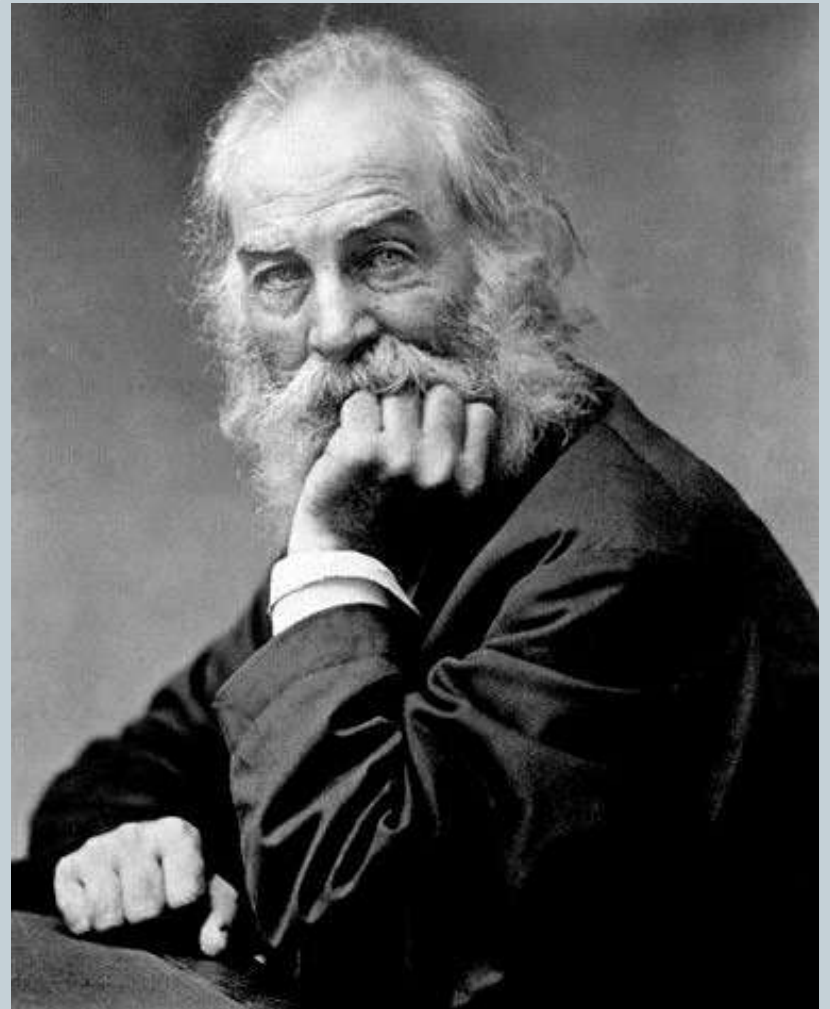


Emily Dickinson & Walt Whitman



PRECURSORS TO MODERNISM

Two Transitional Writers



“The Poet of the Inner-Soul”



Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 and is considered one of the greatest poets of all time.

Like many authors, Dickinson was not known until after her death in 1886.

She was, in fact, a very reclusive and quiet woman who hardly ever left her home town.

7 Poems



During her lifetime, only seven poems of Emily Dickinson's were published.

These, in fact, were poems that she had written to other people who then had them published.

It is not known if she even knew that any of her poems had ever been published.

Failures in Love



The question of Emily's sexual feelings has been a subject of a lot of recent writings. There were at least three men in her life that could have "broken her heart." But her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert, to whom she wrote hundreds of letters, might have also been a love interest. Though there is no proof of homosexuality, it is easy to see why something like that, which was so frowned upon in the 1800's, could have driven her into her private world.

Fun Fact



Emily was educated at Amherst Academy which had started taking female students two years before she enrolled.

The she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. The founder, Mary Lyon, ranked students of the basis of those who would receive God's grace, those who had some hope, and those who had no hope at all.

She placed Emily in the last category.

Her Own Religion



Not having “conventional” religious views may have also contributed to Emily’s isolation. She refused to sign an oath to dedicate her life to Jesus Christ and she dropped out of school. Even so, she clearly had a belief in God and heaven, but it was different than the views held by her peers.

Man #1



She began a friendship with Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia. He was married and they corresponded regularly.

He visited her twice.

She called him her “dearest earthly friend.”

In 1862, he moved to San Francisco, and she was devastated.

Soon afterwards, she withdrew from Amherst society.

Even her best friends rarely saw her unless it was out working in her beloved garden.

Man #2



The third man was the writer
Wentworth Higginson who was known
for encouraging younger writers.

She sent him a brief note with four of her
poems with the message:

“Are you too deeply occupied to say if my
verse is alive?”

He was fascinated and asked for more poems.

A Meeting



Higginson maintained a long correspondence with Dickinson, and eventually he went to visit her in 1870.

The following frame is his description of first meeting her:

“A step, like a pattering child’s in the entry, and in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair and a face of no good feature—in a very plain and exquisitely clean white pique and blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two white day lilies, and she put them in a childlike way into my hand and said, ‘these are my introduction’ in a soft, frightened childlike voice—and she added, under her breath, ‘forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers and hardly know what to say.’”

Higginson said that, soon after this first moment, Emily talked easily and continuously. He later said “I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much...Emily Dickinson had more charm than anyone I every knew.”

Emily's Home in
Amherst,
Massachusetts





The back of the Dickinson Homestead showing the lawn and garden.

Her Poetry



Emily probably wanted to have her poems published but on her own terms, and it seemed that publishers were unwilling to take a risk with them—they were very unconventional at the time.

Higginson thought that Walt Whitman (next) influenced her poems, but she said that she never read his poetry because she heard his poetry was “disgraceful.”

Her Own Style



It seems that Emily invented her own style for her poems.

They have a sing-song quality and are similar, in many ways, to the old ballads of the English and Irish people.

They often alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.

Ballad Stanza: ABCB Rhyme Scheme

Use of slant rhyme, irregular punctuation, capitalization, etc..

Her “Letters to the World”



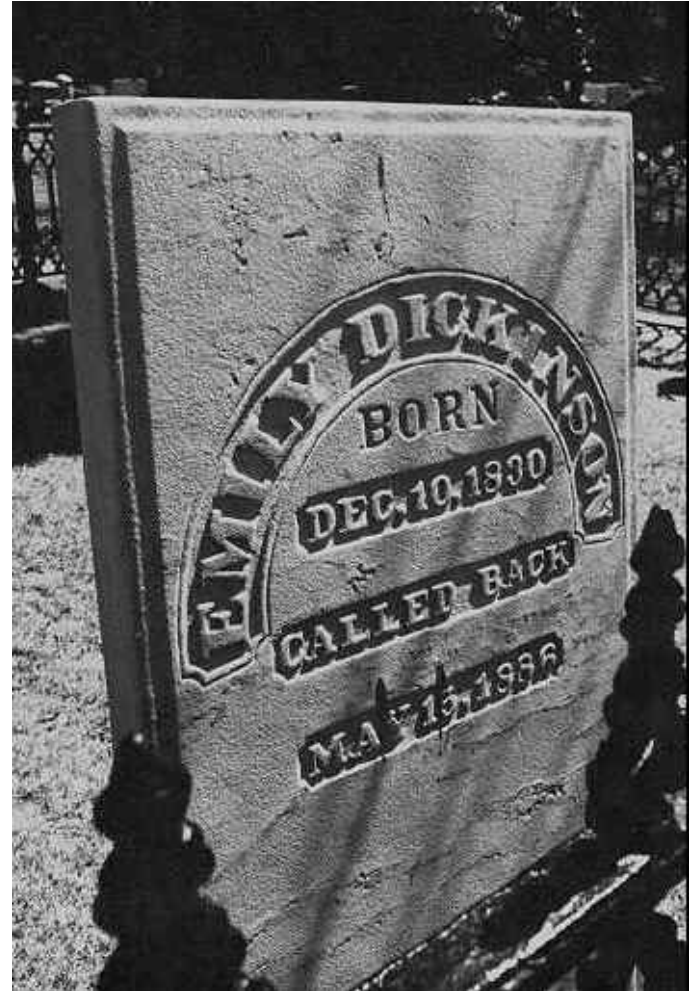
Without a publisher, Emily kept on writing her poetry privately.

In one poems she calls them “my letters to the world which never wrote to me.”

She tied them up in little blue ribbons and hid them away in drawers and boxes.

Emily's Death in 1886

- When Emily died, her sister Lavinia was in charge of Emily's estate.
- Lavinia knew that Emily wrote some poems, but imagine her surprise when she started going through Emily's stuff.



Surprise!



At first, Lavinia went through boxes and dressers and found about 900 poems. But she kept finding even more. Eventually the total swelled to over 1800 poems. Not all of them were published until 1955, nearly seventy years after her death.

Emily's Legacy



Emily Dickinson is now considered one of the greatest American poets.

Moreover, she is America's first major female poet and one of the first major female writers in all of Western literature.

Her "letters to the world" have finally found their audience.

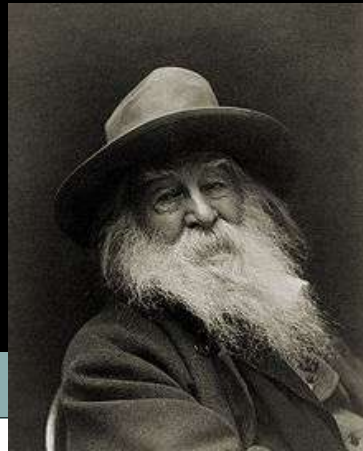
Walt Whitman



If Emily Dickinson is one of America's great poets, she has to share the spotlight with Walt Whitman.

Whitman may have changed the course of poetry more than any other single person.

Almost single handedly, he invented **free verse, the poetry of no rhythm and rhyme that had dominated the last century.**





Whitman



Walt Whitman was born in 1819, at half way between the American Revolution and the American Civil War.

By 1855, when Whitman published his first edition of poetry, America had changed dramatically.

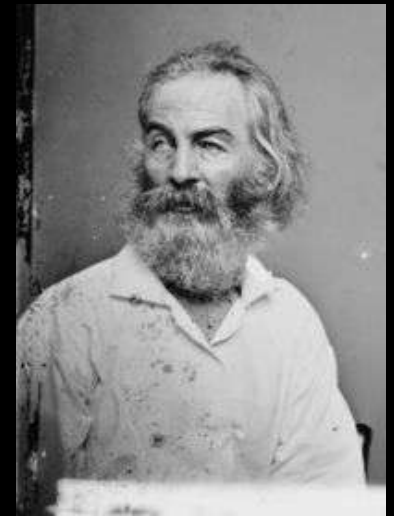
Whitman is the first poet that seemed to speak for all of the new United States.

Diversity



It was America's diversity that fascinated Whitman.

He saw America as the greatest nation that ever was, and it was great because it was a "melting pot" of skilled, hard-working people from everywhere in the world.



The Young Walt Whitman



Before becoming a poet, Whitman held a variety of jobs and lived a kind of vagabond lifestyle.

He was very poor as a child and started having odd jobs as a teenager and young man.

He was a carpenter, a printer, a journalist, and even was a schoolteacher.

The Poet



When he turned to writing poetry, Whitman had already lived a fuller life than many people live in a lifetime.

But his poetry was different—very different. He saw poetry as organic—growing naturally like flowers and other plants grow.

He invented what is now called **Free Verse** — poetry that has no regular rhythm or rhyme.

A Little Unusual



Most people who saw his poetry found it too weird, and many would not even consider it poetry.

Leaves of Grass



His first book of poems was entitled “Leaves of Grass.” (1855)

Whitman paid for it entirely by himself because, like Dickinson’s poems, publishers thought they were too odd to take a costly chance on.

As a former printer, he saved more money by doing the typesetting.

He sent a free copy to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Support from an unusual source



Emerson was considered America's greatest thinker and was an unlikely person to back Whitman's new style of poetry.

Yet Emerson was entranced by the poems and responded with a five-page reply.

It became the most famous piece of literary sponsorship in American history.

Emerson's support then caused others to rethink and revisit Whitman's poems.

Emerson's reply included the following lines:

“I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start.

Emerson probably didn't care much about knowing about Whitman's long foreground, but he was right in assuming Whitman had lived a full and diverse life.

Free Verse



Free verse is Whitman's expression of the democratic concepts of a vast diverse America "What we call poems," he wrote, "are merely pictures."

The "real poems," he insisted, "are the men and women in all the variety of human experience."

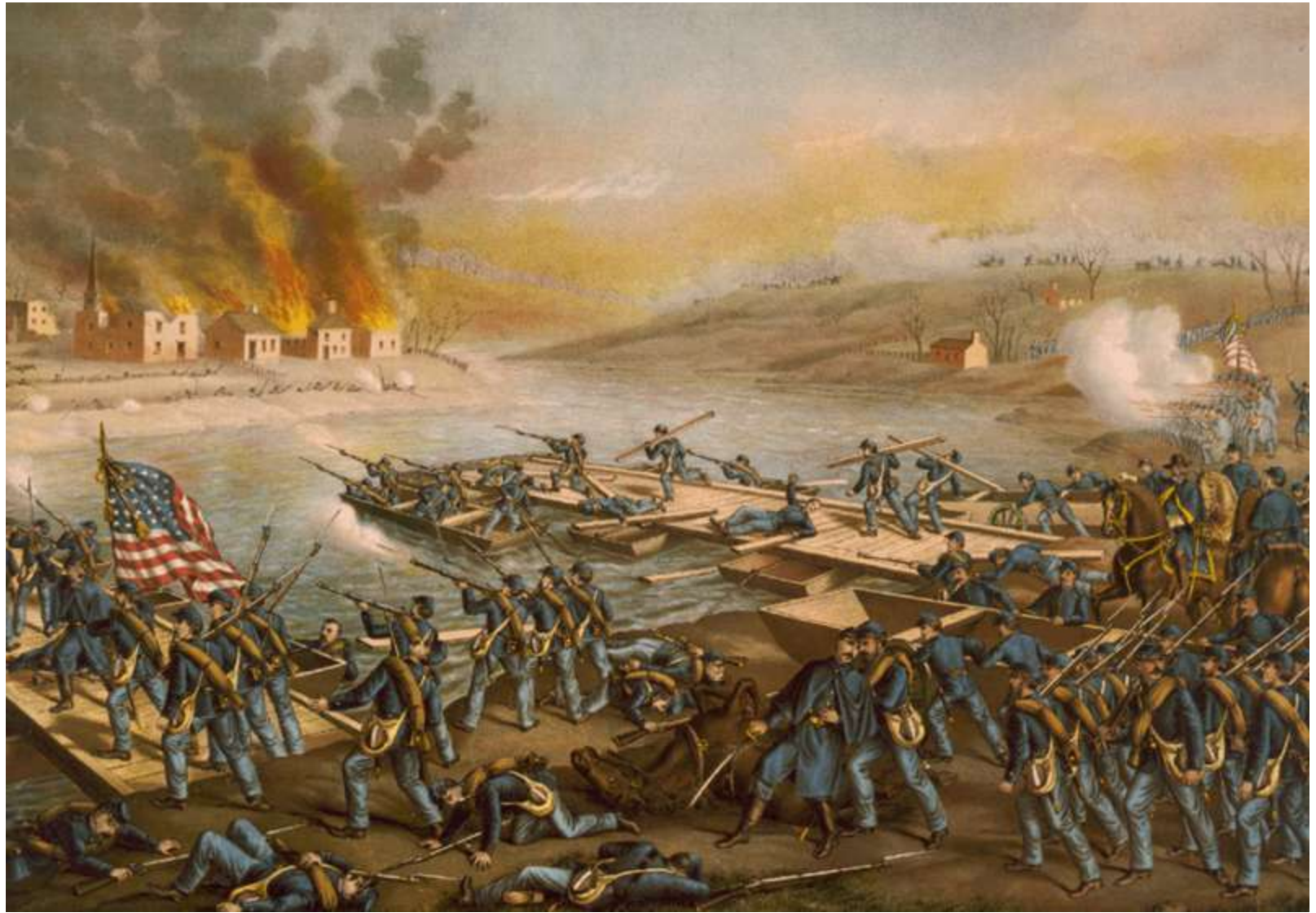
Leaves of Grass (again and again and again)



**Nine times, he republished *Leaves of Grass*.
Nine times, it grew larger with the addition of
more poems.**

**In many ways, as he put it, "The United
States themselves are essentially the
greatest poem."**

**The volumes are a tribute to the country and
to its people, especially the common
working people.**





He was so moved by the scene at the battlefield hospital that he traveled to Washington, D.C, and spent much of the next three years working occasionally as an unofficial nurse in several army hospitals. Whitman made a great effort to get to know wounded soldiers, bringing them small gifts and writing letters for them

Sex



Whitman, incidentally, virtually invented sexuality as a subject of American literature (even though Europeans had discovered it centuries earlier).

After Whitman, sex became an acceptable subject in American literature.

Whitman was also open with his own homosexuality—a brazen move for the time. (Whitman was bisexual actually.)

Abraham Lincoln



Whitman was also a great admirer of Lincoln. Lincoln's death evoked a strong response in Whitman who wrote several poems about Lincoln's death.

"O Captain, My Captain" is perhaps the best known.

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," is also a well-known Lincoln memorial.

The American Chorus

In the following poem, “I Hear America Singing,” Whitman envisions America as a giant chorus. Each person is like a soprano, an alto, and tenor, or a bass who is harmonizing their voice into the giant American song.



**I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear;
Those of mechanics--each one singing his, as it should be,
blithe and strong,**

**The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or
beam,**

**The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or
leaves off work;**

**The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the
deckhand singing on the steamboat deck;**

**The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench--the hatter
singing as he stands;**

The wood-cutter's song--the ploughboy's, on his way in

the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at sundown;

The delicious singing of the mother--or of the young wife at work—or of the girl sewing or washing—

Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;

The day what belongs to the day--At night, the party of

young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious

songs.