

*Bright
Is the Ring
of Words*

**Poems for English Learners
and Language Lovers**

**Selected and with commentary by
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Introduction

This collection of poetry is intended for all lovers of the English language, including English learners. It is a very personal selection of poems that I love, and that provide wonderful word-music.

The five sections explore different themes which have always been favorite subjects for poetry, starting with the wonder and joy of fresh beginnings, through the observation of nature, love in its many forms, messages of hope and resilience, and the contemplation of last and eternal things, of “night, sleep, death, and the stars.”

I have generally chosen poems that are written in fairly simple and direct language, and that should be understandable for intermediate students of English. However, with poetry, intellectual understanding is not everything. I would encourage learners to read and enjoy even poems that you do not fully understand. They will sing in your heart and your mind will follow.

For further reading, I recommend the websites poetryfoundation.org and poets.org, which provide a vast array of resources related to classic and contemporary poetry.

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Enjoy your journey through the wonderful world of English poetry!

Beginning my studies

Beginning my studies

WALT WHITMAN

Beginning my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact, consciousness — these forms — the power of motion,
The least insect or animal — the senses — eyesight — love;
The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone, and hardly wish'd to go, any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time, to sing it in ecstatic songs.

About the author and the poem

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) has been called “America’s world poet.” He was born on Long Island and grew up in Brooklyn, in New York State. He had little formal education, but was inspired by his travels through the growing nation to write and self-publish his first book, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855. He continued to add to and revise this book throughout his life.

Whitman helped with nursing in a hospital during the American Civil War and was deeply marked by the suffering he saw. He revered Abraham Lincoln; one of his most beloved poems is the elegy he wrote after Lincoln’s death, “When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d.”

Although some people admired Whitman’s work during his lifetime, many found it strange, rough, and too open about taboo topics like sex. His reputation has grown since his death, and his work influenced many modern poets. He has also been a strong voice for the American ideal of free individualism linked with tolerance, compassion for the other, and embracing diversity, and continues to inspire many thinkers and activists today.

Whitman loosened up the rigid forms that poetry was expected to follow, using language in creative, surprising ways. At the same time, he echoed the Bible and other ancient forms of verse in powerfully rhythmical, song-like lines. His open-minded attitude and generous, democratic spirit now seem to be calling us from the future, rather than the past.

“Beginning my studies” first appeared in 1867 in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman’s book of poems about the Civil War, and was later included in *Leaves of Grass*. It is typical of Whitman that even in midlife, and following a gruesome war, he still writes of the joy of new beginnings. His poetry is full of the wonder to be found even in the most mundane, common daily experiences, and of the hope that can spring up in a dark-seeming world.

I'm nobody!

EMILY DICKINSON

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us — don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

About the author and the poem

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) was born and lived her entire life in the small college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. She never married and in later years almost never left the family house. She wrote around 1800 poems, but fewer than a dozen of these were published during her lifetime. They were changed by editors to fit the poetic ideas of the time. As with Walt Whitman, Dickinson's original and surprising use of language was not appreciated until after her death. She is now known as one of America's greatest poets.

Dickinson wrote short lyric poems, usually in four-line stanzas, like the hymns that were commonly sung in church during her lifetime. Within this simple form, she is able to express ideas that are amazingly complex and profound.

"I'm nobody!" was published in 1891 and is one of Dickinson's most well-known poems. However, it is about wanting *not* to be well-known or famous, to live happily as a "nobody" without the pressure to compete or compare with others. Perhaps this poem is so popular because many of us have this wish — and because we also hope to find a friend who shares it with us.

Although she lived a very private life, Dickinson knew the value of friendship. We can be "nobody" to the world but still recognized and understood by a person we trust. If you really wanted to be hidden and unknown, would you go around saying, "I'm nobody!" and asking "Who are you?" Like all of Dickinson's poems, this one is less simple than it appears at first.

Afternoon on a Hill

EDNA ST VINCENT MILLAY

I will be the gladdest thing

Under the sun!

I will touch a hundred flowers

And not pick one!

I will look at cliffs and clouds

With quiet eyes,

Watch the wind bow down the grass

And the grass rise.

And when lights begin to show

Up from the town

I will mark which must be mine

And then start down!

About the author and the poem

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was raised by a strong, independent mother who encouraged her to write and publish poetry from a young age, and to study and learn from great poets of the past. She became a successful and respected poet, only the third woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Her performances and readings were “riveting.” She had progressive ideas for the time and was called a “herald of the New Woman.”

Millay went through many personal difficulties, including a manuscript being lost in a fire, and a serious injury in a car accident. The death of her husband in 1947 was also very hard for her.

In the mid-twentieth century, when the style of poetry changed, hers was considered old-fashioned and became less popular. But her feminism and individualism, along with many very fine poems, have brought her more respect today.

“Afternoon on a Hill” was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1917. Its fresh and youthful perspective was later darkened, as Millay became frustrated by the cruelty and injustice of human beings. Here, though, there is no shadow on the brightness of life.

Introduction to Songs of Innocence

WILLIAM BLAKE

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

Pipe a song about a Lamb;
So I piped with merry cheer,
Piper pipe that song again —
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy cheer,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read —
So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

About the author and the poem

As well as being a poet and an artist, William Blake (1757-1827) was a visionary who saw spirits and angels. He lived in the crowded city of London during a time of great social change and unrest. After training as an engraver, he made his living producing illustrations for books and magazines, which was an important job in the days before photography. He was deeply affected by some of the violence and destruction that he witnessed, including the burning of Newgate Prison during a riot.

His poetry and paintings combine a strong awareness of this darker side of human nature with an equally powerful sense of the light within, which he called “experience” and “innocence.” He printed his works himself using new processes for color engraving that he developed. He welcomed the revolutions of the time that went against the old forces of oppression and tyranny. He rejected narrow religious ideas and believed that man and God were once united, and could be so again.

Blake’s writings were very little read in his time. Some people thought him a dangerous radical, and few understood his long prophetic works. Today he is considered one of the greatest English poets. The short poems in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are still his best known.

Blake thought that poetry should bring both pleasure and wisdom. In the “Introduction to Songs of Innocence,” he tells of the heavenly child that inspires him to create his art, and of the joy of singing and writing his songs.

Everyone Sang

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

About the author and the poem

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was born into a wealthy Jewish merchant family in Kent, England. His father was disinherited for marrying a non-Jew, but when Siegfried was four years old his parents separated. After studying history at Cambridge but leaving without a degree, he lived modestly on a small family income and published his first poems.

Sassoon joined the British army out of patriotism during the first World War, but was soon horrified by the realities of war. Although he was extremely brave in combat and given the Military Cross, he spoke against the prolonging of the war and was almost accused of treason in a military court. Instead, he was sent to a hospital to be treated for shell-shock.

There he met and became friends with Wilfred Owen, another poet. He encouraged Owen to write and later brought his work to a wider audience. Both men returned to the war; Sassoon was almost immediately wounded again, and Owen was killed in 1918, just a week before the Armistice. Sassoon is still best remembered for his powerful war poems in *Counter-Attack* and *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, although he wrote many other books of poetry, and also fiction and biography.

“Everyone Sang” was published in 1919, following the Armistice. Some readers think it refers to people singing in joy at the end of war; some think it describes soldiers singing in the trenches. It doesn’t really matter. What is clear is the feeling of freedom and expansion that singing — or poetry — can bring.

Sea-Fever

JOHN MASEFIELD

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

About the author and the poem

John Masefield (1878-1967) had a difficult childhood; his parents died when he was young, and he was sent to live with an aunt. He was unhappy at boarding school, and decided to join the merchant navy. While on ship he spent much of his time reading and writing and listening to sailors tell stories, and decided to become a writer and storyteller himself.

He left the sea to work at odd jobs in New York and read many modern and classical writers. After two years he returned to England, married an older woman who was a mathematics teacher, and started to publish his poems. He became a successful writer and lecturer, and wrote twelve novels as well as long poems and dramatic works. In 1930 he was appointed Poet Laureate.

“Sea-Fever” is from Masefield’s first poetry collection, *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902).

Ariel's Song

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands:
Court'sied when you have, and kiss'd,--
The wild waves whist--
Foot it featly here and there;
And, sweet sprites, the burthen bear.
Hark, hark!
Bow, wow,
The watch-dogs bark:
Bow, wow.
Hark, hark! I hear
The strain of strutting chanticleer
Cry, Cock-a-diddle-dow!

About the author and the poem

Very little is known about the life of the world's greatest playwright, William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The son of a glovemaker, he was born in the town of Stratford on the Avon river in England. There he married at the age of 18, had three children, and died at the age of 52. For about 25 years he was a successful actor, writer, and producer in the London theatre world. Many people like to argue that another person, better educated and more noble, must have written Shakespeare's plays, but there is no real evidence for this.

Shakespeare included many songs and short lyric poems in his plays. The above is one of several sung by the air-spirit Ariel in *The Tempest*. His master, the magician Prospero, wants to revenge himself on the men who robbed him of his dukedom years ago. He has told Ariel to make himself invisible and use music to lead the young prince Ferdinand, son of his enemy, around his enchanted island.

Wonder and Joy

ROBINSON JEFFERS

The things that one grows tired of — O, be sure
They are only foolish artificial things!
Can a bird ever tire of having wings?
And I, so long as life and sense endure,
(Or brief be they!) shall nevermore inure
My heart to the recurrence of the springs,
Of gray dawns, the gracious evenings,
The infinite wheeling stars. A wonder pure
Must ever well within me to behold
Venus decline; or great Orion, whose belt
Is studded with three nails of burning gold,
Ascend the winter heaven. Who never felt
This wondering joy may yet be good or great:
But envy him not: he is not fortunate.

About the author and the poem

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), born in Pennsylvania, was the son of a Presbyterian minister who was also a classical scholar. He traveled often to Europe with his family and went to school in Germany and Switzerland. In university he studied literature, medicine, and forestry, but after he married and moved to California he became a full-time poet.

The beauty of the natural world and the freedom of wild animals impressed him so strongly that he developed a philosophy he called “inhumanism.” He believed that human beings should be less emotionally self-centered and recognize the greatness and magnificence of the non-human world. His poetry is not sentimental, but often contains images of violence and terror.

During the war years his views were sometimes feared as unpatriotic and his poetry fell from popularity. Today his work has a central place in the new field of eco-poetics.

“Wonder and Joy” was first published in 1916.

from Wonder

THOMAS TRAHERNE

How like an angel came I down!
How bright are all things here!
When first among his works I did appear
O how their glory me did crown!
The world resembled his eternity,
In which my soul did walk;
And ev'ry thing that I did see
Did with me talk.

The skies in their magnificence,
The lively, lovely air;
Oh how divine, how soft, how sweet, how fair!
The stars did entertain my sense,
And all the works of God, so bright and pure,
So rich and great did seem,
As if they ever must endure
In my esteem.

A native health and innocence
Within my bones did grow,
And while my God did all his glories show,
I felt a vigour in my sense
That was all spirit. I within did flow
With seas of life, like wine;
I nothing in the world did know
But 'twas divine.

About the author and the poem

Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) was an English country priest whose writings were barely known until the twentieth century. He never lost his childlike wonder in the natural world and was known for his great reverence and piety, his cheerful spirit, and his deeds of kindness to those in need. He believed that human beings had lost the joy that belonged to them in childhood, and that paradise can be regained by returning to this state. He thought that the search for happiness, in the sense of this original joy, was the rightful task of religion.

The following excerpt from “Wonder,” one of his best-known poems, beautifully expresses this theme of original innocence and joy.

*from Ode: Intimations of
Immortality*

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
 Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
 He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
 Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
 And by the vision splendid
 Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

About the author and the poem

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the most important figures of the Romantic movement in England. He was born in the Lake District in northwestern England and this landscape inspired much of his poetry. As a young man interested in radical politics he visited Revolutionary France and fell in love with a French woman, who bore him a daughter, but returned to England without marrying her.

After publishing his first poems he lived for some years with his sister Dorothy and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another poet. With Coleridge (and insights from Dorothy) he produced *Lyrical Ballads*, which was a turning point in English poetry. Wordsworth wrote in a preface to a later edition that poetry should be based on ordinary language, rather than the elaborate, artificial and unnatural style that was then in fashion.

More writing and travels followed before Wordsworth married a childhood friend and settled down to raise a family. A job as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland made him financially secure, but no longer able to be independent in his political views. By 1820 his earlier poems were also being praised, but although he continued to write until late in his life, most critics find his later poems to be not as successful.

“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” is a long poem that was published in the 1807 *Poems, In Two Volumes*. In it Wordsworth finds evidence for the immortality of the human soul in the child’s experience of wonder and glory, that fades as we grow up. Wordsworth’s memories of this state lead him to believe we can return to it again.

Song of a Man Who Has Come Through

D.H. LAWRENCE

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course though the chaos of the world
Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows,
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall find the Hesperides.

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.

About the author and the poem

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was born in the coal district of Nottinghamshire in England. His father was a coal miner, his mother a former teacher forced to work in a lace factory. From an early age he roamed the hills and woods near his home, and his appreciation of the natural world shows strongly in his writing.

Lawrence worked his way out of the poverty of his childhood, becoming a clerk, a teacher, and finally a professional writer. His novels were controversial because of their frank and open treatment of sexual attraction, including between same-sex couples. However, his novels also explored new and challenging approaches to the arts, politics, economics, friendship, gender roles, and marriage. They broke new ground and influenced later writers. His poetry and travel writing are also very highly thought of.

His affair with an older German woman who was then married to his former modern languages professor led to some scandal. They eloped, and remained together for the rest of Lawrence's life. He left England, where he was being accused by the authorities of obscenity, and roamed the world, settling for a time in Taos, New Mexico. Poor health forced him to stop traveling and return to Europe. He died of tuberculosis after a stay at a sanatorium in France.

“Song of a Man Who Has Come Through” is from the volume of love poems titled *Look! We Have Come Through* that Lawrence published in 1917. He felt that all poems had to come out of personal feeling and that they should be spontaneous and free. In this poem he powerfully describes the poet's experience of artistic inspiration, of literally being blown through by the spirit.

To see a world

from Auguries of Innocence

WILLIAM BLAKE

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

About the author and the poem

Blake thought that poetry should bring both pleasure and wisdom. “Auguries of Innocence” is a long poem found in one of the notebooks of William Blake but not published until 1863. The first four lines, excerpted here, are followed by 128 lines of rhyming couplets. These often point out moral failings, but also the possibility for human beings to gain the light of knowledge and divine insight. The right of way seeing the world around us — not *with* but *through* the eye — is central.

Echoes

WALTER DE LA MARE

The sea laments
The livelong day,
Flinging its waste of sand;
Cries back the wind from the whispering shore —
No words I understand:
Yet echoes in my heart a voice,
As far, as near, as these —
The wind that weeps,
The solemn surge
Of strange and lonely seas.

About the author and the poem

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) wrote fantastical, dreamlike poetry and fiction that celebrated the importance of the imagination in a workaday world. Born in London, for many years he wrote alongside his work in the offices of the Standard Oil company, before he received a Civil List pension that allowed him to concentrate on writing.

His book *Songs of Childhood*, children's fantasy novels like *The Three Royal Monkeys*, and his anthologies of poems for children caused him to be considered by many to be mainly a children's author. However, his visionary and extravagant style can also help adults, as "a way to heighten life," as one biographer put it. Many of his works explore the supernatural and uncanny, keeping us aware of the mysterious elements that lurk behind everyday life.

In "Echoes" the poet connects his observation of the waves with the surging emotions within his soul. (The name de la Mare means *of the sea*.)

from A Shropshire Lad

A.E. HOUSMAN

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

About the author and the poem

Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936) was one of seven children. His father was an English solicitor, but he was much more attached to his mother, and her death on his twelfth birthday gave him a severe blow that probably affected him for the rest of his life. While a student at Oxford, his unreciprocated love for another young man distressed him so much that he failed his final examinations, although he had been an excellent student.

For ten years he worked in the Patent Office in London, but studied Latin texts at the British Museum in the evenings. He wrote articles for journals that were so impressive that he was invited to become a professor of Latin at University College, London, and later at Cambridge University.

Housman considered himself mainly a scholar, but the poems he published as *A Shropshire Lad* in 1896 became extremely popular. (Shropshire is a county in England that Housman had not yet visited when he wrote the poems, which are meant to be from the point of view of a farm laborer.) “Loveliest of Trees,” like most of his poetry, contains a pessimistic idea — the speaker is already thinking of his death fifty years in the future — but its graceful, lilting lines and images of natural beauty keep it from being overwhelmingly sad.

Prairie Spring

WILLA CATHER

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

About the author and the poem

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was born in Virginia and moved with her family to the Plains state of Nebraska when she was nine years old. She was strongly moved by the grandness of this vast landscape and by meeting the native and immigrant peoples that lived there. Upon graduation from the University of Nebraska, she moved to the East Coast and became a journalist, teacher, and editor. After building up the failing *McClure's* magazine she became a full-time novelist.

Her three early novels set on the American prairie made her a success with readers and critics, and she wrote many other fine novels and stories. But her style went out of fashion in the turbulent 1930s, when she was seen as not being socially engaged enough. She is now recognized as one of the great and lasting American authors, who wrote unforgettably of both the terrors and the beauties of human existence.

Cather's strongest emotional attachments were to women throughout her life. She was intensely private and destroyed many letters, so much is not known about her personal life. She lived for almost 40 years with her companion, the editor Edith Lewis, and the two are buried side by side in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

"Prairie Spring" was published as the epigraph to the novel *O Pioneers!* in 1913.

The Eagle

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

About the author and the poem

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), who became “Lord Tennyson” when Queen Victoria made him a baron in 1884, was one of the most popular and influential Victorian poets. He began to write poetry when he was a teenager, and after some difficult times following the death of his father, became successful with the publication of his first books of poetry in the 1840 and his appointment as Poet Laureate.

Tennyson lived in a quickly changing world that was moving from a rural past to an industrial future. His poetry often looks back to the beauties of an unspoiled mythical past, but as the official state poet of England he felt he had to celebrate the achievements of modern society.

A strain of epilepsy in his family, then thought shameful, as well as mental instability and addiction, caused him much suffering. He often wrote of madness, broken relationships, and violence. The darkness of these themes is countered by the beauty of his lyrics, which are rich in sound and imagery.

“The Eagle” is one of several poems that were inspired by a journey through the Pyrenees, the mountains between France and Spain, that Tennyson made as a young man. He was impressed by the sight of the great birds soaring among the rocky cliffs. This dramatic mountain landscape continued to inspire him throughout his writing life.

A bird came down the walk

EMILY DICKINSON

A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then, he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad,—
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

About the author and the poem

Emily Dickinson was a keen observer of nature. She studied botany and geology during her school days at Amherst Academy, and made a herbarium (a book of pressed flowers) that is a marvel of order and precision. She tended the garden at her home throughout her life, and often sent her friends flowers with verses attached.

In the following poem she looks with her poet's eye at a bird pecking at worms on the ground, surely a common sight in her garden. She starts with an unsentimental, dryly humorous series of detailed observations, and seamlessly takes us into an unrestricted space of freedom. The poem was first published in 1891 in the second collection of Dickinson's poetry.

The Pike

AMY LOWELL

In the brown water,
Thick and silver-sheened in the sunshine,
Liquid and cool in the shade of the reeds,
A pike dozed.
Lost among the shadows of stems
He lay unnoticed.
Suddenly he flicked his tail,
And a green-and-copper brightness
Ran under the water.

Out from under the reeds
Came the olive-green light,
And orange flashed up
Through the sun-thickened water.
So the fish passed across the pool,
Green and copper,
A darkness and a gleam,
And the blurred reflections of the willows on the opposite bank
Received it.

About the author and the poem

Amy Lowell (1874-1925) was born into a prominent and wealthy Boston family. Her childhood was troubled by social problems and despair about her “ugly” appearance. She never went to college because her family did not consider it proper for a woman, but read avidly and became obsessed with collecting books. Lowell was linked romantically with women, especially the actress Ada Dwyer Russell, for whom she wrote a number of elegant and erotic love poems.

Lowell was an early champion of free verse and experimental poetry forms. She said that unrhymed poetry could be built upon the natural, organic rhythm of the speaking voice, rather than a set structure. She supported and published other poets as well, using her wealth and influence to shape the direction of contemporary American poetry.

Ezra Pound, an American writer whom she met in England, impressed her with his “Imagist” style that strove toward the clarity and conciseness of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, a goal she had already embraced. Though her poems were forgotten in the later twentieth century, today her skill as a poet and her importance as an innovator are widely recognized.

“The Pike” is almost like a Japanese print in motion. Though there is no emotional interpretation of any kind given in the poem, the image of the great, carnivorous fish moving through the “sun-thickened” water is vaguely menacing. It was published in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, Lowell’s second book, in 1814.

A noiseless patient spider

WALT WHITMAN

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

About the author and the poem

This poem gives us another observation of an ordinary creature that can be commonly found in nature — a spider that is sending strands of its web out into the surrounding space. In the second stanza, Whitman puts himself at the center, speaking (as he often does) to his own soul. He compares his soul's activity of seeking connection with the world with the spider's activity of web-making. The comparison is itself an act of connection, a weaving together of outer and inner realities. We can see the poetic creation of such metaphors as a brave and pioneering action, a form of survival as necessary to us as the web is to the spider.

“A Noiseless Patient Spider” was first published in *The Broadway, A London Magazine* as part of the larger collection *Whispers of Heavenly Death* in 1868. It became part of a later edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

The Rockface

CONRAD FERDINAND MEYER

Translated from the German by Lory Widmer Hess

Unwelcoming and wild, the rockface stares.
The eye shrinks back, then roves irresolute
About those steeps. It seeks security.
There! Above the abyss a bridge is spun
As if of spiderweb, and round an edge
Rough steps are hewn, suggestive of a path.
Atop juts out a doorway filled with blue –
There may a climber come to sunlit heights!
The eye connects the span, the step, the stair.
It seeks. It's found the homeward way entire,
And see, how friendly now appears this face.

Die Felswand

*Feindselig, wildzerrissen steigt die Felswand.
Das Auge schrickt zurück. Dann irrt es unstät
Daran herum. Bang sucht es, wo es hafte.
Dort! über einem Abgrund schwebt ein Brücklein
Wie Spinnweb. Höher um die scharfe Kante
Sind Stapfen eingehaun, ein Wegesbruchstück!
Fast oben ragt ein Tor mit blauer Füllung:
Dort klimmt ein Wanderer zu Licht und Höhe!
Das Aug verbindet Stiege, Stapfen, Stufen.
Es sucht. Es hat den ganzen Pfad gefunden,
Und gastlich, siehe, wird die steile Felswand.*

About the author and the poem

Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825-1898) was a Swiss poet and novelist. He was born in Zürich to a cultured family; his father died early and his mother, who suffered from mental illness, eventually committed suicide. Meyer also had periods of mental illness and was hospitalized during some of these.

Meyer studied law at university but was more interested in history. He later became known as a writer of realistic historical novels, most set during the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation. His narrative ballads were also well regarded. His shorter lyric poems were almost all written during his later life, and often celebrate works of art. Seeing the works of Michelangelo in Rome was a deeply impressive experience for him.

Few of Meyer's works have been translated into English, but I enjoy his poems and have translated several of them, either for publication or for my own pleasure.

“The Rockface” (Die Felswand) describes the experience of seeking meaning, a way to navigate through the seeming randomness of our sense perceptions. Like a climber looking for a path, the poet-observer also looks for a step-by-step progression, a thread of understanding that pulls him from uncertainty to recognition, and thus gives him the feeling of coming home. The reader of a poem — especially in a foreign language — can perhaps also have the same experience of finding a new friend in what at first seemed “unwelcoming” and “wild”.

The Enkindled Spring

D.H. LAWRENCE

This spring as it comes bursts up in bonfires green,
Wild puffing of emerald trees, and flame-filled bushes,
Thorn-blossom lifting in wreaths of smoke between
Where the wood fumes up and the watery, flickering rushes.

I am amazed at this spring, this conflagration
Of green fires lit on the soil of the earth, this blaze
Of growing, and sparks that puff in wild gyration,
Faces of people streaming across my gaze.

And I, what fountain of fire am I among
This leaping combustion of spring? My spirit is tossed
About like a shadow buffeted in the throng
Of flames, a shadow that's gone astray, and is lost.

About the author and the poem

Lawrence is known for his nature poetry, which often deals with the energy which rises up from the earth, coiled and dangerous as a snake, or as in this poem fiercely flaming out. He begins with the wonderfully contradictory image of seeing spring leaves as “bonfires green,” and extends the fiery metaphor to his own spirit, which is shaken by the encounter.

How are we to stand against such powerful forces? Though we may feel “lost” as Lawrence does in the end of the poem, we tame and reclaim the realm of nature through language. Even as he writes of being tossed like a shadow, the poet brings light into a dark experience.

God's Grandeur

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

About the author and the poem

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was a Jesuit priest who only became famous as a poet after his death. His father, who founded a marine insurance company, also published poetry and a novel. He and his wife were very religious high-church Anglicans (the Protestant church closest to Catholicism).

Hopkins's early ambition was to become a painter, and he was a skilled draftsman. While at school he had ascetic tendencies, once trying to abstain from drinking water until he collapsed. At Oxford he studied classics and became friends with the poet Robert Bridges, the person who would later bring his poetry to the world. Hopkins had not wanted to publish it during his lifetime because that would be egotistical.

At the age of 22 Hopkins converted to Roman Catholicism. He wanted to give up everything for God, even poetry, and after burning his poems, he entered the Jesuit order. He later decided that the conflict between poetry and religion did not exist, and began to write again.

Hopkins became a professor of Greek and Latin at University College, Dublin in 1884. Within his severe and restrictive religious life, he sometimes fell into a state of melancholy despair that is expressed in some of his later poems. However, his last words are said to be "I am so happy, I loved my life." He died of typhoid fever and was buried in Dublin.

Hopkins's language is strong and richly sculptured, with many repeated consonants (alliteration) and a variable rhythmic structure based on Old English poetry rather than the borrowed classical models which he called "same and tame" When they were first published his poems seemed strange and rough to many, but he inspired later poets including T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. He is now considered the most original of all Victorian poets.

“God’s Grandeur” is one of a set of sonnets that was written in 1877, just before Hopkins was ordained as a priest. From the despair of seeing how humanity corrupts and destroys the gifts of creation, he comes to a triumphant vision of the unspoiled essence that still springs up like the light of dawn, protected by divine “wings.”

*The lover lingers and
sings*

Bright is the ring of words

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Bright is the ring of words
When the right man rings them,
Fair the fall of songs
When the singer sings them.
Still they are carolled and said –
On wings they are carried –
After the singer is dead
And the maker is buried.

Low as the singer lies
In the field of heather,
Songs of his fashion bring
The swains together.
And when the west is red
With the sunset embers,
The lover lingers and sings
And the maid remembers.

About the author and the poem

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, into a family with a proud tradition of lighthouse design and engineering. From his mother he inherited a weak chest and was often sick as a child. When he was able to go to school it was hard for him to fit in. Usually he stayed at home and was taught by private tutors.

Stevenson learned to read late, around age 8, but before that he was already telling stories to his mother and nurse. He wrote stories throughout his childhood, supported by his father, who had done the same until his own father told him to stop such nonsense. During vacations he traveled with his family to inspect lighthouses, but he used this travel as material for his writing rather than as inspiration to become an engineer.

In spite of his poor health, he continued to write and to travel; while in Europe he met a married American woman who had separated from her unfaithful husband, and fell in love with her. After she returned with her children to San Francisco, he went to join her. The coast-to-coast trip across the United States broke his health and he had to recover in a hotel in Monterey, California. Fanny, now divorced, came to nurse him and they were finally able to be married.

In the following years Stevenson at last became successful as a writer, with stories of adventure and horror like *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. He continued to search for a place to live where he could feel well. In 1890 he bought in Samoa, in the South Pacific, where he took the native name Tusitala (teller of tales). He wrote novels, stories, and nonfiction, but felt overworked and grew depressed. He was working on a new novel that some consider his masterpiece, but left it unfinished when he suddenly collapsed and died, probably from a cerebral haemorrhage.

As a poet, Stevenson is best known for *A Child's Garden of Verses*, a fine collection that is still enjoyed by both children and adults. "Bright is the ring of words" was published in 1896 in

Songs of Travel and Other Verses. It has been put to music by several composers, including a beautiful setting by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

The Clod and the Pebble

WILLIAM BLAKE

“Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.”

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

“Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.”

About the author and the poem

“The Clod and the Pebble” is from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789). The “contrary states of the human soul” explored in that collection are personified in this single poem, in the voices of the clod and the pebble. Does love mean unselfish giving or egoistic self-absorption?

Although it might seem that Blake is making a simple moral distinction between “Heaven” and “Hell,” notice that it is not he who is speaking, but the objects themselves. Can we trust their point of view?

The Song of Wandering Aengus

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

About the author and the poem

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), an Irish poet, was fascinated from an early age by the legends and lore of Ireland. He was descended from a well-known Irish painter; his father also studied art, and his brother and sisters were also involved in painting and the Arts and Crafts movement. His mother came from a wealthy merchant family that provided the seaside estate which Yeats considered his true home.

In his youth Yeats became involved in spiritualism, Theosophy, and other mystical paths; his early poems are meditations on love and on mystical themes. In his twenties he met and fell in love with a young woman, Maud Gonne, who repeatedly refused his proposals of marriage. He still considered her his muse and was horrified when she married another man. The marriage did not last, though, and for Yeats this relationship continued in its “troubling of his life.” After a final refused proposal to Maud in 1916 he at last married a much younger woman and had two children.

He became deeply involved in the Irish nationalist movement, and founded and wrote several plays for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. He continued to write into his seventies; his style became harder and more direct, dealing with themes of dread and despair as the horrific events of the twentieth century unfolded. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, soon after Ireland became an independent nation.

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” was published in *The Wind Among the Reeds* in 1899. Yeats said it was inspired by a Greek folk song, but it also seems to refer to the Irish myth of Aengus, a god who fell in love with a girl he saw in a dream and pursued her until he found her. It seems clear that there must also be a connection with Maud Gonne, his elusive love.

The Heart of a Woman

GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

About the author and the poem

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966) was one of the earliest African-American playwrights, as well as a poet, musician, and supporter of other writers and artists. She challenged racial and gender barriers with her work and also fought for social justice, especially against the horrific practice of lynching in the South.

She was born in Atlanta, Georgia of mixed-race heritage (African-American, Native American, and English). She was educated in Atlanta and at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, where she studied music intending to become a composer. However, she returned to Atlanta to work as a teacher until her marriage to an attorney and government worker, with whom she moved to Washington, DC. Her husband was not happy with her writing, which took time away from her role as a traditional wife and mother, but she published her first books of poetry anyway.

In Washington she often hosted African-American writers and other artists in her home, which she called the “Half Way House.” After her husband’s death, she had to raise and support her two sons on her own. As she worked at government and clerical jobs she continued to write poetry, plays, and a weekly newspaper column, and to open her home to other writers, including Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. For over forty years she held a weekly Saturday gathering known as the S Street Salon. She often struggled with poverty, but never gave up her creative spark or enthusiasm for literature, and was always generous to other writers.

“The Heart of a Woman” is one of Douglas Johnson’s most recognized poems. It provided the title for her poetry collection *The Heart of a Woman* in 1918. Maya Angelou also used this title for her fourth book of memoirs in 1981.

A Birthday

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSETTI

My heart is like a singing bird

Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;

My heart is like an apple-tree

Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;

My heart is like a rainbow shell

That paddles in a halcyon sea;

My heart is gladder than all these

Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;

Hang it with vair and purple dyes;

Carve it in doves and pomegranates,

And peacocks with a hundred eyes;

Work it in gold and silver grapes,

In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;

Because the birthday of my life

Is come, my love is come to me.

About the author and the poem

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894) was the youngest child of a remarkable Italian-English family. Her father was a poet, her mother a teacher, her siblings were writers, scholars, and artists, and she herself was, along with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, known as the greatest woman poet of the Victorian age. Today, we would say one of the greatest poets of either gender.

The family was rich in affection and creativity, though they struggled financially. Rossetti had been writing poetry since childhood, but for many years only a few of her poems were printed in magazines and anthologies. Her first success was *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), followed by several other volumes of widely acclaimed poetry.

A tempestuous child (she once cut her arm with scissors in a fit of rage), Rossetti became increasingly restrained and devoted to her Anglican religious principles. She rejected marriage to more than one suitor because of religious differences, and in later life wrote many devotional works.

“A Birthday” was first published in *Macmillan’s* in 1861.

Amores - 1

E.E. CUMMINGS

your little voice

Over the wires came leaping

and i felt suddenly

dizzy

With the jostling and shouting of merry flowers

wee skipping high-heeled flames

courtesied before my eyes

or twinkling over to my side

Looked up

with impertinently exquisite faces

floating hands were laid upon me

I was whirled and tossed into delicious dancing

up

Up

with the pale important

stars and the Humorous

moon

dear girl

How i was crazy how i cried when i heard

over time

and tide and death

leaping

Sweetly

your voice

About the author and the poem

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) was born and educated in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he attended Cambridge Latin High School and Harvard College. During the First World War he volunteered as an ambulance driver, but his antiwar attitude caused him to be arrested as a spy. After three months he was cleared of these charges and set free. He wrote about the experience in a novel, *The Enormous Room*.

After the war he studied art in Paris, and returned to the United States to find that both *The Enormous Room* and his 1923 book of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, had made him famous. He alternated between homes in rural New Hampshire, Greenwich Village in New York, and Paris, continuing to paint as well as write, although he was never as successful with his art as with his poetry. His third marriage was the happiest, and he collaborated on several projects with his wife, the photographer Marion Morehouse.

Cummings experimented with verse forms, using irregular capitalization, eccentric line breaks, invented words, inverted syntax, varying alignment, and other nontraditional means that emphasize the dynamic energy of his poetic voice. He often used informal language and playful, childlike images. He could be satirical and critical of oppressive forces, but through all his work a sense of joy and freshness bubbles up.

In “Amores — 1” an ordinary phone call is transformed through love into a transcendent experience. The poet’s dancing lines take us along with him, leaping off the page into a space beyond words.

My true love hath my heart

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

My true-love hath my heart and I have his,
By just exchange one for the other given:
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss;
There never was a bargain better driven.

His heart in me keeps me and him in one;
My heart in him his thoughts and senses guides:
He loves my heart, for once it was his own;
I cherish his because in me it bides.

His heart his wound received from my sight;
My heart was wounded with his wounded heart;
For as from me on him his hurt did light,
So still, methought, in me his hurt did smart:
Both equal hurt, in this change sought our bliss,
My true love hath my heart and I have his.

About the author and the poem

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was a poet and scholar as well as a courtier and soldier, one of the most important men of the Elizabethan Age in England. He wrote in many forms, including the greatest sonnets of the age aside from Shakespeare's, but his poetry was not published until after his death. He died of gangrene after being wounded in a battle against the Spanish, and afterwards became legendary as the perfect model of an English knight: learned, diplomatic, generous, and valiant. The reality was more complex; for example his famous series of love poems, though dedicated to his wife, was written for his mistress.

“My true love hath my heart” is from a long prose work, *The Arcadia*, written around 1580. In this passage a shepherdess speaks of her love for the shepherd she is pledged to marry, who is lying with his head in her lap.

Lost and Found

GEORGE MACDONALD

I missed him when the sun began to bend;
I found him not when I had lost his rim;
With many tears I went in search of him,
Climbing high mountains which did still ascend,
And gave me echoes when I called my friend
Through cities vast and charnel-houses grim,
And high cathedrals where the light was dim,
Through books and arts and works without an end,
But found him not — the friend who I had lost.
And yet I found him — as I found the lark,
A sound in fields I heard but could not mark;
I found him nearest when I missed him most,
I found him in my heart, a life in frost,
A light I knew not till my soul was dark.

About the author and the poem

George MacDonald (1824-1905), born and educated in Scotland, was ordained as a Congregationalist minister but broke with the denomination over some of the unconventional ideas he expressed in his sermons. He turned instead to a writing career and was a popular and prolific author. He wrote many realistic stories with moral and religious themes, and published “unspoken sermons” although he was no longer a minister. But he is best remembered today for his children’s classics, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, and *At the Back of the North Wind*, and his shorter tales *The Golden Key* and *The Light Princess*. His adult fantasies *Lilith* and *Phantastes* were also a strong influence on modern fantasy.

MacDonald knew many of the famous writers of his day, including Browning, Tennyson, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope, and Thackeray. He met Whitman and Longfellow while on a successful lecture tour of America. He was a friend of Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), who decided to publish *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* when MacDonald’s three daughters read and loved it.

MacDonald said, “I write, not for children, but for the child-like, whether they be of five, or fifty, or seventy-five.” His spiritual views were inclusive, and emphasized the joy of recovered relationship with God. “Lost and Found” is a sonnet that describes the heart’s search for a true friend, experienced as a light within.

Love

GEORGE HERBERT

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

About the Author and the Poem

George Herbert (1593-1633) was born in Wales to a wealthy and artistic family. He was raised and educated in England, served briefly in Parliament but decided to become a priest after the death of King James I.

After being ordained, Herbert spent the rest of his short life as the rector of a small parish church near Salisbury, England. He cared for his parishioners with great devotion. Henry Vaughan called him “most glorious saint and seer.” He died of consumption before his fortieth birthday.

Herbert wrote poetry in Latin and Greek as well as English. He sent a manuscript of his poems to a friend shortly before his death, saying they should be published if they were thought to be “to the advantage of any other poor soul,” otherwise burned. His English poems were published as *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* in 1633, the year of his death. It instantly became a popular and much-reprinted favorite.

Herbert’s religious poetry uses puns, wordplay, visual pattern, echo-rhymes, and other devices to enhance the meaning he is trying to convey. By highlighting such features, he both emphasizes the artificial screen of language, and looks it toward a transcendent reality.

“Love” is the third of a series of poems with the same title. It is one of Herbert’s most famous and beloved poems, both for its spiritual message and its poetic beauty. As a dialogue between divine Love and the human Soul, it invites the reader to participate in a feast of reconciliation, forgiveness, and mercy.

Hold fast to dreams

Dreams

LANGSTON HUGHES

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

About the author and the poem

Langston Hughes (1901-1967) an American writer and social activist, was born in Missouri, had an unsettled youth in the Midwest (his parents were divorced and he spent time living with other relatives and friends), and moved to New York City as a young man. He was a leader of the movement of African-American writers known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes said of his writing, “My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind.” He began writing during his school days, was first published in 1921 in *The Crisis* (the official magazine of the NAACP), and published plays, fiction, autobiography, and fiction as well as many books of poetry. He advocated pride in black heritage and used jazz and folk rhythms in his poems.

Some biographers believe that Hughes was homosexual but kept it a secret to retain financial support, but others deny this. He died in New York of complications after surgery related to prostate cancer. His ashes are buried beneath the foyer of the Schomburg Centre for Research for Black Culture in Harlem, underneath an African cosmogram called “Rivers.”

Lucinda Matlock

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medicinal weed —
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you —
It takes life to love Life.

About the author and the poem

Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950) was born in Kansas and grew up in small towns in Illinois. Like his father before him, he became an attorney, but also a poet and author. Of his 40 books he is mainly remembered for his collection *Spoon River Anthology*. He began to publish this series of poems that came out of his experience of small-town midwestern life in a St Louis paper in 1914. Each poem is a free-verse epitaph spoken by a person buried in the cemetery of Spoon River, who is able to reveal the truth about his or her life from the vantage point of death. More than 200 separate characters appear in the poems, creating a rich and lively picture of American small town life.

The verses were bound and published as a book in 1915 and were an instant success. They have been adapted for the theater several times, both with and without music, and are often used as audition pieces by actors.

The people of the region where Masters drew his inspiration from names on local gravestones were often not so happy with the book. They objected to his sometimes unflattering portrayal of their ancestors, though Masters said they could not be identified with real people. His later books included biographies of Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain.

“Lucinda Matlock” celebrates the heroism of people who are able to live through both good and tragic times with undiminished strength. Lucinda does nothing out of the ordinary, but she sees herself as triumphing over despair and discontent. The language is plain and unadorned, like regular speech, yet has a feeling for sound and a strong rhythm that lift it above the everyday.

from *Ulysses*

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

. . . There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me,
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

About the author and the poem

Many of Tennyson's best poems were written in the weeks following the death of his close friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, who was engaged to be married to his sister. In "Ulysses," he speaks in the voice of an old man deciding how to spend his last years — the Greek hero Odysseus, who has arrived at home after many perilous journeys. Tennyson was in fact only 33 years old at the time.

In these final lines from the longer poem, Ulysses (Odysseus in Latin) calls his companions to set out with him again for an unknown goal, and "do something ere the end," rather than sit securely by the fire.

To the Swimmer

COUNTEE CULLEN

Now as I watch you, strong of arm and endurance, battling and struggling
With the waves that rush against you, ever with invincible strength returning
Into my heart, grown each day more tranquil and peaceful, comes a fierce longing
Of mind and soul that will not be appeased until, like you,
I breast yon deep and boundless expanse of blue.

With an outward stroke of power intense your mighty arm goes forth,
Cleaving its way through waters that rise and roll, ever a ceaseless vigil keeping
Over the treasures beneath.

My heart goes out to you of dauntless courage and spirit indomitable,
And though my lips would speak, my spirit forbids me to ask,
“Is your heart as true as your arm?”

About the author and the poem

Countee Cullen (1903-1946) was taken as a teenager into the home of the influential Harlem pastor Frederick A. Cullen, whose name he adopted. This brought him into the center of Black culture and political life at the time, and exposed him to the outburst of African American energy and artistic work known as the Harlem Renaissance. His marriage to the daughter of W.E.B. DuBois was a major social event, joining two of the most prominent African American families of the time.

At the same time, Cullen was extremely successful in the white academic world and cultural atmosphere, winning prizes, earning a master's degree from Harvard, and publishing several books of poems while still in his twenties. He argued that art transcended race, and took Keats, Shelley, and Housman as his models, as he shared their Romantic self-involvement. Into the European structures and styles he had learned so thoroughly, he incorporated his own ideas about racial experience. He criticized poets like Langston Hughes who used jazz rhythms and other innovations in their poems, questioning whether this was truly poetry.

In the 1930s Cullen was writing less poetry and became a schoolteacher. He also produced fiction, drama, children's books, and translations. He died of complications from high blood pressure and was survived by his second wife (his first marriage having lasted only two years).

Death be not proud

JOHN DONNE

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

About the author and the poem

John Donne was born in 1572 to Roman Catholic parents, at a time when practicing that religion was illegal in England. He was educated at the University of Cambridge but could not take a degree because of his religion. He was not at all pious or ascetic in his youth, though, spending a good deal of the family wealth on women, travel, and other pastimes, including literature. A secret marriage to his employer's niece put an end to a promising career in diplomacy.

Donne struggled to support his family, as his beloved wife Anne gave birth to twelve children, seven of whom survived past the age of ten. He worked as a lawyer and a Member of Parliament, and at last took Holy Orders in the Church of England, being ordained in 1615. After the death of his wife, who died in 1617 giving birth to a still-born child, he left England to serve as a chaplain to an ambassador to the princes of Germany, and in 1621 was made Dean of St. Paul's in London, a well-paid position he held until his own death in 1631.

Donne's poetry was highly regarded during his lifetime, within a small circle of connoisseurs, and he was a famous preacher in his incarnation as a clergyman. But his style fell out of favor over the following centuries, only to be taken up again by the Modernist avant-garde. They valued his manner of fusing intellect and passion, and he seemed to them a contemporary in many of his views.

The sonnet began as an Italian poetic form, but became a favorite of English poets during Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, published in 1609, showed how versatile and powerful this brief, compact verse form could be, and later poets continued to work with it without exhausting all the possibilities. "Death be not proud" is one of Donne's nineteen Holy Sonnets, first published in 1633, two years after the poet's own death.

Donne wrote his Holy Sonnets to "address the problem of faith in a tortured world with its death and misery," according to scholar A.J. Smith. Meanwhile, the following two sonnets

demonstrate how American poets have taken up the form and made their own declarations of belief, tinged with both hope and despair.

The New Colossus

EMMA LAZARUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

About the author and the poem

Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) was an American author and activist for Jewish causes. She was born in New York City into a large family of Sephardic Jewish descent. Her father was a wealthy merchant, and on both sides she was descended from the original Portuguese Jewish settlers who fled the Inquisition to settle in what was then called New Amsterdam.

Lazarus studied privately with tutors, learning several languages as well as studying British and American literature. She started to write her first poems at the age of eleven; her earliest published poems included translations from German and French.

Lazarus had written many poems, plays, literary criticism, and a novel, when in 1883 she wrote “The New Colossus” for an auction that raised funds to build the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. Lines from the poem were placed on a plaque in 1903.

As pogroms in Russia caused many poor Jews to emigrate to New York, Lazarus became more interested in her Jewish ancestry. Her humanitarian projects included founding the Hebrew Technical Institute and the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews. She began to write poems with Jewish themes, translated medieval Hebrew writers, and wrote articles advocating an independent Jewish nationality.

After her second trip to Europe, Lazarus became very ill on her return to New York, probably of Hodgkin’s lymphoma. She died and was buried in Cypress Hills, Queens.

America

CLAUDE MCKAY

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

About the author and the poem

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was born in Jamaica to a family of peasant farmers. He was proud of his African heritage but also studied the great British poets from an early age, under the instruction of his brother Uriah, a schoolteacher, and an English neighbor, Walter Jekyll. Encouraged by Jekyll, he published two books of poetry and won an award from the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences. He used the award money to travel to Alabama and study at the Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State College, eventually moving to New York City.

McKay was disgusted by the racism he encountered in Jamaica and the United States. He wrote passionate poems calling for resistance to oppression and an end to indifference to human suffering. He became involved in Communism, which seemed to offer a way toward social change and justice. Along with his poetry, he wrote novels and stories that explored the Black experience and dramatized social issues.

Later in his life, poor and ill health, McKay retreated from Communism and began working with Catholic relief organizations. He converted to Catholicism in 1944, which puzzled many of those who knew him as a left-wing activist. McKay died of a heart attack in Chicago in 1948.

The sonnet "America" was published in the Communist journal *Liberator* in 1921.

No coward soul is mine

EMILY BRONTE

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest,
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

About the Author and the Poem

Emily Brontë (1818-1848) is the product of one of the most famous and strangest literary families in English history. She and her two sisters Charlotte and Anne, were the daughters of an Irish-born rector of a country parish in Yorkshire; their mother died when Emily was three years old. They lived in poor and isolated surroundings but were rich in imagination and creativity. Together with their brother, Branwell, from an early age they created stories of adventure, romance, and politics based on their own reading of fiction, history, and current events.

Branwell, the only boy, never fulfilled his early promise, could not settle on a profession, and became a womanizer and an alcoholic. The three sisters, seeking to support themselves, published a volume of poetry. It only sold two copies, but their novels had more success. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* was not the most popular, with its dark tale of violent passion, but is now thought by some to be the greatest of all.

Emily was the most private and most mysterious of the Brontë children. She loved the Yorkshire moors, the wide, stark landscape covered with heather and stones, where she would walk for hours. When she was away from them, she became extremely homesick and had to return. She probably would not have published her work if not pushed to do so by Charlotte. Her writing came out of a deep inner need rather than a wish for worldly fame or fortune. Her poems are the only ones of those published by the three sisters that have serious poetic worth.

"No coward soul is mine," dated 1846, is the last of the unpublished poems that she wrote toward the end of her short life, which ended — as did those of Anne and Branwell — with her death from tuberculosis. It is said to be a favorite poem of Emily Dickinson, who requested that it be read at her funeral.

from Prometheus Unbound

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

About the Author and the Poem

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was the oldest son of an English landowner. After a happy childhood spent in the country and tutored at home, he was bullied and tormented by other boys when he went away to school at Eton College. He was interested in science and used it to play pranks using electricity and gunpowder. He settled down when he went to Oxford University, where he would read for up to sixteen hours a day.

However, he was soon expelled from Oxford for his atheism, and embarked on a turbulent personal life along with an increasing mastery of the art of English poetry, and continued agitation for radical political and anti-establishment views. He drowned in a boating accident shortly before his 30th birthday. The poems he wrote during his short life became hugely popular and influential for a later generation, while his dangerously transgressive views about freedom and individual self-determination are now part of our spiritual heritage.

Prometheus Unbound is a long verse drama inspired by a lost play of the ancient Greek dramatist, Aeschylus. Shelley completed it in 1819 while living in Rome. It tells of the rebellion of the Titan Prometheus against the tyrant-God Jupiter, and concludes with this resounding chorus.

A clear midnight

Fall, Leaves, Fall

EMILY BRONTE

Fall, leaves, fall; die, flowers, away;
Lengthen night and shorten day;
Every leaf speaks bliss to me
Fluttering from the autumn tree.
I shall smile when wreaths of snow
Blossom where the rose should grow;
I shall sing when night's decay
Ushers in a drearier day.

About the Author and the Poem

This brief verse is one of the many that were unpublished only after the author's death. Here, she reverses the usual poetic image of falling leaves as a sad sign of loss and decay, and welcomes the coming of winter with mysterious "bliss" and "delight," without explaining why.

Winter Stars

SARA TEASDALE

I went out at night alone;
The young blood flowing beyond the sea
Seemed to have drenched my spirit's wings—
I bore my sorrow heavily.

But when I lifted up my head
From shadows shaken on the snow,
I saw Orion in the east
Burn steadily as long ago.

From windows in my father's house,
Dreaming my dreams on winter nights,
I watched Orion as a girl
Above another city's lights.

Years go, dreams go, and youth goes too,
The world's heart breaks beneath its wars,
All things are changed, save in the east
The faithful beauty of the stars.

About the Author and the Poem

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) grew up in a wealthy family in St Louis, Missouri. Until she was 10 years old she was too sickly to attend school and was educated at home. She began to publish her poetry in her twenties and was praised for her lyrical and romantic work. She won the first Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1917.

Teasdale was courted by several men, including another poet, Vachel Lindsay, who did not think he could give her enough material support. Instead, she married another admirer of her poetry, a rich businessman, and moved with him to New York City. Her husband was constantly away on business, though, and Teasdale was unhappy. She divorced him and renewed her relationship with Lindsay, now married with children.

Lindsay, who had other affairs and was deeply depressed by money worries and failing health, committed suicide in 1931. Teasdale, also in poor health, died of an overdose of sleeping pills two years later.

The simplicity and musical beauty of Teasdale's poetry often conveys complex thoughts and emotions. "Winter Stars" was published in the collection *Flame and Shadow* in 1920. Reflecting on the senseless bloodshed of the Great War, Teasdale contrasts the restless violence of our earthly life with the constant beauty of the stars.

When I am dead

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

About the author and the poem

A morbid strain is to be found in many of Rossetti's poems, which often deal with themes of longing, loss, and resignation. This may have to do with the way her early passions had to be thwarted and controlled, according to Victorian mores; her brother lamented that "in innate character she was vivacious, and open to pleasurable impressions; and, during her girlhood, one might readily have supposed that she would develop into a woman of expansive heart, fond of society and diversions, and taking a part in them of more than average brilliancy. What came to pass was of course quite the contrary." Instead, she became known as an excessively restrained and scrupulous person.

Rossetti's own death was drawn out and excruciating; she had an operation for breast cancer, but the illness recurred and she died in 1894 after months of great suffering. However, "When I am dead," from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), gives no hint of the painful struggle to come, but looks forward to a time when suffering will be no more.

A Dream Within a Dream

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow:
You are not wrong who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less gone?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is *all* that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

About the Author and the Poem

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an American writer best known for his stories of mystery and horror. His parents were actors; his father abandoned the family after Poe was born and his mother died shortly afterward. Poe was raised by a foster family in Virginia.

After failure in college and the military, Poe declared that he truly wanted to be a writer. Although he was often in financial hardship, he was the first American writer to make his living from writing alone. His poem “The Raven” was a major success. He also wrote some of the first detective stories and influential essays.

Poe called himself “constitutionally sensitive — nervous in a very unusual degree,” and his life was troubled by illness and even insanity. To those he loved he could be gentle and kind, but others found him irritable and critical. In his best works, this duality of human nature is imaginatively explored. The reason for his death is unknown, but since Poe was in poor health and an alcoholic, it is not surprising that he died young.

“A Dream Within a Dream” is a revised version of a poem that was first composed in the 1820s.

Acquainted with the Night

ROBERT FROST

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

About the Author and the Poem

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of the most widely known and best-loved American poets of the twentieth century. He was born and spent his childhood in California. After the death of his father, Frost moved to eastern Massachusetts with his mother and sister. The landscape of rural, where he spent much of the rest of his life, was a strong inspiration for his poetry.

Frost wrote his first books of poetry while trying to run a farm in New Hampshire. After nine years, he gave up the farm and went with his wife and children to England, where he met other poets and published his first collection. He returned to the United States and worked as a writer and teacher of poetry for the rest of his life. He won the Pulitzer Prize four times, more than any other poet, and although he never completed a university education, he was awarded honorary degrees from several including Dartmouth and Harvard. He was chosen to read a poem at the inauguration of President Kennedy.

“Acquainted with the Night” was published in the collection *West-Running Brook* in 1928. It shows Frost’s interest in traditional forms of rhyme and meter.

The Call

CHARLOTTE MEW

From our low seat beside the fire
 Where we have dozed and dreamed and watched the glow
Or raked the ashes, stopping so
We scarcely saw the sun or rain
 Above, or looked much higher
Than this same quiet red or burned-out fire.
 To-night we heard a call,
 A rattle on the window-pane,
 A voice on the sharp air,
And felt a breath stirring our hair,
 A flame within us: Something swift and tall
 Swept in and out and that was all.
Was it a bright or a dark angel? Who can know?
It left no mark upon the snow,
 But suddenly it snapped the chain
 Unbarred, flung wide the door
 Which will not shut again;
And so we cannot sit here any more.
 We must arise and go:
 The world is cold without
 And dark and hedged about
With mystery and enmity and doubt,
 But we must go
 Though yet we do not know
Who called, or what marks we shall leave upon the snow.

About the author and the poem

Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) was born, educated, and lived in London. Her father was the architect who designed Hampstead Town Hall. He died without leaving enough money to support his family, and two of his seven children became mentally ill, while three died in childhood. The two remaining sisters decided never to marry, afraid they would pass on mental illness to her own children. Mew, who was attracted to women, but unhappy and conflicted about it, wore masculine clothes and cut her hair short.

Mew published only a few poems and stories by 1912 and struggled financially. When she started to become part of the London literary community, her originality was admired by many other poets and writers. Virginia Woolf called her “very good and interesting and unlike anyone else.” With the support of her friends, she was able to publish several books of poetry. Unfortunately she became very depressed after the death of her sister in 1927, and committed suicide.

Spring and Fall

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

to a young child

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

About the author and the poem

“Spring and Fall was written in 1880 and published in 1918 after the poet’s death. It is spoken as if to a child, “Margaret,” who is weeping over the falling leaves — a contrast to Emily Brontë’s poem “Fall, Leaves, Fall.”

We grow accustomed to the Dark

EMILY DICKINSON

We grow accustomed to the Dark -
When light is put away -
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye -

A Moment - We uncertain step
For newness of the night -
Then - fit our Vision to the Dark -
And meet the Road - erect -

And so of larger - Darknesses -
Those Evenings of the Brain -
When not a Moon disclose a sign -
Or Star - come out - within -

The Bravest - grope a little -
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead -
But as they learn to see -

Either the Darkness alters -
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight -
And Life steps almost straight.

About the author and the poem

In a vast number of poems that went unpublished during her lifetime, Dickinson brings precise imagery to the human soul's wrestling with the greatest themes: love, death, time, and eternity. This one (which, like all of her poems, was untitled by the poet) articulates the experience of stumbling through the night until our vision can adjust, and connects it with "larger darkneses," a picture of moral growth that may help sustain us through times of uncertainty.

A Clear Midnight

WALT WHITMAN

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless.

Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done.

Thee fully forth emerging silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death, and the stars.

About the author and the poem

“A Clear Midnight” was first printed as the final poem in the section “From Noon to Starry Night” in the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Through seven editions, Whitman has reshaped his poetic body of work and increasingly added a spiritual strand to his poems of the physical and visible world. Ten years before his own death, the poet turns his eyes to last and lasting things.

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