Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson
Transitional Figures

- Both writing at a time of transition in American literature.
- Romantic writers, Transcendentalists dominate American letters from 1830's-1860
- Realism primary mode in years after the Civil War
Changes Following Civil War

- Industrialized North wins out over pastoral South--period when Industrial Revolution culminates in the U.S.
- Machines replace hand labor. (Development of trade unions; Marx’s writings about workers alienated from their labor are influential)
- Huge numbers of immigrants begin flocking to cities, taking jobs in factories
- Between 1870 and 1890: Explosion of urban centers. Chicago increases 20 times in size; New York 4 times; Philadelphia triples
Changes, cont.

• Transcontinental railroad completed in 1869
• Ease of railroad travel makes it necessary to reduce over 300 local “sun” time zones to only 4 time zones in 1889
• Telegraph invented in 1861
• Telephone patented in 1876
• Plains Indians subjugated by late 1880’s
Leaves of Grass

- Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* first published in 1855, then revised throughout his lifetime—volume goes through numerous editions, expands during the very period of these changes.
Contemporary Critical Reactions

• Charles Dana in the *NY Daily Tribune*: Complained of a “somewhat too oracular strain and language that is “too frequently reckless and indecent…quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society.” Nevertheless, “no impartial reader can fail to be impressed with the vigor and faint beauty of isolated portions.”

• Rufus Griswold in the *NY Criterion*: “It is impossible to imagine how any man’s fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey who had died of disappointed love.”
• **Boston Intelligencer:** “What we thought ridiculous in the title is eclipsed in the pages of this heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity, and nonsense. The beastliness of the author is set forth in his own description of himself, and we can conceive no better reward than the lash for such a violation of decency as we have before us…This book should find no place where humanity urges any claim to respect, and the author should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of a brute. There is neither wit nor method in his disjointed babbling, and it seems to us that he must be some escaped lunatic, raving in pitiable delirium.”
• Charles Eliot Norton in *Putnam’s Monthly*:
  “Superficial yet profound...preposterous yet somehow fascinating...a mixture of Yankee Transcendentalism and New York rowdyism.”
Emerson’s Reaction

- From famous letter Emerson wrote to Whitman: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. . . .I find it [Leaves of Grass] the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.”
- Whitman as self-promoter
NEWness of Whitman’s work startling, confusing

- Not only a transitional figure between Transcendentalism and Realism, but his work blends aspects of both movements.
Transcendental Elements

- Interconnectedness, unity of all things (“For very atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”; undermining of traditional dichotomies: body/soul; heaven/hell; goodness/wickedness; male/female; life/death)
- Suspicion of past texts, schools of thought (“Creeds and schools in abeyance”)
- Nature as a means to discovering spiritual truth (“I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass”)
Realistic Elements in *Leaves of Grass*

- Journalism background
- Whitman as the great “bohemian observer” of the city (see especially Sections 12, 15 of “Song of Myself”--long catalogues of realistic sights and sounds)
- Sections added about the Civil War in later editions (also, *Speciman Days*)
Whitman Most Remembered, Most Influential as...

• An innovator in verse form--used free verse

• An experimenter in language--got rid of conventional literary allusion; chose rude Anglo-Saxon words over flowery Latinate words; loved the urban common language of the city ("The sound of the belch’d words of my voice" [line 25]; “The blab of the pave…sluff of boot-soles” [line 154])

• Prophet of the self; promoter of individualism
Whitman Most Remembered, Most Influential as…. (cont.)

• The poet of democracy--wrote about common people, the “vast masses” and varieties of Americans, not romantic subjects of a Poe or a Longfellow (“Annabel Lee”; “Hiawatha”)
• Thus, seen as a quintessentially American poet, who used American materials, celebrated the country and the age
• Finally a poet of the physical body as well--introduces sex into American poetry
“Song of Myself”

• Overall structure of the poem:
  – Describes Whitman’s entry into a mystical state (described as a sexual union)
  – He receives an orgasmic vision of the unity of all things
  – Delivers a Christ-like message of eternal life
  – Has a “dark night of the soul” period, but is re-affirmed in his vision
  – Emerges from the mystical state (described in post-coital terms)
Meanwhile…Civil War…What Civil War?

• Dickinson’s most productive period is early 1860’s; hundreds of poems written in 1861, 1862

• Yet, very few of her poems address political situation

• Instead, Dickinson’s poetry tends to turn inward.
Dickinson’s Life

- Father, Edward Dickinson a prominent lawyer and politician
- Always close to family, siblings
- Mt. Holyoke Academy
Religious Experiences

• Speculation that Mary Lyon’s (principal of Mt. Holyoke) evangelicism might have caused Dickinson to leave

• Never experienced religious awakening so many of her friends did
“Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless. Abby, Mary, Jane, and farthest of all my Vinnie have been seeking, and they all believe they have found; I can’t tell you what they have found, but they think it is something precious. I wonder if it is? . . . I really think I envy them . . . You must pray when the rest are sleeping, that the hand may be held to me, and I may be led away.”
Suspicious about conversion experiences?

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung
Thomas Wentworth Higginson

- Wrote article in 1862 *Atlantic Monthly*, telling young poets to “charge your style with life.”
- Dickinson sent him 4 poems
- He encouraged her to hold off publishing
- Began life-long correspondence
The Moth of Amherst

• In her early 30’s began dressing in white
• Retreated to her house
• Critical speculation about why
• Ultra-sensitivity
I taste a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro' endless summer days –
From inns of molten Blue –

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door –
When Butterflies – renounce their "drams" –
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the – Sun!

From Thomas H. Johnson’s Biography

“The exuberance of living overwhelmed her. Each new excitement became a heady liquor that made her stagger. ‘I can wade Grief,’ she exclaims in 1861, ‘But the least push of Joy/Breaks up my feet—/And I tip—drunken’” (Johnson 46).
From Johnson’s Biography:

Colonel Higginson paid his first visit to Emily Dickinson in 1870, and in a letter to his wife written in the evening of the same August day he gives the fullest statement any direct observer has recorded of her attitude toward the way of life she had chosen. The impressions are both in her own words as he recalled them, and in his:

“I find ecstasy in living—the mere sense of living is joy enough.” I asked if she never felt want of employment, never going off the place, and never seeing any visitor. “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time” (and added) “I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough.”

He then went on: “I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her.”
Dickinson’s Poetry

- Often Explores:
  - Questions of religious belief (especially possibility of salvation and the after-life)
  - Relation to nature and the natural world
  - The role and purpose of poetry and the poet
Form in Dickinson

• Whitman expansive, outward-looking; reflected in his form
  – Long poems; long lines
  – Amplification with repeated initial words, ideas
  – Epic lists and catalogues

• Dickinson’s turn inward also reflected in her more compact, even cryptic form
Form in Dickinson

– Use of common meter (from Protestant hymnals)
  • Quatrains
  • Iambic meter
  • Alternating lines of 4 feet; 3 feet
  • Set rhyme scheme: usually abab

– Idiosyncratic pattern of dashes, capitalization

– Startling images ("My Life has stood - a Loaded Gun-"); but often imagery derived from home and garden

– Ambiguity

– Poems themselves sometimes reflections on her formal choices: "This Was a Poet" (metaphor of distillation); "Tell all the Truth"
The Soul selects her own Society--
Then--shuts the Door--
To her divine Majority
Present no more--

Unmoved--she notes the Chariots--pausing--
At her low Gate--
Unmoved--an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her mat--

I've known her--from an ample nation
Choose One--
Then--close the Valves of her attention-
Like Stone--

• A poem about solitude? About Dickinson’s own choice to live a withdrawn life?
• A poem about someone who chooses a single love interest and stands firm to that choice?
• A poem that criticizes the Puritan concept of the Elect: the vision that God hardens his heart to sinners?
Dickinson & Transcendentalism

• Like Whitman, Dickinson utilizes many Transcendental notions. Sometimes seems to be a Transcendentalist. ("Some keep the Sabbath going to Church"; "The Brain--is wider than the Sky")

• Yet, more skeptical, less optimistic about God and nature ("I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--"; "Apparently with no surprise")
Shaping 20th Century Poetry

- Dickinson’s skepticism prefigures modernist writers
- Formal choices influenced the imagist poets of the 1910’s and 1920’s, especially Amy Lowell
- Full extent of her work not published until 1954

- Whitman’s use of free verse reshapes 20th Century American poetry
- His optimism, bohemianism, and spiritual affirmation influential on the Beat writers, especially Allen Ginsberg