WHITMAN/DICKINSON POETRY ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Most scholars and critics include Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman among the very best poets in American history. Each of them contributed so much to the evolution of modern poetry that their influence continues to this day.

Aside from their status as great poets, these two individuals bore little resemblance to one another, as people or as poets. Whitman traveled throughout America and developed free verse, in part, to help in his quest to become the "American Poet" called for by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Dickinson, on the other hand, rarely left her father's house in Amherst, MA, and published only a few of her intense, minimalistic poems in her lifetime.

For this project, read a selection of poems from each author (provided below) as well as a biography on both authors. Then map out an essay discussing the obvious but somewhat surprising differences in their perspectives on a relevant literary theme.

NOTE

Readers tend to note one similarity between these two poets-- strong individualism and non-conformity reflected in their poetry and lifestyles. While this individualism creates a basic similarity in perspective in some of their poetry, one cannot help but notice a strong divergence in their view and treatment of specific topics. One example involves their poems on death, a common Romantic period theme.

Readers may not prefer to think about what they regard as depressing topics, but writers in all periods consider death an important theme. Of course, some writers treat the theme indirectly or incidentally as part of their consideration of some other topic, but Whitman and Dickinson wrote frequently and directly about death. Careful readers soon understand each poet's message on death and then begin to see interesting and unexpected differences between their treatment of this common theme.

TASK/PROCESS

Read the resources below and annotate the poems. As you read the poems and other material provided, note the ways these poets discuss death.

The best approach involves looking for specifics. Asking various specific questions will assist in formulating a characterization of the poets' perspectives on death. Consider the following examples with which to get started:

-What does each poet want us to know about death?
-How would they have us consider and view death?
-How persuasive are they in bringing us around to their view?

Now add two more questions of your own to explore:

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Emily Dickinson was a reclusive American poet. Unrecognized in her own time, Dickinson is known posthumously for her unusual use of form and syntax.

"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words—and never stops at all."
—Emily Dickinson

Synopsis
Born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson left school as a teenager to live a reclusive life on the family homestead. There, she filled notebooks with poetry and wrote hundreds of letters. Dickinson's remarkable work was published after her death—on May 15, 1886, in Amherst—and she is now considered one of the towering figures of American literature.

Early Life and Education
Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her family had deep roots in New England. Her paternal grandfather, Samuel Dickinson, was well known as the founder of Amherst College. Her father worked at Amherst and served as a state legislator. He married Emily Norcross in 1828 and the couple had three children: William Austin, Lavinia Norcross and Emily.

Emily Dickinson was educated at Amherst Academy (now Amherst College) and the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She was an excellent student, despite missing long stretches of the school year due to frequent illness and depression. Though the precise reasons for Dickinson's final departure from the academy in 1848 are unknown, it is believed that her fragile emotional state probably played a role.

Writing and Influences
Dickinson began writing as a teenager. Her early influences include Leonard Humphrey, principal of Amherst Academy, and a family friend named Benjamin Franklin Newton. Newton introduced Dickinson to the poetry of William Wordsworth, who also served as an inspiration to the young writer.

In 1855, Dickinson ventured outside of Amherst, as far as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, she befriended a minister named Charles Wadsworth, who would become a cherished correspondent.

Among her peers, Dickinson's closest friend and adviser was a woman named Susan Gilbert. In 1856, Gilbert married Dickinson's brother, William Austin Dickinson. The Dickinson family lived on a large home known as The Homestead in Amherst. After their marriage, William and Susan settled in a property near The Homestead known as The Evergreens. Emily served as chief caregiver for their ailing mother from the mid-1850s until her mother's death in 1882. (Neither Emily nor her sister Lavinia ever married and lived together at The Homestead until their respective deaths.)

Dickinson's seclusion during this period was probably partly due to her responsibilities as guardian of her sick mother. Scholars have also speculated that she suffered from conditions such as agoraphobia, depression and/or anxiety. She also was treated for a painful ailment of her eyes. After the mid-1860s, she rarely left the confines of The Homestead. It was also during this time that Dickinson was most productive as a poet, filling notebooks with verse without any awareness on the part of her family members. In her spare time, Dickinson studied botany and compiled a vast herbarium. She also maintained correspondence with a variety of contacts. One of her friendships, with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, seems to have developed into a romance before Lord's death in 1884.

Later Life and Discovery
Dickinson died of kidney disease in Amherst, Massachusetts, on May 15, 1886 at the age of 56. She was laid to rest in her family plot at West Cemetery. The Homestead, where Dickinson was born is now a museum.

Little of Dickinson's work was published at the time of her death, and the few works that were published were edited and altered to adhere to conventional standards of the time. Unfortunately, much of the power of Dickinson's unusual use of syntax and form was lost in the alteration. After her sister's death, Lavinia Dickinson discovered hundreds of her poems in notebooks that Emily had filled over the years. The first volume of these poems was published in 1890, with additional volumes following. A full compilation, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, wasn't published until 1955.

Emily Dickinson's stature as a writer soared from the first publication of her poems in their intended form. She is known for her poignant and compressed verse, which profoundly influenced the direction of 20th century poetry. The strength of her literary voice, as well as her reclusive and eccentric life, contributes to the sense of Dickinson as an indelible American character.
Because I Could Not Stop for Death by Emily Dickinson

BECAUSE I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.

We passed the school where children played
At wrestling in a ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 't is centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

I Heard a Fly Buzz when I Died by Emily Dickinson

I HEARD a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heaves of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,
And breaths were gathering sure
For that last onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me I
Could make assignable,—and then
There interposed a fly,

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,
Between the light and me;
And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see.

I Felt a Funeral in My Brain by Emily Dickinson

I FELT a funeral in my brain,
And mourners, to and fro,
Kept treading, treading, till it seemed
That sense was breaking through.

And when they all were seated,
A service like a drum  
Kept beating, beating, till I thought  
My mind was going numb.

And then I heard them lift a box,  
And creak across my soul  
With those same boots of lead, again.  
Then space began to toll

As all the heavens were a bell,  
And Being but an ear,  
And I and silence some strange race,  
Wrecked, solitary, here.

Let Down the Bars, O Death! by Emily Dickinson

LET down the bars, O Death!  
The tired flocks come in  
Whose bleating ceases to repeat,  
Whose wandering is done.

Thine is the stillest night,  
Thine the securest fold;  
Too near thou art for seeking thee,  
Too tender to be told.

The Bustle in a House by Emily Dickinson

THE BUSTLE in a house  
The morning after death  
Is solennest of industries  
Enacted upon earth,—

The sweeping up the heart,  
And putting love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until eternity.
Walt Whitman was an American poet whose verse collection Leaves of Grass is a landmark in the history of American literature.

QUOTEBIOGRAPHY: WALT WHITMAN

"I am as bad as the worst, but, thank God, I am as good as the best."
—Walt Whitman

Synopsis
Poet and journalist Walt Whitman was born May 31, 1819 in West Hills, New York. Considered one of America's most influential poets, Whitman aimed to transcend traditional epics, eschew normal aesthetic form, and reflect the nature of the American experience and its democracy. In 1855 he self-published the collection Leaves of Grass, now a landmark in American literature.

Early Years
Poet, journalist. Called the "Bard of Democracy" and considered one of America's most influential poets, Walt Whitman was born May 31, 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, New York. The second of Walter and Louisa Whitman's eight surviving children, he grew up in a family of modest means. While earlier Whitmans had owned a large parcel of farmland, much of it had been sold off by the time young Walt was born. As a result, his father struggled through a series of attempts to recoup some of that earlier wealth, as a farmer, carpenter and real estate speculator.

Whitman's own love for America and its democracy can be at least partially attributed to his upbringing and his parents, who showed their own admiration for their country by naming Walt's younger brothers after their favorite American heroes. The names included George Washington Whitman, Thomas Jefferson Whitman, and Andrew Jackson Whitman. At the age of three, the young Walt Whitman moved with his family to Brooklyn, where his father hoped to take advantage of the economic opportunities in New York City. But his bad investments prevented him from achieving the success he craved. When Walt Whitman was 11, his father, unable to support his family completely on his own, pulled him out of school so he could work. To help put food on the table, Whitman found employment in the printing business.

His father's increasing dependence on alcohol and conspiracy-driven politics, contrasted sharply with his son's preference for a more optimistic course. "I stand for the sunny point of view," he'd say, "the joyful conclusion."

When he was 17, Whitman turned to teaching. His first job was in a one-room schoolhouse in Long Island. Whitman continued teach for another five years, when, in 1841, he set his sights on journalism. He started a weekly paper called the Long-Islander, and later returned to New York City, where he continued his newspaper career. In 1846 he became editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, a prominent newspaper.

But Whitman proved to be volatile editor, with a sharp pen and a set of opinions that didn't always align with his bosses o his readers. He backed what some considered radical positions on women's property rights, immigration, and labor issues. He lambasted the infatuation he saw among his fellow New Yorkers with certain European ways and wasn't afraid to go after the editors of other newspapers. Not surprisingly, his job tenure was often short. In a four-year stretch Whitman, was ousted from seven different newspapers.

In 1848 Whitman left New York for New Orleans where he became editor of the Crescent. It was a relatively short stay for Whitman—just three months— but it was where he saw for the first time the wickedness of slavery and the slave trade.

A voracious reader and aspiring poet, Whitman returned to Brooklyn in the autumn of 1848 and started a new "free soil" newspaper called the Brooklyn Freeman.

Over the next seven years, as the nation's temperature over the slavery question continued to rise, Whitman's own anger over the issue elevated as well. He often worried about the impact of slavery on the future of the nation and its democracy. It was during this time that he turned to a simple 3.5 by 5.5 inch notebook, writing down his observations and searching for a poetic voice that could bind together the disparate factions he saw plaguing the country.

Leaves of Grass
In the spring of 1855, Whitman, finally finding the style and voice he'd been searching for, self-published a slim collection of 12 unnamed poems titled Leaves of Grass. Whitman could only afford to print 795 copies of the book. Leaves of Grass marked a radical departure from established poetic norms. Traditional rhyme and meter were discarded in favor of a voice that came at the reader directly, in the first person. On its cover was an image of the bearded poet himself.

The book received little attention at first, though it did catch the eye of fellow poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote Whitman to praise the collection as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom" to come from an American pen.
The following year, Whitman published a revised edition of *Leaves of Grass* that included 33 poems, including a new piece, "Sun-down Poem" (it was later renamed "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), as well as Emerson's letter to Whitman and the poet's long response to him.

Fascinated by this newcomer to the poetry scene, Emerson dispatched writers Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott to Brooklyn to meet Whitman. Whitman, now living at home and truly the man of the homestead (his father passed away in 1855), resided in the attic of the family house.

By this point, Whitman's family life was marked by dysfunction. His brother Andrew was an alcoholic, while his sister was mentally unstable. Whitman himself had to share his bed with his mentally handicapped brother.

Alcott wrote of Whitman, "eyes gray, unimaginative, cautious yet sagacious," wrote Alcott, "his voice deep, sharp, tender sometimes and almost melting. When talking he will recline upon the couch at length, pillowing his head upon his bended arm, and informing you naively how lazy he is, and slow."

Like its earlier edition, this second version of *Leaves of Grass* failed to gain much commercial traction. In 1860, a Boston publisher issued a third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The revised book held some promise, but the start of the Civil War drove the publishing company out of business, furthering Whitman's financial struggles.

**Civil War**

In 1862, Whitman moved to Washington D.C. His brother George, who fought for the Union, was being treated in the capital for a wound he suffered in the war. Whitman ended up staying in Washington for the next several years. He found part-time work in the paymaster's office and spent much of the rest of his time visiting wounded soldiers.

This volunteer work proved to be both life-changing and exhausting. By his own rough estimates, Whitman made 600 hospital visits, seeing more than 100,000 patients. The work took a toll physically, but also propelled him to return to poetry. He published a new collection called *Drum-Taps*, which represented a more solemn realization of what the Civil War meant for those in the thick of it.

This new collection included the poems "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night." A later edition featured his elegy on President Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

**Later Years**

In the immediate years after the Civil War, Whitman continued to visit wounded veterans. It's during this time that he met Peter Doyle, a young Confederate soldier and train car conductor. Whitman, who had a quiet history of becoming close with younger men, had an instant and intense bond with Doyle. As Whitman's health began to unravel in the 1860s, Doyle helped nurse him back to health.

In Washington, where Whitman eventually found steady work as a clerk at the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior, the pace of life that agreed with him. He continued to pursue literary projects, and in 1870 he published two new collections, *Democratic Vistas* and *Passage to India*.

But in 1873 his life took a dramatic turn for the worse. In January 1873 he suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. In May he returned home to see his ailing mother, who died just three days after his arrival. Frail himself, Whitman found it impossible to continue with his job in Washington and relocated to Camden, New Jersey, to live with his brother George.

Over the next two decades, Whitman continued to tinker with *Leaves of Grass*. An 1882 edition of the collection earned the poet some fresh newspaper coverage. That in turn resulted in robust sales, enough so that Whitman was able to buy a modest house of his own in Camden.

These final years proved to be both fruitful and frustrating for Whitman. His life's work received much needed validation in terms of recognition, but the America he saw emerge from the Civil War disappointed him. His health, too, continued to deteriorate.

On March 26, 1892 Walt Whitman passed away in Camden. Right up until the end, he'd continued to work with *Leaves of Grass*, which during his lifetime had gone through seven editions and expanded to some 300 poems. He was buried in a large mausoleum he had built in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery.

**WHITMAN POEMS**

**The City Dead-House by Walt Whitman**

BY the City Dead-House, by the gate,
As idly sauntering, wending my way from the clangor,
I curious pause—for lo! an outcast form, a poor dead prostitute brought;
Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd—it lies on the damp brick pavement;
The divine woman, her body—I see the Body—I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty—all else I notice not;
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbific impress me;
But the house alone—that wondrous house—that delicate fair house—that ruin!
That immortal house, more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!
Or white-domed Capitol itself, with majestic figure surmounted—or all the old high-spired cathedrals; That little house alone, more than them all—poor, desperate house!
Fair, fearful wreck! tenement of a Soul! itself a Soul!
Unclaim’d, avoided house! take one breath from my tremulous lips;
Take one tear, dropt aside as I go, for thought of you,
Dead house of love! house of madness and sin, crumbled! crush’d!
House of life—erewhile talking and laughing—but ah, poor house! dead, even then;
Months, years, an echoing, garnish’d house—but dead, dead, dead.

Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field by Walt Whitman

VIGIL strange I kept on the field one night:
When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side that day,
One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return’d, with a look I shall never forget;
One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach’d up as you lay on the ground;
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle;
Till late in the night reliev’d, to the place at last again I made my way;
Found you in death so cold, dear comrade—found your body, son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding;)
Bared your face in the starlight—curious the scene—cool blew the moderate night-wind;
Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battlefield spreading;
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant silent night;
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh—Long, long I gazed;
Then on the earth partially reclining, sat by your side, leaning my chin in my hands;
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you, dearest comrade—Not a tear, not a word;
Vigil of silence, love and death—vigil for you my son and my soldier,
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole;
Vigil final for you, brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living—I think we shall surely meet again;)
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear’d,
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head, and carefully under feet;
And there and then, and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited;
Ending my vigil strange with that—vigil of night and battlefield dim;
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding;)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain—vigil I never forget, how as day brighten’d,
I rose from the chill ground, and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

To OneShortly to Die by Walt Whitman

1
FROM all the rest I single out you, having a message for you:
You are to die—Let others tell you what they please, I cannot prevaricate,
I am exact and merciless, but I love you—There is no escape for you.

Softly I lay my right hand upon you—you just feel it,
I do not argue—I bend my head close, and half envelope it,
I sit quietly by—I remain faithful,
I am more than nurse, more than parent or neighbor,
I absolve you from all except yourself, spiritual, bodily—that is eternal—you yourself will surely escape,
The corpse you will leave will be but excrementitious.

2
The sun bursts through in unlooked-for directions!
Strong thoughts fill you, and confidence—you smile!
You forget you are sick, as I forget you are sick,
You do not see the medicines—you do not mind the weeping friends—I am with you,
I exclude others from you—there is nothing to be commiserated,
I do not commiserate—I congratulate you.
**NAME:**

**Introduction (3-5 sentences: Grabber, Transitional Sentence, Strong Thesis)**

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**Conclusion (3-5 sentences: Restate (reword) Thesis, Transitional Sentence, Strong Ending)**