**AMERICAN ROMANTICISM**

POETRY

FOCUS: 19th CENTURY POETRY - THE NEW ENGLAND BRAHMINS; WALT WHITMAN; EMILY DICKINSON; EDGAR ALLAN POE.

1. **The New England Brahmins**

**The New England Brahmins** (AKA: **Cambridge Poets, America’s Schoolroom, Household Poets** or **Fireside Poets**) – a group of New England authors associated with Harvard and Cambridge, Massachusetts, who were educated in Europe aristocrats, steeped into foreign culture. They were professors at Harvard and made Boston the literary capital.

Characteristics:

* Use of traditional poetic subject and forms;
* Regular and familiar rhythms;
* High moral standards of behavior;
* Celebration of the family and the domestic life.

The Fireside Poets were very popular in the 19th century, but their popularity declined in the 20th and 21st century, because of the changes in the beliefs, and poetic style.

Representatives:

**James Russell Lowell** (1819 – 1891)

* The archetypal New England man of letters with various literary talents;
* A poet, critic, essayist, editor, and diplomat;
* Graduated from Harvard with a degree in law;
* Published *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets* (1845)*-* a collection of critical essays that included pleas for the abolition of slavery;
* Wrote about 50 antislavery articles for periodicals.
* His *[Biglow Papers](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Biglow-Papers)* (1846-48) - a set of satirical verses in which Lowell uses a humor and original Yankee [dialect](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect) to express his opposition to the [Mexican War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Mexican-American-War) as an attempt to extend the area of slavery.
* A number of anti-slavery poems before the Civil War.

**Oliver Wendell Holmes** (1809-1894)

* American physician, poet and humorist;
* The ‘Breakfast-Table’ papers – a series of essays first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*;
* A number of poems which appealed to popular tastes of the day;

**Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**   
(1807-1882)

* The leading Cambridge poet and the most popular one;
* Heavily influenced by European culture and writing;
* Much of his verse tends to be derivative and conforms to the popular literary tastes of the day;
* His most famous poem, *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), deals with the legend of the American Indians;
* The *[Tales of a Wayside Inn](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tales-of-a-Wayside-Inn) -* modeled roughly on [Geoffrey Chaucer’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Geoffrey-Chaucer) *Canterbury Tales*.

1. **Walt Whitman** (1819-1892)

A pioneer poet, essayist, journalist and humanist, he is considered to be part of the transition between transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his work.

Walt Whitman was Dutch on his mother’s side and New England British on his father’s. He grew up on Long Island. In 1823 his family moved to Brooklyn. His later poetry is filled with the sights and sounds of country and city which impressed him so deeply as a child.

* By birth a poet of the people;
* Limited formal education;
* His education came from his various jobs in printing shops and newspapers;
* His occupations also included: a painter, schoolteacher, reporter, editor;
* One of the most highly individual and important authors in the history of American literature;
* The publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 represented a revolutionary departure in American verse, both in terms of form and content.
* A firm believer in Jacksonian democracy and the splendor of the common man;
* Whitman owned much to the philosophical thought of Emerson.

***Leaves of Grass*** (1855)

Addressed to the citizens of the United States, ***Leaves of Grass*** was a kind of autobiography in verse. Both prophetic and intimate, its glorification of democracy and the nation itself – its landscape and its people – was matched by an equally keen concern with the ideas, beliefs, experiences and emotions of the common man in an age which celebrated the value of individualism. This exaltation of the individual – in a physical as well as spiritual sense – commonly takes the form of the ‘I’ in his poems, and yet Whitman was keen to stress that each person is contained in all other people in a kind of mystical unity of personality.

Whitman was a pioneer in terms of technical innovation. He experimented with **free verse** in an attempt to liberate American poetry from the restrictions and rules of traditional stanza and rhyme forms. His so-called long line contained a variable number of unstressed syllables and no strictly fixed meter, and he organized his stanzas into what he called ‘verse paragraphs’. In later editions of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman’s poems took on a more mature and pessimistic outlook: the Civil War affected him deeply, a the group of poems called *Drum Taps* testify, and his famous elegy on the death of President Lincoln, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d* (1865), betrayed a sense of anguished resignation and grief.

Some critics have argued that Whitman was primarily an egoist and sensualist, that his ego and vast sensual craving found their expression in his poetic celebration of the self, and that his constant desire to expand the boundaries of the self ultimately led him to identify himself with the cosmos. However, Whitman’s “I” is not only Whitman himself but his idea of the representative man. Whitman teaches that humanity is naturally good, and he identifies with all humanity. He considered each of his poems to be a separate leaf or ‘blade’ of grass because they were divine (though common), because they were symbolic of life and cycles of birth and death, and because they were significant both individually and in the mass.

*SONG OF MYSELF*

[16]

*I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,*

*Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,*

*Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,*

*Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,*

*One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,*

*A Southerner as soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the Oconee I live, …*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

* In what ways is the poem different from other poems?
* How many contradictions do you see?
* What’s Whitman’s attitude to his country?

1. **Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886)**

Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman – the greatest poets of 19th –century America – both highly individualistic, though Whitman’s individualism was public, while Dickinson’s was private. Both saw physical everyday things as symbols of spiritual things. Both rebelled against the poetic conventions of rhythm, meter and rhyme of their time. Both were forerunners of 20th-century poets. But Dickinson’s ‘sense of limitation’ contrasts Whitman’s expansiveness; where Whitman was optimistic, Dickinson saw life as difficult, painful, and filled with losses – or with gains that were temporary and costly.

* She wrote about 1,775 poems (which she called ‘her letter to the world’);
* Her works remained almost completely unknown during her lifetime;
* Short and beautifully crafted poems;
* Experimental rhythm and rhyme;
* Enigmatic images and metaphor;
* **Love**, **death** and the **natural universe** are the main themes.

Dickinson’s poetry reflects a Calvinistic sense of evil and the inevitability of spiritual struggle. Notable motifs in her poetry include:

- A sense of loss

- The idea of nature as both threat and a source of joy and comfort

- The ecstasy and the dangers of love

- The tension between faith and doubt

- A fascination with death

Her nature images express both a delight in nature, suggestive of New England transcendentalism, and a Calvinistic sense of evil in nature. Some readers might find her poetry morbid and oppressive because of its emphasis on:

- Fear and anguish

- Renunciation and loss

- Sickness and starvation

- Pain and death

Critic Irvin Ehrenpreis comments about Dickinson that she “*wrote not about immortality but our hope for immortality, not about nature but our separation from nature, not about God but our belief in God … It was the defeat of love by circumstance – by jealousy, egotism, illness, death – that drove her to doubt the existence of God and to yarn for a trust in immortality*” (1975:4).

*Apparently with no surprise*

*To any happy Flower*

*The Frost beheads it at its play -*

*In accidental power -*

*The blonde Assassin passes on -*

*The Sun proceeds unmoved*

*To measure off another day*

*For an Approving God.* [1884]

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

* What is the main theme of the poem?
* What do you think of the image of the sun?

1. **Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)**

* Writer, poet and critic;
* A key representative of Dark Romanticism;
* Famous for his tales and poems of horror, mystery and suspense;
* Master of the Macabre;
* Father of the detective story.

**Inventor of the Detective Story**  
   
    In 1841, Poe published the first modern detective story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.  In this tale, Poe established the basis in which succeeding mystery writers would follow. The first step to this basis is to provide a seemingly impossible crime. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, a double murder takes place inside a room that is locked from the inside. The next step in the mystery writing process is to have the detective character analyze the clues in order to solve the mystery. To explain to the audience just how intelligent the detective is, the narrator is not the detective but his less intelligent partner.  So assured of his own powers of analysis was Poe that in his tale *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, he claimed to have solved a real-life crime that had baffled the New York City police.  This would be the first detective story based on a true crime.  Poe’s *Thou Art the Man* became the first comic detective story and the first mystery in which the culprit turned out to be “the least likely suspect.”

    Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries wrote, “Where was the detective story before Poe breathed the breath of life into it?” Doyle considered Poe to be the father of the detective genre.

**Pioneer of Science Fiction**

    In 1835, Poe published *Hans Phaall, A Tale* the story of a trip to the moon.  Although other writers had written fantastic stories, Poe added realistic scientific details to make his stories more believable. Throughout his career Poe wrote stories about the limits of technology.  In *The Facts in the Case of M. Vademar* a doctor is able to communicate with a man whose body had already died.  This tale was so realistic that it was reprinted in a medical journal in England.

**Master of the Psychological Horror Story**

    Much of Poe’s popular appeal rests on a few of his tales of terror, but the horror genre has frequently been ignored or derided by critics.  This was the case even in Poe’s day. Poe believed terror was a part of life and therefore a legitimate subject for literature. By Poe’s time, Gothic fiction had already been popularized by Horace Walpole and Charles Brockman Brown. Their tales typically centered on family curses and haunted castles.  Poe’s first published tale *Metzengerstein* falls into this genre, but in Poe’s next horror tales he would move the action away from a remote castle and into an everyday setting like a home (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*) or a school (*William Wilson*).   Even when Poe set his horror tale in a distant land he focused less on the location than on the psychology of his characters.  Poe also wrote about the subjects that were generating newspaper headlines in his day— murders, premature burials, and grave robberies. Author H.P. Lovecraft devoted an entire chapter of his book *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1935) to Poe.

 Poe’s tales of terror remain among his most popular and have influenced later horror writers like Steven King and H.P. Lovecraft.  Filmmakers Alfred Hitchcock and Dario Argento have acknowledged that Poe’s horror tales were among their initial inspirations.

**America’s First Great Literary Critic**

    Poe is considered America’s first great literary critic.  During his lifetime, American authors were generally considered inferior to their British counterparts, and many American authors imitated British literature.  As a critic, Poe frequently attacked authors he considered guilty of imitation, and he was often the first to accuse an author of plagiarism if their work too closely resembled that of another author.  The popular American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a favorite target.

Poe’s tendency to ridicule those he considered inferior writers offended many of the most important authors and editors of his day, including Rufus Griswold, who would later write Poe’s biography.  Poe’s reviews were not, however, all negative.  He called a young Nathaniel Hawthorne “a man of the truest genius” (Review of *Twice-Told Tales*, *Graham’s Magazine*, May 1842), and he wrote that “it is scarcely possible to speak of [“The Old Curiosity Shop” by Charles Dickens] too well.”  Poe so admired the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that he dedicated his book *The Raven and Other Poems*to her.

    When judging the quality of an author’s work, Poe also explained his definition of good writing.  In his May 1842 review of Hawthorne, Poe defined the criteria by which he reviewed a short story.  He said such a work should be original and should have an emotional impact on the reader.  Poe thought that the entire story should be composed with that emotional impact in mind.  If one were to take breaks in the middle of reading, the emotional impact the story is intended to evoke would be diluted by all the distractions of the real world.