

*COLLEGE GUILD*  
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

POETRY CLUB-2, UNIT 3

EMILY DICKINSON and WALT WHITMAN

**Emily Dickinson** (1830-1886) and **Walt Whitman** (1819-1892), were the founders of a uniquely American poetic voice. Dickinson, who wrote over 1,800 poems, was one of America's greatest and most original poets who experimented with form in order to free it from conventional restraints. Her speakers are sharp-sighted observers who see the inescapable limitations of their societies as well as imagined escapes from it.

Although she lived most of her later life in reclusive isolation with her family, she maintained written correspondence with many people and read widely. Her poems were numbered, not titled. What might be the reason for or the benefit of not titling poems?

"I'm Nobody! Who are you? 1.  
Are you – Nobody – Too?  
Then there's a pair of us?  
Don't tell! They'd advertise – you know!  
How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!

Surgeons must be very careful 2.  
When they take the knife!  
Underneath their fine incisions  
Stirs the Culprit – *Life!*



4. In both the third and fourth poems Dickinson writes about the power of language. What is she saying about it? Do you agree with her?
5. Write a poem about the power, or lack of power, of language, emulating (imitating) Dickinson's style.
6. In the fifth poem Dickinson is describing both evening and morning skies. What do you think "Ruby Trousers hurried on" means? How do you imagine the sky from her words?
7. Write a poem about something in the natural or unnatural world, using details in way Dickinson does to paint the picture one can see. Try using unusual capitalizations and dashes, like Dickinson!

**Walt Whitman** was, in addition to being a poet, an essayists and a journalist who was largely self-taught. He is often called the father of free verse, unrhymed poetry that isn't metrical, though he didn't invent it. In his teens while working in the printer's trade he fell in love with the written word. He continued to revise his most famous book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, up until the time of his death.

#### WHEN I READ THE BOOK

When I read the book, the biography famous,  
 And is this then (I said) what the author calls a man's life.  
 And so will someone when I am dead and gone write about my life?  
 (as if any can really know aught? my life.  
 Why even I myself I often think know little or nothing of my real life,  
 Only a few hints, a few diffused clues and indications  
 I see for my own use to trace out here).

8. What is Whitman saying about biographers and a person's life in this poem? Can biographies capture a person's life? Can a poem?
9. This poem is written in free verse vs. rhyme. How does this add or detract from the message?
10. Write a poem in free verse in which the speaker is talking to him or herself, musing about a question he has been thinking about.

## SHUT NOT YOUR DOORS TO ME PROUD LIBRARIES

Shut not your doors to me proud libraries

For that which was lacking among you all, yet need most, I bring;

A book I have made for your dear sake, O soldiers.

The words of my book nothing, the life of it everything,

A book separate, not linked with the rest, nor felt by the intellect,

But you will feel every word, O Libertadd arm'd Libertadd\*

It shall pass by the intellect to swim the sea, the air

With joy with you, O Soul of man.

*(\*Liberty armed liberty)*

**11. What does Whitman mean by “every word....shall pass by the intellect”? How can poetry “pass by the intellect to swim the sea...”?**

**12. Why would this create liberty?**

INDICATIONS (excerpts)

The words of the true poems give you more than poems.

They give you to form for yourself, poems, religion, politics,

war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, romances, and everything else.

They balance ranks, colors, races, creeds and the sexes.

They do not seek beauty – they are sought,

Forever touching them, or close upon them, follows beauty, longing

fain,\* love-sick....

Whom they take, they take into space to behold the birth of the stars,

to learn one of the meanings,

To launch off with absolute faith – to sweep through the

ceaseless sings, and never to be quiet again.

*(\*an archaic [antiquated] word meaning pleased, happy, willing, obliged, compelled.)*

**13. What does Whitman say is poetry's function? Do you agree?**

**14. Which lines stand out for you to convey Whitman's meaning?**

#### AMERICA

Central of equal daughters, equal sons

All, all alike endeared, grown, ungrown, young or old,

Strong, ample, fair enduring, capable, rich

Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love

A grand, sane, towering seated Mother,

Chaired in adamant\* of time.

*(\*unyielding, inflexible or an unbreakable or extremely hard substance)*

**15. This poem was written over 100 years ago in a time of optimism. In what ways has this national spirit changed, or has it remained the same? Explain.**

**16. Write a poem in free verse about America today.**

#### A CLEAR MIDNIGHT

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

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

They fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering

The themes thou lovest best,

Night, sleep, death and the stars.

**17. Write a poem about your soul, the soul of someone you know, or a plant's, animal's, or a Martian's.**

**18. What do you like and/or dislike about Whitman's style?**

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*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*