



## Focus Text

Condolence Letter to Mrs. Bixby

## Author

Abraham Lincoln

## Literary Period

American Romantic, Civil War

## Things to Notice

- 1 The solemn rhythm and cadence of the letter, its progression of ideas, and the thoughtful choice of words. Observe how the measured pace of the sentence seems to echo cadences similar to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”
- 2 Notice that Lincoln did not use offensive cliches such as “I know exactly how you feel” (usually followed by a story about the speaker’s loss), or “It’s all for the best,” or even, “They’re in a better place.” He acknowledged the just weight of Mrs. Bixby’s sorrow, but focused on gratitude, purpose, hope, and comfort.

## Something to Think About

This letter contains only four sentences. What makes it so powerful? Could you take out one sentence and have the letter still be meaningful? If so, which sentence?

## Week 1 (suggested: Feb. 1-9)

Listen to the audio reading of the letter (first link at the end of this page). Print out the letter and read it silently, then aloud. Practice reading with clarity and appropriate emotion, using the solemn and formal pacing you can hear in the music of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (link below). Copy the letter in handwriting or type it on the computer (do not copy and paste).



## **Week 2 (suggested: Feb. 11-16)**

Note the structure and sequence of the letter. Read through the letter and observe how each sentence fulfills a meaningful purpose. Consider the tone and words Lincoln uses to:

- Show awareness and empathy
- Place individual death in the context of a greater purpose
- Offer hope for the future
- Direct attention to the source of all comfort
  
- In the second sentence, notice how Lincoln shapes the sentence, with “weak, fruitless, words” balancing “overwhelming grief, loss.” This is a structural balance, as well as an auditory balance.
- The fourth sentence is similarly balanced, with “anguish, bereavement, and sacrifice” standing opposite “cherished memory, solemn pride.”
- What word pictures does Lincoln use in the first and fourth sentences?
- The references to glory and sacrifice relate to the concept that “It is sweet and good (or right) to die for your fatherland.” You may see this concept presented by the poet Horace in his *Odes*” (link below) centuries before Lincoln wrote to Mrs. Bixby. What is comforting about this ancient idea?
- Lincoln’s own son had died less than two years before this letter was written, so he was most likely able to empathize deeply with Mrs. Bixby’s loss. Would the letter have been more or less effective if he had devoted space to his own loss?

## **Week 3 (suggested: Feb. 18-23)**

Using the facts of the story and the tone and pacing from the letter, plus your own words, write a short newspaper article about a bereaved widow who receives a letter from the President of the United States. You may use Abraham Lincoln and Mrs. Bixby or any other president and citizen (real or imagined) you choose.

## **Week 4 (suggested: Feb. 25-28)**



Write a letter of condolence to someone, real or fictional, who has experienced a loss. Include elements such as awareness, empathy, hope for the future, and comfort.

File all the papers from this unit (your copy of the original poem and your short story and this week's poem) in your Classics-Based Writing Notebook.

## **Text Source**

You'll find the letter at:

<http://excellence-in-literature.com/classics-based-writing/letter-from-abraham-lincoln-to-mrs-bixby>

The Battle Hymn of the Republic

<http://excellence-in-literature.com/classics-based-writing/battle-hymn-of-the-republic>

“Dulce et decorum” by Horace:

<http://excellence-in-literature.com/classics-based-writing/dulce-et-decorum-est-pro-patria-mori-from-the-odes-of-horace>