

1. George Washington (1789-1797)
Washington Dreams of the Hippopotamus
Music and lyrics by Christian Kiefer
Art by C.W. Roelle

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Literary/Historical:

1. Consider the role George Washington plays in American popular culture. From his image gracing the one dollar bill to the name of our nation's capital city, Washington has gone from being a man to being a mythological image. Discuss how Washington's is used today and what it means as a facet of American culture. Then discuss how that image is used in "Washington Dreams of the Hippopotamus."
2. With its use of flutes, violins, marching drums, and brass, the music of "Washington Dreams of the Hippopotamus" attempts to be evocative of the revolutionary war. Discuss how this is or is not successful and what it might mean in the context of the song itself. Is the song upholding one part of the mythology (the marching patriots) while tearing down another (Washington's truthfulness)? Explain and analyze.
3. In many ways, the theme of "Washington Dreams of the Hippopotamus" refers to one of the most famous cultural stories we have of America's first President: the "I cut down the cherry tree" story of young George's truthfulness. Discuss how the song itself uses *irony* to recast and/or question an important piece of American mythology.

Historical:

4. Discuss how "Washington Dreams of the Hippopotamus" defines the role of spoken rhetoric in the context of the historical presidency. Actions are championed—as in the description of Washington's military leadership in the second verse—but ultimately is it how *he* told the story that is of ultimate importance?

Research-Based:

5. By way of extension of question #4 above, how important were political speeches and oral rhetoric during Washington's presidency? Further extending this topic, how important was young America's press in selecting Washington as the first president? In the song, Washington feels that his own *words* were of utmost importance to his political survival. Was this really true?

Art/Visual Rhetoric:

6. C.W. Roelle's wire drawing of Washington views the hippopotamus of the song's lyrics as a kind of hunting trophy. Discuss and analyze this image as visual rhetoric. What does this image say? How might it be viewed separate from and/or in the context

of the song's lyrics? How does the use of wire (bold black lines without color) effect the viewer's overall perception of Washington? Is it ultimately a commentary on just how recognizable his image actually is in American culture?