
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Whitman's Life and Works
- 1.3 Dickinson's Life and Works
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Chronology
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of the background, both historical and literary that shaped Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as major voices of nineteenth century American poetry.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Helen McNeil has said in her excellent study, *Emily Dickinson*, "If Walt Whitman is the American poet of wholeness, Emily Dickinson is the American poet of what is broken and absent". There is no wonder that Whitman is preoccupied with the larger issues of liberty, equality, and fraternity in mid-nineteenth century America in which the Civil War (1861-65) posed a grave threat to the unity and cohesion of the nation. The Civil War ended in the victory of the northern states of the nation and defeat of the southern states. The passion aroused by the Civil War led to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the eighteenth President of the Union. It is appropriate that "When Lilacs Last In The Door-Yard Bloomed" (1865-66) is one of the most moving poems ever written by Whitman. It is a passionate elegy in which the poet has described the journey of Lincoln's coffin across the length and breadth of the nation. One can safely say that Whitman is a poet of American democracy and along with liberty and equality it was fraternity, the ideal of human brotherhood that emerges as the core of his poetry.

Emily Dickinson is, however, preoccupied with the plight of the individual, particularly a woman brought up in Puritanism-dominated New England. Her poems are fragments that illumine the dark corners of a female who led a rather secluded life and there is no wonder that out of 1775 poems that are included in her definitive edition edited by Thomas H. Johnson only seven were published in her lifetime.

While Whitman died as the greatest poet of America, Emily Dickinson was nearly unknown at the time of her death.

1.2 WHITMAN'S LIFE AND WORKS

Walt Whitman (1819-92) was born on Long Island where his early life was passed. While his father was a free-thinker from England, his mother was a Dutch Quaker who was an intensely religious person and believed that every person was guided by

American Poetry-I

an inner light. From 1823 to 1833 his family moved to Brooklyn where Whitman had some years of formal schooling. Later on, Whitman broke out of the classroom and served as printer's devil, journeyman compositor and also as a school teacher. The shifting of jobs is an accurate reflection of a typical American trait—a quest for a meaningful vocation. From 1838 to 1839, he edited the *Long Islander*. Apart from his journalistic activity, he also read avidly the Bible, Shakespeare, Ossian, Scott, Homer and something of the Greek and Hindu poets. His reading also reflected his intellectual curiosity and keenness to assimilate the best works both of Europe and Asia. This kind of an exploration of the Western classics and Eastern lore is also found in other members of the American Renaissance like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Mark Twain.



Walter Whitman

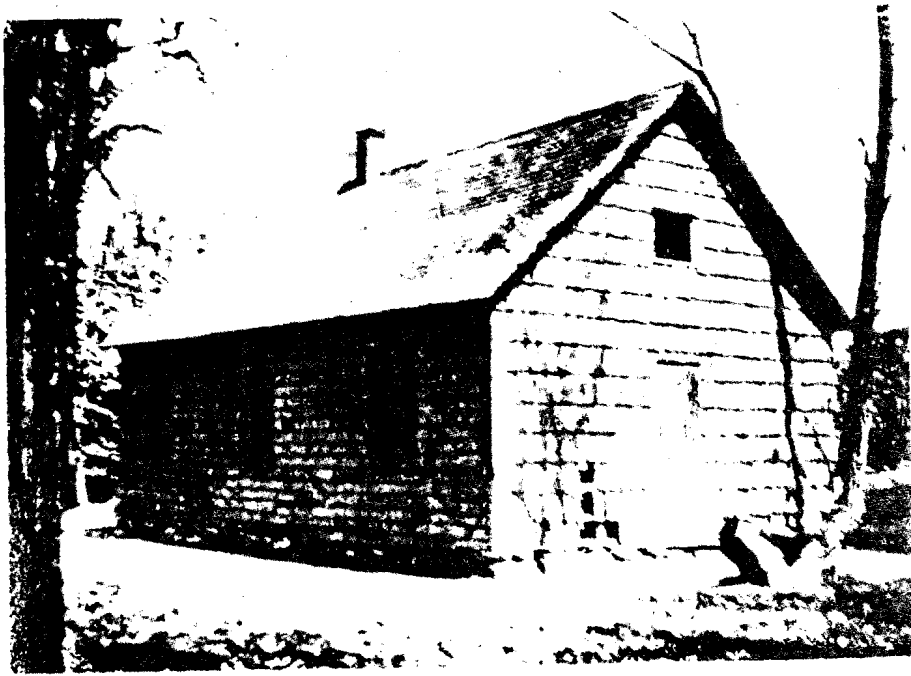


Louisa Van Velsor Whitman



Whitman's birthplace, West Hills, New York

Background



Whitman's schoolhouse in Woodbury, Long Island

Whitman's stay in Brooklyn and New York brought him in touch with party politics and he was associated with newspapers and magazines of the Democrats. He also contributed poems and stories to *Democratic Review* (1841-45) and much of his writings at this point of time were conventional, mediocre and sentimental. Later on, he became the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* which was the newspaper of Democratic party in 1846. While Democratic party took a pro-slavery stand, Whitman did not defend slavery but he also could not support the mad fanaticism of the ultra Abolitionists who wanted slavery to be abolished at one stroke by the President of the Union. The party establishment wanted the *Brooklyn Eagle* to accommodate both the pro and anti-Abolitionist stands purely from a commercial angle so that the circulation may not go down drastically. For refusing to toe the practical line adopted by the party establishment, Whitman was sacked as the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. This was Whitman's first encounter with party establishment and there is no wonder that Whitman began to hate party politics and began to take an independent, radical stand on the issue of slavery.



Winter Scene in Brooklyn (c.1817-20); painting by Francis Guy

In February 1848 Whitman went to New Orleans with his brother Jeff who was the most intimate with him in a large family of nine brothers and sisters. He also became the editor of *New Orleans Crescent* for three months. Later on, he returned to Brooklyn. He came via St. Louis, Chicago and upstate New York and saw something of the frontier and the harsh life of the pioneers. It was an experience that affected him strongly. He also edited various newspapers, including the *Brooklyn Times*. His prolonged stay in Brooklyn also gave him an idea of the sights, hurry and bustle of the metropolis, that is, New York—the commercial centre of the New World. It was in the metropolis that Whitman became intimate with the drivers of omnibuses and ferryboat pilots, the crowds at the beaches and the political orators charged with partisan politics. He also indulged in his passion for Shakespeare's plays and Italian opera. As a young man he used to put on the airs of a dandy but later on he began to look more rough and unpolished. It was in this frame of mind that he published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. It consisted of twelve poems and a critical preface. *Song of Myself* is a long, rambling poem that figures in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Many critics admired the originality and vigour of the anthology but some critics were also disgusted with the explicit sex portrayal and denounced the work as an immoral book.

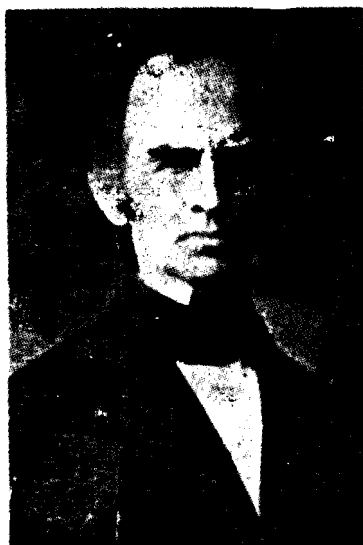
Controversy apart, *Leaves of Grass* is an anthology that is the magnum opus of Whitman's career as a poet. There is no wonder that the poet went on revising and enlarging it. *Leaves of Grass* is in free verse and is devoid of traditional rhyme and metre. Emerson greeted the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and lauded Whitman as the first authentic poet of the New World. Whitman published an enlarged second edition in 1856 and the third edition in 1860. It is strange that initially the poet was not much affected by the Civil War (1861-65) that rocked the Republic but it was the wounding of his brother in the Civil War that roused his strong emotions. He went to Washington and became an unofficial nurse to Northern and Southern soldiers in the army hospitals. It was the agony and suffering of the soldiers that seared and corroded Whitman's soaring idealism and optimism.

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated after the end of the Civil War, Whitman was thoroughly shaken and he wrote his most popular lyric, "O Captain! My Captain!" and one of his major poems, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." The latter is an unforgettable elegy mourning the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. For a short time Whitman worked as a clerk in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior but was dismissed by the Secretary on the ground that he was the notorious author of an immoral book like *Leaves of Grass*. In 1867 and 1871, Whitman issued two new editions of *Leaves of Grass*. His prose work *Democratic Vista* too appeared in 1871. It was in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that *Passage to India* was included. It is, perhaps, the last major poem by Whitman in which there is a soaring vision of the entire globe, fusing the spiritual wisdom of the East with the materialism and technology of the West. Whitman suffered from a paralytic stroke in 1873 which was perhaps the result of an infection during his work in the army hospital.

During the last nineteen years of his life, Whitman lived a quiet life at Camden, New Jersey. He also brought out the last edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1889. He also went to Boston and met his mentor Emerson whom he still revered in spite of strong differences. Before his death, Whitman had become a national celebrity and the unquestioned bard of American democracy and received many visitors from abroad. His death led to a remarkable mourning and wave of sympathy in the nation and also abroad.



Emily as Lavinia remembered her



Edward Dickinson

Emily, Austin and Lavinia Dickinson, 1840

Emily Dickinson (1830-86) was the daughter of Edward Dickinson who was a prominent lawyer of Amherst, Massachusetts and Emily Norcross. Since her mother became a bed-ridden invalid, Emily Dickinson confessed she had no mother. It was Edward Dickinson, her strong and dominating father, who tended to be both father and mother to the child. He was such a stern and authoritarian father that he didn't permit Emily Dickinson to study at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for more than a year (1847-48). Like Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Edward Dickinson also believed that too much education was not becoming for a young woman. It led to the growth of female assertiveness and also caused a kind of discord and dissension in the family. Therefore, there is no wonder that Edward Dickinson also commanded his daughter not to go out of the Homestead which he had repurchased in 1855. As a young woman, Emily Dickinson asserted that she wouldn't go out of the Homestead ever. She even refused to go to the church which all women, old and young, were encouraged to visit.



Emily Dickinson's room



The Homestead, East Facade

Thus began a life of utmost seclusion and introversion for young Emily Dickinson. She was, however, attached to her brother Austin and his wife Sue. She also cultivated a number of intense intellectual companions. The first of them was Benjamin F. Newton who was a law student in her father's office. It was he who introduced her to many stimulating books and authors and also urged her to take seriously her vocation as a poet. It was Benjamin F. Newton who introduced her to the writings of Emily and Charlotte Bronte and also to the writings of a feminist Lydia Maria Child. The young man also presented to Emily Dickinson with a copy of Emerson's poetry in 1849—just two years after publication. Walt Whitman was, however, considered too immoral, and wicked a poet for a young woman like Emily Dickinson.

The early death of her first literary mentor as a result of T.B. was a great shock to the young woman and one could sense the rationale behind her lifelong preoccupation with death. Later on, she developed an intense relationship with Reverend Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia whom she met in 1854. She began to regard the priest as

her "dearest earthly friend" and in her poetry, early poetry she created the image of the lover whom she knew only through her imagination. Wadsworth's removal to San Francisco in 1862 marked a turning point in Emily Dickinson's life. From 1862 onwards her withdrawal from the life of the Puritan community in New England was nearly absolute and critics are of the view that from 1862 to 1865 there was a remarkable upsurge of her creativity as a poet. Since her poems were not meant for publication and were only her "letters to the world," it is not possible to date them with any degree of accuracy. Yet, there is adequate evidence that during 1862-1865 Emily Dickinson wrote nearly three hundred of her approximately 1700 and odd poems.

Although the publication of her poems was far from her mind, Emily Dickinson, however, had a budding poet's craving to find out if her poems were alive. On April 15, 1862 she wrote a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a professional man of letters to find out whether her verses "breathed." Higginson had been a Unitarian minister in Worcester who had resigned from the church and taken up writing, literary criticism as a career. He had written the "Letter to a young contributor" as the lead article in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April. Emily Dickinson sent a couple of unsigned poems to Higginson and wanted to know if her poems had genuine literary worth. Higginson sent her a reply, asking her to send some more poems, inquiring her age, her reading, her companions and further details about her writing. However, Higginson's advice to James T. Fields, the editor of the *Atlantic*, was that the poems were not good enough for publication. They were too raw and fragile to be published in a popular venture like the *Atlantic*.

Emily Dickinson, however, continued to exchange letters with her third literary mentor. The conventional literary taste of Higginson strengthened her resolve to keep her poems unpublished. She went on writing feverishly and kept her poems in packets—away even from the eyes of her brother Austin and sister Lavinia. She went on writing in her own unconventional way and the absence of the response of readers gave her the freedom to stick to her individual style. She was, however, indebted to Higginson for the intellectual companionship and invited him to Amherst. She wrote to him, "you were not aware," she said, "that you saved my Life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests." (*Introduction to the poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977, sixth printing, p.xxiv.)



Emily Dickinson's white dress



Silhouettes of Dickinson family, 1847

It is unfortunate that "when Emily Dickinson died in 1886, she had published only seven poems, all anonymously" (*Emily Dickinson* by Donna Dickinson, Berg Leamington Spa/Dover NH/Heidelberg, 1985, p.97). While Higginson was of the view that her poems were too raw and fragile poems to be published in *The Atlantic*, Emerson was of the view that she wrote as if she was suffering from fever. Perhaps, she was born too soon and it was only after her death that she got recognition. There is no wonder that five years after her death, her first book of poems went through six printings in six months. Twelve years later, her poems were translated into German. By 1920 she had become one of the greatest poets of American literature.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Walt Whitman was a poet of the American Republic and he celebrated both the freedom of the individual and also the community of workers and artisans.

Emily Dickinson was a lady born in an aristocratic family of Amherst and due to her intense love-hate relationship with an authoritarian father chose a life of utmost seclusion.

While Whitman achieved a degree of fame and odium as well in his life, Emily Dickinson was practically unknown during her lifetime. It was only after her death that she got recognition.

1.5 CHRONOLOGY

I. Walt Whitman:

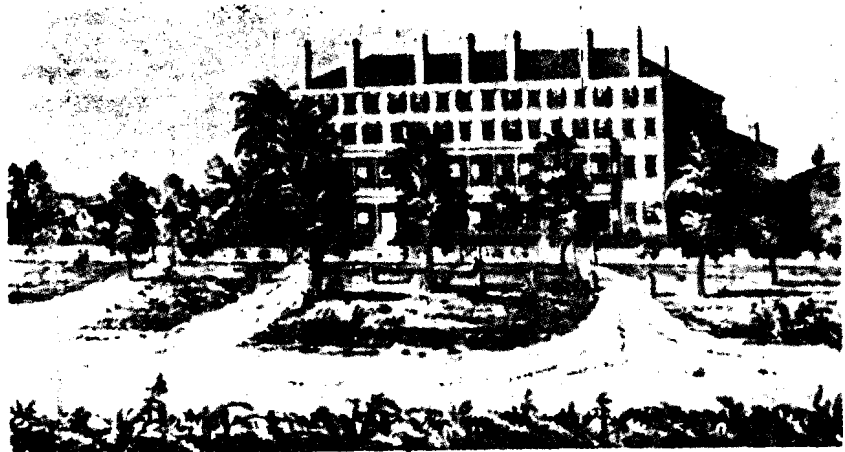
- 1789 Walter Whitman, the poet's father, born.
- 1795 Louisa Van Velsor, the poet's mother, born.
- 1816 Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor married.
- 1818 A brother, Jesse Whitman, born.
- 1819 Walter Whitman born in West Hills, Huntington, Long Island, on 31 May.
- 1821 A sister, Mary Elizabeth Whitman, born.
- 1823 A sister, Hannah Louisa Whitman, born.
Moves to Brooklyn with his family.
- 1825 Attends the public schools.
- 1827 A brother, Andrew Jackson Whitman, born.
- 1829 A brother, George Washington Whitman, born.
- 1830 Leaves the public schools.
- 1831 Joins the staff of *Long Island Patriot*.
- 1834 A brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman, born.
- 1835 Moves to New York City.
- 1836 Moves to Hempstead, Long Island, and begins teaching school.
- 1838 Begins newspaper career by serving as publisher and editor of *Long Islander*.
- 1839 Moves to Jamaica, Long Island.
Works on *Long Island Democrat*.
Resigns from the paper and returns to school teaching.
- 1841 Returns to New York City and works for various newspapers.
- 1842 *Franklin Evans*, a temperance novel, published.
Edits *New York Aurora* and *New York Evening Tattler*.
- 1843 Edits *New York Statesman*.
- 1844 Edits *New York Democrat*.
- 1845 Edits *Long Island Star*.
Moves to Brooklyn.
- 1846 Edits *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.
- 1848 Visits New Orleans and works on *New Orleans Daily Crescent*.
Edits *Brooklyn Daily Freeman*.

- 1855 *Leaves of Grass* published by Fowler and Wells in New York.
Father dies on 11 July.
- 1856 *Leaves of Grass* published by Fowler and Wells in New York.
- 1857 Edits *Brooklyn Daily Times*.
- 1859 Dismissed as editor of *Brooklyn Daily Times*.
- 1860 *Leaves of Grass* published by Thayer and Eldrige in Boston.
- 1862 Visits hospitals in Brooklyn to help Civil War wounded.
Goes to Washington to find his brother George, wounded in battle.
- 1863 Secures an appointment as a copyist in the paymaster's office.
Begins visits to wounded soldiers in Washington hospitals.
- 1864 Returns to Brooklyn.
- 1865 *Drum-Taps* and *Democratic Vistas* published.
Returns to Washington and works as clerk in Interior Department.
- 1865 Fired by James Harland, new secretary of interior, but secures appointment
in attorney general's office.
- 1866 William Douglas O'Connor publishes *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication*
in defense of Whitman.
- 1867 *Leaves of Grass* published by William Chapin in New York. John
Burroughs publishes *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*.
- 1868 *Poems*, edited by William Michael Rossetti, published in England.
- 1871 *Leaves of Grass* published by J.S. Redfield in New York.
Passage to India and *After All, Not to Create Only* published.
- 1872 *Leaves of Grass* pirated and published by John Camden Hotten in England.
As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free published.
- 1873 Whitman suffers a stroke on 23 January.
Mother dies on 23 May.
Leaves Washington for Camden, New Jersey.
- 1874 Whitman's position in Washington terminated.
- 1876 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Camden.
Memoranda During the War and *Two Rivulets* published.
- 1879 *Leaves of Grass* published in an unauthorized reprinting by Worthington in
New York.
- 1880 Summers with Richard Maurice Bucke in London, Ontario.
- 1881 *Leaves of Grass* published by James R. Osgood in Boston, but withdrawn
from sale by the publisher after attorney general of Massachusetts declares
the book obscene.
Lectures on Lincoln before the St. Botolph Club in Boston.
- 1882 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Camden, then by Rees Welsh in
Philadelphia, then by David McKay in Philadelphia.
Specimen Days & Collect published.
- 1883 Richard Maurice Bucke publishes *Walt Whitman*.
- 1884 Buys house on Mickle Street in Camden.
- 1886 *Leaves of Grass* published by Walter Scott in England.
- 1887 *Specimen Days in America* published by Walter Scott in England.
- 1888 *Complete Poems and Prose* published by Whitman in Philadelphia (limited
to 600 copies).
November Boughs published.
Democratic Vistas, and Other Papers published by Walter Scott in
London.
Suffers a stroke in June.
- 1889 *Leaves of Grass* published by Whitman in Philadelphia (limited to 300
copies).
- 1891 *Good-Bye My Fancy* published.
- 1892 *Leaves of Grass* published by David McKay in Philadelphia Walt Whitman
dies on 26 March.

II. Emily Dickinson:

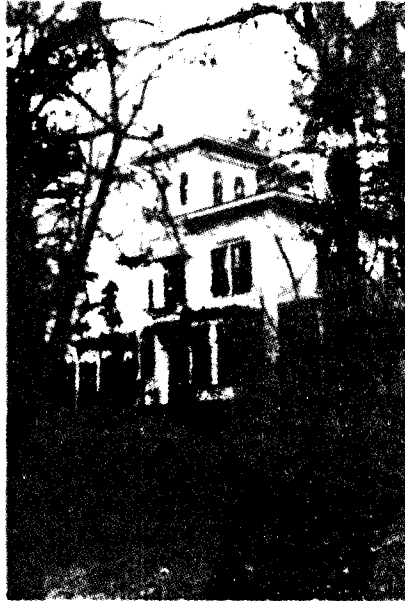
- 1830 10 December: Emily Dickinson born in Amherst, Mass.; second child, after
Austin (1829-95), of lawyer Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross
Dickinson. Dickinsons living in The Homestead, built by Edward's father
Samuel Fowler Dickinson.

- 1833 Lavinia ('Vinnie') Dickinson, sister, born (d.1899).
- 1835 Edward Dickinson appointed Treasurer of Amherst College.
- 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) publishes essay 'Nature.'
- 1837 Great Panic; thousands ruined in American business collapse.
- 1839 Margaret Fuller (1810-50) initiates female intellectual 'conversation' meetings in Boston, which continue until 1844.
- 1840 Grandfather Dickinson having moved to Ohio, Edward Dickinson sells his half of The Homestead and moves his family to another house in Amherst. Emily and Lavinia enter co-educational Amherst Academy. Emerson co-founds magazine *The Dial* (1840-44) with Fuller, prepares *Essays, First Series* (pub. 1841).
- 1842 Edward Dickinson elected State Senator in Massachusetts; elected again in 1843.
- 1845 Fuller's influential feminist tract *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* published (revised from *The Dial*). Mexican-American War until 1848; Texas joins U.S.; other Mexican territory annexed at end of war.
- 1846 Religious revival in Amherst. Emily has already been expressing doubt to her more pious friend Abiah Root. Emerson's *Poems* published.
- 1847 Emily enters Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in September. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte (1816-55) published under pseudonym of Currer Bell.



Mt.Holyoke Female Seminary

- 1848 August: Emily withdrawn from Mount Holyoke by father. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* published.
December: Emily Bronte dies. Seneca Falls Declaration marks beginning of American Women's Rights movement.
- 1849 Publication of *Kavanagh*, popular romance novel by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; secretly given to Emily by her brother Austin.
- 1850 Another religious revival in Amherst; Edward Dickinson, Susan Gilbert and Lavinia Dickinson join First Church of Christ. Health of mother Emily Dickinson begins to decline. Publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, a 'romance' by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64).
- 1851 Emily and Lavinia travel to Boston. Herman Melville (1819-91) publishes *Moby-Dick*.
- 1852 Edward Dickinson, conservative Whig Party candidate, elected to U.S. House of Representatives. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in book form.
- 1853 Amherst-Belchertown railroad opens, promoted by Edward Dickinson.
- 1854 Family visits Washington. *Walden, or Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) published.
- 1855 Emily and Lavinia visit Washington and Philadelphia. Edward Dickinson repurchases entire Homestead and returns family to paternal home; defeated in election in November; starts law partnership with son Austin. Mother Emily Dickinson begins to weaken; henceforth Emily and Lavinia run household, supported by domestics. Walt Whitman (1819-92) publishes *Leaves of Grass*. Charlotte Bronte dies.



Front door of the Dickinson Homestead

The Evergreens

- 1856 Austin joins First Church; marries Susan Gilbert (1830-1913), Emily's closest friend; Austin and Sue move into The Evergreens, built for them by Edward Dickinson next to The Homestead.
- 1857 Emerson lectures in Amherst, stays with Austin and Sue; Emily doesn't attend. Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes her long narrative poem *Aurora Leigh*.
- 1858 Emily is writing poetry seriously, perhaps writes first 'Master' letter.
- 1859 Emily meets Catherine Scott (later Anthon), a friend of Sue, and considers her a close friend until 1866.
- 1860 Edward Dickinson declines nomination for Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts on conservative Constitutional Union ticket. Rev. Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia visits Emily. Abraham Lincoln, of the anti-slavery Republican Party, founded 1854, elected President.
- 1861 *Springfield Republican*, respected Western Mass. Newspaper edited by friend Samuel Bowles (1826-78), prints Emily's poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed—' retitled 'The May-Wine.' Friends begin to notice that Emily has been withdrawing gradually from society. Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies in Italy. Confederation of 11 Southern States secedes from the Union; April: Civil War begins.
- 1862 *Springfield Republican* publishes 'Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—'. During 1862-63, a period of crisis in her personal life, Emily writes about 300 poems. Frazar Strarns, son of the President of Amherst College, killed in action. April: Emily replies to article in literary magazine *Atlantic Monthly* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, literary figure and former preacher, includes poems, asks if her poetry 'is alive.'
- 1863 February 1: Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation frees the slaves.
- 1864 Two more poems by Emily printed; Emily in Boston seven months for treatment of eyes.
- 1865 By the end of this year Emily has written about a thousand poems. April: General Lee, Confederate Commander-in-Chief, surrenders; Lincoln assassinated.
- 1867 Austin supervises construction of new First church opposite Evergreens; Edward Dickinson gives dedicatory speech in 1868.
- 1870 Emily meets Higginson, who finds the visit exhausting. Family friend J.G. Holland becomes founding editor of important literary magazine *Scribner's*; although he has seen dozens of poems by Emily, he prints none.

- 1872 Edward Dickinson resigns Amherst Treasuryship, to be succeeded in 1873 by Austin. Publication of *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1819-1880), completed.
- 1873 Edward Dickinson elected to Massachusetts House of Representatives as independent candidate.
- 1874 Edward Dickinson dies suddenly in Boston. Austin and Sue's third child and Emily's favourite, Gilbert, born.
- 1875 Mother Emily Dickinson henceforth bedridden with paralysis.
- 1876 Helen Hunt Jackson, Amherst-born poet and novelist who has become Emily's friend and correspondent, urges Emily to publish George Sand, French woman novelist.
- 1878 By now Emily has written over 1,400 poems. Some in Amherst think Jackson's pseudonymously published 'Saxe Holme' stories are by Emily; Emily's 'Success is counted sweetest,' published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets* (No Name Series) after Jackson's urging, is thought by many to have been written by Emerson. Samuel Bowles dies.
- 1880 Judge Otis Lord, family friend and recent widower, visits frequently and discusses marriage with Emily.
- 1881 *July*: President Garfield shot, dies 19 September.
- 1882 *April*: Rev. Charles Wadsworth dies. *September*: Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd begin love affair. *November*: mother Emily Dickinson dies after long illness.
- 1883 Nephew Gilbert Dickinson dies.
- 1884 *March*: Judge Lord dies. *June*: Emily has first attack of kidney disease.
- 1885 Helen Hunt Jackson dies.
- 1886 *May 15*: Emily Dickinson dies of kidney disease. First selection of her poems published four years later in 1890, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. First *Collected Poems* published 1955, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Why was Whitman sacked as the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*?
2. How did the critics react to *Leaves of Grass*?
3. How did the Civil War affect Walt Whitman?
4. Who were the literary mentors of Emily Dickinson?
5. Why did Emily Dickinson live such a secluded life?

1.7 SUGGESTED READING

- Erkilla, Betsy. *Whitman: The Political Poet*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- McNeil, Helen. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Virago, Pantheon, Pioneers, 1986.
- Dickenson, Donna. *Emily Dickinson*. NH/Heidelberg: Berg Leamington Spa Dover, 1985.
- Johnson, Thomas H. Ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1977 (sixth printing).

UNIT 2 THE TEXT 1: WALT WHITMAN

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 *Song of Myself*
- 2.3 *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*
- 2.4 *When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed*
- 2.5 *Passage to India*
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Glossary
- 2.9 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective in this Unit is to give you an idea of some of the major texts of Walt Whitman. While *Song of Myself* (1855) shows the poet's youthful exuberance and figures prominently in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, *Passage to India* occurs in (1871-72) edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Song of Myself is the first major text of Walt Whitman included in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). It did not bear the writer's name, had only the title *Leaves of Grass* and the date and place of publication: Brooklyn, New York: 1855. It is a long rambling poem preoccupied with the poet's unique self. It also seeks to establish rapport, comradeship and utmost communion with the reader. The self of the poet seems to embrace nature, civilization, men, women and children. In other words, the cosmos is assimilated by the poet who emerges as the bard of American democracy. The youthful exuberance and high spirits found in *Song of Myself* is also present abundantly in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1856) in which the focus is on the river, the sunset, the ferry boat and the details of daily life, the poet's self and the crowd, the present generation and the future generation, and the *I* of the poet and the *you* of the reader. The *you* also stands for all the commuters of the past, the present and the future who want to reach home. The poet celebrates human brotherhood and fraternity as the core of American Republic.

It was, however, the Civil War (1861-65) that marked a turning-point in the history of the American Republic. The North was able to subjugate the South and President Abraham Lincoln was re-elected as the supreme head of the Union. The assassination of the hero of the Civil War led to Walt Whitman's third major text, *When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed* (1865). It is a powerful elegy lamenting the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln and also as a poem coming to terms with the assassination of the President. The poet is also able to picture death as a kind of prelude to national cohesion and rebirth and as the healer of the wounds of the Civil War. *Passage to India* (1871-72) is the fourth major text of Walt Whitman which was added to the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and it tries to fuse the technological progress of the New world with the ancient wisdom and love of the East. There is again a kind of soaring vision of the entire globe being united into a compact whole transcending the barriers of geography, history and culture. Long

before globalization could become a reality, Whitman could see the glimpses of a unified world emerging in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

2.2 "SONG OF MYSELF"

Song of Myself (1855) is a long, rambling poem which spans the poet's self, the reader, nature and the cosmos. The poet is thirty-seven years old and is in perfect health. It is the earth consisting of rivers, mountains, wind that has nurtured him. Even within his house he is able to feel impact of all kinds of perfumes. What, however, he loves most is the feel of the world outside. It is the refreshing air, the rustle of green leaves, the silence of dry leaves, the sight of the sea-shore, and the sea-rocks that stir him deeply. They fill him with deep delight. One can see traces of Wordsworth's love of nature in Whitman's depiction of nature. There is, however, one important difference between Whitman and Wordsworth. While Whitman always refers to the reader and seeks involvement and communion with a like-minded soul, the poetry of Wordsworth is mostly that of a solitary man brooding and meditating.

There is no wonder that the you is as important in *Song of Myself* as the I. The poet asks the reader if he has an idea of the size of the earth. He also asks the reader, "Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?" In other words, unless the reader is able to respond to the sheer diversity and glory of the earth, he would not be able to grasp the full meaning of the text of *Song of Myself*. It is clear that the preoccupation with his own self does not turn Whitman into a hermit or a recluse. He wants to confirm if the reader would be able to measure up to Whitman's vision. In other words, the poet is as much pre-occupied with the celebration of his self as with the establishment of a community of like-minded people. The search for an ideal, healthy community is extremely important in *Song of Myself*.

The poet is also aware of "the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events; these come to me days and nights, and go from me again. But they not the Me myself". It is true that by and large Whitman is an optimist and like Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau believes that man can make phenomenal progress but he is also aware of the evils of slavery, the North-South divide and growth of sectarian violence that posed a great danger to the ideal of human brotherhood and fraternity.

One can, however, safely affirm that on the whole, *Song of Myself* is a poem of hope and fulfilment.

Song of Myself

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my Soul;
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death
Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes—the shelves are crowded with
perfumes;

I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it;
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume—it has no taste of the distillation—it is
odorless;

It is for my mouth forever—I am in love with it;
I will go to the bank by the wood, and become undisguised and naked;
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath;
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine;
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood
and air through my lungs;
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore, and dark-color'd
sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn;
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice, words loos'd to the eddies of
the wind;
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms;
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag;
The delight alone, or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-
sides;
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and
meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? Have you reckon'd the earth
much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess the origin of all
poems;
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the
eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books;
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me:
You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.

3

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the
end;
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.
Urge, and urge, and urge;
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance—always substance and increase,
always sex;
Always a knit of identity—always distinction—always a breed of life.

To elaborate is no avail—learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in
the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery, here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my Soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my Soul.
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen, and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best, and dividing it from the worst, age vexes age;
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I
am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and
clean;
Not an inch, nor a particle of an inch, is vile, and none shall be less familiar
than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing:
As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night,
and withdraws at the peep of the day, with stealthy trend,
Leaving me baskets cover'd with white towels, swelling the house with their
plenty,
Shall I postpone my acceptance and realization, and scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
And forthwith cipher and show me a cent,
Exactly the contents of one, and exactly the contents of two, and which is
ahead?

4

Trippers and askers surround me;
People I meet—the effect upon me of my early life, or the ward and city I
live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some manor woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folds, or of myself, or ill-doing, or loss or lack of
money, or depressions or exaltations;
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful
events;
These come to me days and nights, and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am;
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary;
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest.
Looking with side-curved head, curious what will come next;
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists
and contenders;
I have no mockings or arguments—I witness and wait.

5

I believe in you, my Soul—the other I am must not abase itself to you;
And you must not be abased to the other.
Loafe with me on the grass—loose the stop from your throat;
Not words, not music or rhyme I want—not custom or lecture, not even the
best;
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.
I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning;
How you settled your head athwart my hips, and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
bare-strip heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the
argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own;
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my
sisters and lovers;
And that a kelson of the creation is love;
And limitless are leaves, stiff or drooping in the fields;
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them;
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heap'd stones, elder, mullein and
poke-weed.

6

A child said, *What is the grass?* Fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and
remark, and say, *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic;
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white;
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them
the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you, curling grass;
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men;
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;
It may you are from old people, and from women, and from offspring taken
soon out of their mothers' laps;
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers;
Darker than the colorless beards of old men;
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.
I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of
their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to
arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Walt Whitman

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
 I hasten to inform him or her, it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.
 I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not
 contain'ed between my hat and boots,
 And peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one good,
 The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.
 I am not an earth, nor an adjunct of an earth,
 I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless
 as myself;
 (They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own—for me mine, male and female,
 For me those that have been boys, and that love women,
 For me the man that is proud, and feels how it stings to be slighted,
 For me the sweet-heart and the old maid—for me mothers, and the mothers
 of mothers,
 For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
 For me children, and the begetters of children.

Undrape! You are not guilty to me, nor stale, nor discarded,
 I see through the broadcloth and gingham, whether or no,
 And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.

2.3 "CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY"

The poet uses 'I' and describes his meeting with 'you.' Who is 'you'? Is he a male or a female? A white or a black? As the poem is unfolded we are able to guess the identity of 'you'. It is clear that the poet is near Brooklyn Ferry. There is a flood in the sea. The sky is clouded. The sun too is in the sky—it is half-an hour from the sunset. The poet is able to have a glimpse of 'you' near Brooklyn Ferry. He is fascinated by the sight of 'you.' There are so many men and women who are ready to use Brooklyn Ferry and reach home. There would also be many more men and women who would use the Ferry in future as well. 'You' is, perhaps, a word that encompasses the men and women gathered near Brooklyn Ferry now and also the men and women who would gather in distant future. In other words, 'you' stands for all those commuters who are home-bound after a day's hard labour.

The past, present, and the future seem to constitute the eternal flux of time. Both men and women try to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry and reach home. Individuals stand alone and yet they form a part of multitude. The tie that binds transcends all barriers of space and time. The islands that are separated would be bound by Brooklyn Ferry. Even after a hundred years the commuters would continue to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry. In the third section of the poem, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, the poet explicitly defines 'you.' The word refers to the generation that is trying to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry now. It also refers to generations that would try to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry in future. In other words, 'you' refers to all men and women who are destined to negotiate Brooklyn Ferry.

The poet feels a kinship with the existing generation and also with the generations to come. The sea is full of countless ships and steam-boats. There are also seagulls hovering in the sky. The poet's eyes are also dazzled by the reflection of his head in sun-lit water. There is also a haze around the hills towards the south. While some ships are arriving, some have already arrived. The sea near Brooklyn Ferry has ships and steam-boats from all over the world. The flags of all nations are also visible. Long before globalization has started in the world today, there is a glimpse of the

process in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. At the time of the sunset, the flags will be lowered.

Walt Whitman

The poet is also able to visualize the life on land, the fires from the foundry, the chimneys bellowing smoke and the creeping of the night. The poet also affirms that what grips and moves him would also grip and move the generations, both the generation of his time and also the generations to come. The life on the land stirs him as deeply as the life on the sea. Both nature and cities fascinate him. As an inhabitant of Brooklyn, the ample hills around have been dear to him. So have been the streets of Manhattan island. He has also been keenly aware of his physical self and the capacity of his senses to reveal the glory of nature in all its beauty and diversity.

It doesn't, however, imply that the dark and sinister aspects of the life in mid-nineteenth century America were not known to a Romantic poet like Walt Whitman. He has been quite aware of evil in the world. He has been guilty of lying, stealing, grumbling and crookedness. He has also been affected by anger, lust and unspeakable longings. At times, he has been wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly and cowardly. There is a most memorable line in which the poet has described the evil within him, "The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me". One is reminded of Rousseau's candour and frankness when confronted with Whitman's stark portrayal of his dark self. In other words, he confesses that he is both "great and small".

There is a degree of sanity and self-knowledge in Walt Whitman that is astounding. He is a Romantic who is never carried too far away from reality. His feet are firmly planted on the solid earth. In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* both good and evil are pictured with candour and insight.

In the last section of the poem, the poet visualizes the panorama in and around Brooklyn Ferry. He urges the gorgeous clouds in the sky to drench him with their splendour. He also urges them to drench the generation of men and women negotiating Brooklyn Ferry. He urges them to drench with their splendour the generations to come. The proximity of the hills of Brooklyn and the masts of Manhattan is also suggested.

To sum up, the poet celebrates both his self and also what surrounds his self. That is the sea, the islands, the life in cities, the present and the future, the ships of all nations and their flags are as beautifully pictured as the poet's self, encompassing both good and evil. Life seems to have immense possibilities for Walt Whitman in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*.

There is a grain of truth in Charles Eliot Norton's description of Walt Whitman as "a compound of New England transcendentalist and New York rowdy" (*Walt Whitman's America* by David S. Reynolds, p.106).

CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY

1

FLOOD-TIDE below me! I watch you face to face!
Clouds of the west - Sun there half an hour high - I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, How curious you
are to me!
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are
more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and
more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one
disintegrated, yet part of the scheme,

The similitudes of the past, and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings on the walk
in the street, and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly, and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others—the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry, and cross from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of
Brooklyn to the south and east;
Other will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour
high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see
them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the food-tide, the falling back to the
sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, neither time or place - distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;
Just as any of you is one of living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I
was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood,
yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and the thick-stem'd pipes
of steamboats, I look'd.

I too may and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, I saw them high in the air, floating
with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in
strong shadow,
I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual edging toward the south,

Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in
the sun-lit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me;
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, -saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine
pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome
crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite
store-houses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each
side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,

On the neighbouring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high
and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over
the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

4

These, and all else were to me the same as they are to you,

I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same—other who look back on me, because I look'd forward to
them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,

I too lived—Brooklyn, of ample tills, was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around
it,

I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day, among crowds of people, sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night, or as I lay in my bed, they came upon me,

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my Body,
That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be, I knew I should
be of my body.

6

It is not upon you along the dark patches fall,
The dark threw patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?
Nor is it kyou alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knotted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting.

Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my highest name by clear loud voices of young men as they
saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh
against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street, or ferry-boat, or public assembly, yet never
told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you;
What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in
advance,

I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows, but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for
all you cannot see me?

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd
Manhattan?
River and sun-set, and my scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the
belated lighter?
What Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I
love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks
in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish, is
accomplish'd, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set! Drench with your splendor me, or the men
and women generations after me;
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!—stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! Throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house, or street, or public assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! Loudly and musically call me by my
highest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small, according as one makes it!
Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be
looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the
hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! Fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water! And faithfully hold it, till all downcast
eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head,
in the sun-lit water!
Come on, ships from the lower bay! Pass up or down, whitesail'd schooners,
sloops, lighters!
Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! Cast black shadows at nightfall! cast
red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!
Appearances, how or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest aromas,
Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient
rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate hence-forward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,

We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Walt Whitman

2.4 "WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOMED"

Walt Whitman wrote the poem in (1865) after Abraham Lincoln's assassination by John Wiles Booth on April 14. While the North was full of black flags and a cry of vengeance filled the air, Booth's cry on the night of the assassination was—sic Semper Tyrannis. That is the tyrant had been justly punished. Whitman avoids the extreme position of the radical Republicans who wanted vengeance against the South and portrays Lincoln's death as the beginning of a new era of national reconciliation, and healing of the wounds of the Civil War. The poet has pictured Lincoln's death as the harbinger of a new era of peace and reconstruction.

There is a touch of the conventions of a pastoral elegy in *When Lilacs Last In the Dooryard Bloomed*. Along with a sense of mourning there is also a kind of awareness of the return of spring. The poet's complex awareness of a sense of loss and a sense of rebirth and reawakening is expressed by the juxtaposition of Venus in the western sky and the blooming of the lilacs in the dooryard. While Venus seems to be drooping in the western sky, the lilacs are in full bloom. In other words, nature is both in a mood of mourning and also undergoing a subtle, somewhat hidden process of awakening and rebirth. It is true that the poem is full of melancholy and anguish but right from the beginning the blooming of the lilacs has also been pinpointed by Whitman. The title of the elegy is most appropriate and the reader is able to see beyond the gloom and hopelessness. It is the idea of "ever-returning spring" that counter-balances the gloom and melancholy in the poem.

It is, however, in section three of the poem that the poet has described in detail the old farmhouse where the lilac bush stands. It is tall and has heart-shaped leaves. There are fragrant flowers and rich green leaves. The poet takes a small branch from the bush and holds it in his hand. It has delicate and fragrant flowers. There is also a songbird, thrush, that is singing a song. The thrush is alone, like a hermit, and is singing in darkness. The thrush is singing because there is an intense pain in his heart. The thrush is singing because it is unavoidable. If he does not sing, he would die. It has to be noted that the poet identifies himself with the thrush. If the poet does not express his grief through his poem, he will die. He will not survive as a sane being. In section five of the poem, Whitman describes nature in full bloom. Spring has burst in all its vitality. Everywhere violets peep, grass grows, apple-trees turn pink and wheat fields turn dark brown. While nature is in full bloom, a corpse is carried in a coffin.

In section six of the poem, there is a detailed description of the coffin's journey through lanes, streets and states of the Union. A large number of men and women watch the coffin travel through the states of the Union. There is service in churches and the organ bursts in a crescendo. As the coffin passes the poet, he places on it the lilac branch in his hand. That becomes the poet's tribute to the corpse carried in the coffin. In other words, Abraham Lincoln's death and martyrdom also contain the seed of spring, that is revival and resurgence of the nation. Since there was a cry for vengeance all over the North after Lincoln's brutal assassination, Whitman has celebrated death in the seventh section of the poem. What he really wants to do is to minimize the horror of death and pinpoint its sacred glory and life-affirmation. Whitman conveys the sanctity of death, especially that of a martyr like Abraham Lincoln, in these words:

"All over bouquets of roses, O death? I cover you all with roses and lilies:"

In the next section, the poet appeals to the drooping star—Venus to rise again and dispel the night. White Venus has disappeared, the thrush has been singing in darkness. One is reminded of Keat's nightingale that too sings in darkness. Whitman lays stress on the thrush singing somewhere in the swamp. He also admits that he is not able to express all that he feels. The man whose death he has been mourning was large, noble and comprehensive. He has also been buried in the grave. The poet's loss is simply unbearable. In section eleven of the poem Whitman draws a glowing picture of the farms and homes. He also remembers the sinking sun that looks gorgeous. The grass and the green leaves are fresh and resplendent. The workers are returning home in dense over-crowded cities. The poet seems to be as much preoccupied with Lincoln's death as with spring—the harbinger of new life.

There is also a panorama of Manhattan with its huge sky—scrapers and ships in the harbour. The sun shines, looking both calm and haughty. While days are pleasant, the nights are welcome. In this atmosphere, the poet urges the thrush to sing on and on. Let him sing from the swamps, let him sing from inside the bushes, let him sing his loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe". The poet feels that the drooping Venus, the thrushes's song and the lilac in his hand constitute a kind of unity, and togetherness. Their unbreakable bond and kinship has been sharply pinpointed in section thirteen of the poem. In the next section of the poem, there is the most lyrical and moving part of the elegy. The poet has described the scenery of his land with its lakes and forests, farms and fields, winds and storms. The land where men and women toil and extract the bounty of nature. It is in the midst of the manifold activities of life that he is able to have the sacred knowledge of death. In other words, the poet is able to juxtapose life and death. He is able to visualise life-in-death. He also pictures death as a deliverer, that is as a goddess that liberates us from the tangles of life. It is in section sixteen of the poem that the song of death is pictured. One is reminded of Keats's famous observation, "Death is the meed of life." One can safely affirm that *Death Carol* is the most original and the most resonant section of the elegy.

Like a Romantic poet, Whitman celebrates Death as a deliverer and he also wants to heal the wounds of the Civil War by affirming the positive qualities of Lincoln's martyrdom. The journey of the coffin across the length and breadth of the nation is also an attempt to transcend the horrors of the Civil War. Yet, the poet is too much of a realist to forget completely the horrors of the Civil War. In section eighteen of the poem there is a vivid description of the horror of the Civil War that had threatened the Union. As a great humanist Whitman says:

"I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of youngmen—I saw them;
I saw the debris and debris of all dead soldiers of the war;"

One is reminded of the horror of war that is pictured at the end of the *Mahabharata* and such a stark picture of the destructiveness of war could only strengthen one's resolve to work for peace. All in all, *When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed* is as much a poem of mourning as it is a poem of life-affirmation.

WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOOR-YARD BLOOM'D
First published in "When Lilac Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," 1865-6

1
When Lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd – and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

O powerful, western, fallen star!
 O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
 O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
 O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
 O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul.

3

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the whitewash'd
 palings,
 Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich
 green,
 With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume
 strong I love,
 With every leaf of miracle and from this bush in the door-yard,
 With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped leaves of rich
 green,
 A sprig, with its flower, I break.

4

In the swamp, in secluded recesses,
 A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary, the thrush,
 The hermit, withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
 Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
 Death's outlet song of life, (for well, dear brother, I know,
 If thou wast not gifted to sing, thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
 Amid lanes, and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd
 from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
 Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the
 endless grass,
 Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the
 dark-brown fields uprisen,
 Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
 Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
 Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
 Through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land,
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,
 With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women
 standing,
 With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces, and the
 unbarred heads,
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong
 and solemn,
 With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
 The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs – where amid these
 you journey,
 With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual clang,
 Here, Coffin that slowly passes,
 I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Nor for you, for one, alone,
 Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,

For Fresh as the morning, thus would I carol a song for you
O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious, I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you, and the coffins all of you, O death.)

8

O western orb, sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since we walk'd,
As we walk'd up and down in the dark blue so mystic,
As we walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell, as you bent to me nigh after
night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the
other stars all look'd on,)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something, I know
not what, kept me from sleep,)
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west, ere you
went, how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze, in the cold transparent
night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black
of the night,
As my soul, in its trouble, dissatisfied, sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender! I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star, my departing comrade, holds and detains me.

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds, blown from east and west,
Blown from the eastern sea, and blown from the western sea, till
there on the prairies meeting,
These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring, and farms, and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid
and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun,
burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of
the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-
dapple here and there;
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky,
and shadows,

And the city at hand, with dwellings so dense, and stacks of
chimneys,
And all the scenes of life, and the workshops, and the workmen
homeward returning.

12

Lo, Body and soul - this land,
My own Manhattan, with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying
tides, and the ships;
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light,
Ohio's shores, and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies, cover'd with grass and corn.
Lo, the most excellent sun, so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night, and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on, Sing on, you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the
bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid, and free, and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul - O wondrous singer!
You only I hear - yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac, with mastering odor, holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day, and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the
farmers preparing his crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land, with its lakes and
forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds, and the
storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the
voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides - and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy
with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its
meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets, how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities pent—
lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all, and among them all, enveloping me with the
rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew Death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.
Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close—walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle, as with companions, and as holding the hands of
companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the
dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars, and ghostly pines so still.

Walt Whitman

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know, receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.
From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars, and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

16

DEATH CAROL

*Come, lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each.
Sooner or later, delicate death,*

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—But praise! Praise! Praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

*Dark Mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none changed for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unfalteringly.*

*Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O death.*

*From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings
for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape, and the high-spread sky, are
fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.*

*The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave whose voice I
know,
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body grateful nestling close to thee.*

*Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields, and the
prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all, and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.*

15

To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure, deliberate notes, spreading, filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist, and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.
While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

I saw askant the armies,
 And I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
 Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles, I
 saw them,
 And carried hither and you through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
 And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
 And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
 And the white skeletons of young men—I saw them;
 I saw the debris and debris of all the dead soldiers of the war,
 But I saw they were not as was thought,
 They themselves were fully at rest—they suffer'd not,
 The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,
 And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,
 And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

16

Passing the visions, passing the night,
 Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
 Passing the song of the hermit bird, and the tallying song of my soul,
 Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying, ever-altering song,
 As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding
 the night,
 Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again
 bursting with joy,
 Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
 As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
 Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
 I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,
 From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing
 with thee,
 O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

20

Yet each keep, and all, retrievements out of the night,
 The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
 And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
 With the lustrous and drooping star, with the countenance full of
 woe,
 With the holders holding my hand, nearing the call of the bird,
 Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever I keep, for
 the dead I loved so well,
 For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands - and this for
 his dear sake,
 Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul,
 There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

2.5 "PASSAGE TO INDIA"

Walt Whitman included *Passage to India* in the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It is a poem in which he is celebrating the achievements of engineers who have designed the Suez Canal, leading to the linking of Europe and Asia. The opening of the Suez Canal and the laying down of cables across the oceans have linked Europe, Asia and North America. The Poet is filled with joy and is in a mood to celebrate the present. It seems so exciting that the past seems remote and shadowy. The poet,

however, can see the present growing out of the past. This crucial point is stressed by the poet in a memorable line, "For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?"

The second section of the poem begins with a refrain, "Passage O Soul, to India?" The refrain indicates the poet's sense of adventure and journey to the mystical land of the East, that is Asia. The journey is more than a physical journey. It is also a journey into the myths and fables of Asia and Africa. Science and technology developed in Europe and North America are important but equally (if not more) are the myths and fables of Asia and Africa. There are temples dedicated to the sun, there are fables pertaining to ancient gods and goddesses, there are lofty towers, there are towers red as roses—the poet celebrates all—all of them. The poet also celebrates a new religion. He celebrates engineers, architects, voyagers and explorers. He projects a soaring vision of "the oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near, the lands to be welded together".

There is a hunger to colonize and conquer all lands and all peoples. Globalization seems to be the goal that Walt Whitman is projecting so ecstatically in *Passage to India*. The poet also makes it clear that the hunger to colonize and conquer all lands and all peoples is not purely from a selfish motive of trade and commerce. It is a spiritual imperative in order to justify God's name and the soul's immense possibilities of growth and perfection. The poet affirms that America's destiny would be fulfilled through colonization, conquests and assimilation. A reader of Asia and Africa will, however, respond to Whitman's globalization with a fair degree of suspicion. If Whitman is a bard of American democracy, he has also traces of American love of global hegemony.

In the third section, Whitman juxtaposes two exciting scenes. At first he visualizes the completion and the opening of the Suez canal and the movement of steam ships through the channel. He also pays a tribute to the strange landscape, the pure sky and the sand around the channel. He can also see workers gathering around huge dredging machines. Along with the opening of the Suez canal, Whitman is also able to visualize the opening up of the vast American continent through the Pacific Railroad. The poet is able to hear "the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle". The thrust of the sudden expansion makes the poet measure the length and breadth of the American continent. The poet is able to picture in vivid detail the opening up of the vast land. He has glimpses of the great mountains, the Wind River, the Wahsatch mountains. He has also a sight of Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest. Whitman's imagination is able to encompass almost the entire landscape of the continent. Thus the exploration into the New World and into Asia occurs more or less simultaneously. The poet also recalls Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, whose daring adventure led to the discovery of the North American continent. He also says that the great explorer's dream is going to be realized soon.

"Passage to India" is the ringing refrain that occurs at the beginning of the section 2, 3 and 4 of the poem. It seems to create a strong unity of impression of man's indomitable urge to conquer the vast, unending land mass in North America, Europe and Asia. It also signifies the overcoming of barriers and an affirmation of the oneness of mankind. The poet also recalls Vasco de Gama's quest for the New World, the discovery of India and the founding of a new nation. The poet also celebrates man's conquest of continents and the fulfillment of man's destiny. *Passage to India* is a culmination of the history of the modern time. It is uplifting like the crescendo of a thrilling song. The time is such that even the unattainable can be attained, even the stars can be grabbed. Such is the robust optimism of Walt Whitman, reminding us of Robert Browning's observation, "Grow along with me, the best is yet to be." There is something of the visionary and the dreamer in Whitman's *Passage to India*.

In the sixth section, the poet has drawn an exalted picture of the earth floating in space. He says, "O, vast Rondure, swimming in space, covered all over with visible power and beauty". The earth is floating in the procession of sun, moon and

countless stars. On the earth, one can see grass, waters, animals, mountains and trees. All objects big or small, are instinct with life. They seem to be a manifestation of a divine purpose. The poet is also able to go back to the past, that is the beginning of human life. He can see in imagination Adam and Eve and their progeny. He makes it clear that Adam and Eve appear in the garden of Eden, located in Asia. The poet also visualizes the future. After the seas have been crossed, after the captains and engineers have done their work, after the inventors, the scientists, the chemists, the geologists, the ethnologists, a great bard would come. The bard's song would mark the culmination of the work of voyagers, scientists and inventors. It is through the bard's endeavour that "Nature and Man shall be disjoined, and diffused no more, the true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them".

Walt Whitman

In the seventh section of the poem the poet again refers to "the marriage of continents, climates and oceans". There is a sense of urgency that is reflected in the next section of the poem. It is a time that reminds one of the land that lies beyond Europe and North America. The poet refers to the new frontier that challenges the voyagers and explorers, "The old, most populous, wealthiest of the Earth's lands, the stream of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many affluents". It would be flattering to readers of today to realize how the land of the Indus and the Ganges stimulated the imagination of a poet like Walt Whitman.

In section nine of the poem, the poet again celebrates the navigators and explorers who discovered North America. There is an unforgettable image of the visionary who sailed towards the New World facing innumerable hurdles. In section ten, the poet celebrates the sense of adventure and the hunger for the unknown that burns in the bosom of the young. There is a sense of urgency that is found in section eleven of the poem. The poet says, "O we can wait no longer! We too take ship, O soul". There is a modified refrain that is found in section twelve and thirteen of the poem. That is, "Passage to more than India". In other words, the frontier is not limited to India. The frontier is beyond India. The adventure of navigators and explorers would not be confined to the colonization of India. It would go far beyond the Indian continent. The core of the poem does not lie in arrival. It lies in the journey, in endless exploration. The poet sums up the core of *Passage to India* in these words:

"For we are bound where the mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we risk the ship, ourselves and all."

PASSAGE TO INDIA

First published in 1870

1

SINGING my days,
Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)
In the Old World, the east, the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires;
Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul,
The Past! the Past! the Past!

The Past—The dark, unfathom'd retrospect!
The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!
The past—the infinite greatness of the past!
For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?
(As a projectile form'd, impell'd passing a certain line, still keeps on,
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)

2

Passage, O soul, to India!
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.

Not you alone proud truths of the world,
Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld—Asia's, Africa's fables,
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets—the elder religions;
--O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known,
 mounting to heaven!
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd
 with gold!
Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!
You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest!
You too with joy I sing.

3

Passage to India!
Lo, soul! Seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

A worship new I sing,
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.

3

Passage to India!
Lo, soul, for thee, of tableaux twain,
I see in one the Suez canal initiated, open'd,
I see the procession of steamships, the Empress Eugenie's leading
 the van,
I mark from the deck, the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level
 sand in the distance,
I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the workmen gather'd,
The gigantic dredging machines.
In one again, different, (yet thine, all thine, O soul, the same,)
I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surrounding every
 barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying
 freight and passengers,
I here the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-
 whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the
 world,
I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes—the
 buttes,
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless,
 sage-deserts,
I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great
 mountains, I see the Wind River and the Wahsatch
 mountains,
I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the
 Promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,
I scan the noble Elk mountain and wind around its base,
I see the Humboldt range, I thread the valley and cross the river,
I see the clear waters of Lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic pines,
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting
 mirages of waters and meadows,

Marking through these, and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
The road between Europe and Asia.

Walt Whitman

(Ah Genoese thy dream! thy dream!
Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,
The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.)

4

Passage to India!
Struggles of many a captain, tales of many a sailor dead,
Over my mood stealing and spreading they come,
Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach'd sky.
Along all history, down the slopes,
As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface
 rising,
A ceaseless thought, a varied train—Lo, soul, to thee, thy sight, they
 rise,
The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions;
Again Vasco de Gama sails forth,
Again the knowledge gain'd, the mariner's compass,
Lands found, and nations born—thou born, America,
For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,
Thou rondure of the world, at last accomplish'd

5

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,
Unspeakable, high processions of sun and moon and countless stars
 above,
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden, prophetic intention,
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish with never-happy
 hearts,
With that sad incessant refrain, *wherefore unsatisfied Soul? And*
 Whither O mocking Life?
Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
Who speak the secret of impassive Earth?
Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature, so unnatural?
What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb
 to answer ours,
Cold earth, the place of graves.)

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains—and shall be carried out,
(Perhaps even now the time has arrived.)

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the
 geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name,
The true Son of God shall come singing his songs.

Then, not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,
shall be justified,
All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,
All affection shall be fully responded to—the secret shall be told,
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and
link'd together,
The whole Earth this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be
completely justified,
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by
the true son of God, the poet,
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

6

Year at whose wide-flung door I sing!
Year of the purpose accomplish'd!
Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!
(No mere Doge of Venice now, wedding the Adriatic,)
I see, O Year, in you the vast terraqueous globe, given, and giving
all,
Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World,
The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival
garland,
As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.

7

Passage to India!
Cooling airs from Caucasus far, soothing cradle of man,
The river Euphrates flowing, the past lit up again.

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,
The old, most populous, wealthiest of Earth's lands,
The streams of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many affluents,
(I my shores of America walking to-day behold, resuming all,)
The tale of Alexander, on his warlike marches, suddenly dying,
On one side China and on the other side Persia and Arabia,
To the south the great seas and the Bay of Bengal,
The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,
Old occult Brahma, interminably far back, the tender and junior
Buddha,
Central and southern empires, and all their belongings, possessors,
The wars of Tamerlane, the reign of Aurungzebe,
The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium, the
Arabs, Portuguese,
The first travelers, famous yet, Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor,
Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,
The foot of man unstay'd, the hands never at rest,
Thyself O soul that will not brook a challenge.

8

The medieval navigators rise before me,
The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise,
Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth in
spring,
The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.

And who art thou, said shade?
Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,
With majestic limbs, and pious, beaming eyes,
Spreading around, with every look of thine, a golden world,
Enhuing it with gorgeous hues.

As the chief histrion,
Down to the footlights walks, in some great scena,
Dominating the rest, I see the Admiral himself,
(History's type of courage, action, faith,)
Behold him sail from Palos, leading his little fleet,
His voyage behold—his return—his great fame,
His misfortunes, calumniators—behold him a prisoner, chain'd,
Behold his dejection, poverty, death.

(Curious in time I stand, noting the efforts of heroes,
Is the deferment long? bitter the slander, poverty, death?
Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground? lo, to God's due
occasion,
Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms,
And fills the earth with use and beauty.)

7

Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,
Not lands and seas alone—thy own clear freshness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom,
To realms of budding bibles.

O soul, repressless, I with thee, and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with fair Creation.

8

O we can wait no longer,
We too take ship O soul,
Joyous, we too launch out on trackless seas
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O
soul,)
Caroling free, singing our song of God,
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.
With laugh and many a kiss,
(Let others deprecate—let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation,)
O soul thou pleasest me, I thee.

Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,
Sailing these seas or on the hills or waking in the night,
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time, and Space and Death, like waters
flowing,
Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over
Bathe me O God, in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O Thou transcendant,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,
Thou moral, spiritual fountain - affection's source - thou reservoir,
(O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! waitest not there?
Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)

Thou pulse - thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space,
How should I think, how breathe a single breath, how speak, if, out
of myself,
I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, Thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;
--What love, than thine and ours could wider amplify?
What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?
What dreams of the ideal? What plans of purity, perfection, strength?
What cheerful willingness for others' sake, to give up all?
For others' sake to suffer all?

Reckoning ahead O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
As, fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
The younger melts in fondness in his arms.

9

Passage to more than India!
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?
O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those?
Disportest thou on waters such as those?
Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!
You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach'd
you.

Passage to more than India!
O secret of the earth and sky!
Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong mountains of my land!
Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!
O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!
Passage to you!

Passage—immediate passage! The blood burns in my veins!
Away, O soul! Hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not grovell'd here long enough, eating and drinking like
mere brutes?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?
Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

Walt Whitman

O my brave soul!
O farther, farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

2.6 LET US SUM UP

Leaves of Grass is the major work of Walt Whitman. Its first edition was published in 1855 and the last death-bed edition was published in 1891-92.

While *Song of Myself* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* reflect Walt Whitman's youthful exuberance and hope, *When Lilas In The Dooryard Bloomed* and *Passage to India* are poems that reflect the poet's more mature vision.

Belief in the individual is counter-balanced by Whitman's celebration of comradeship between man and man. There is evil in man and in society but on the whole joy, order and harmony prevail in the cosmos.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. "Beginning with the I of the poet and ending with the *you* of the reader, the opening lines mark the poles between which the poem swings."
Do you agree with this assessment of Whitman's *Song of Myself*?
2. *Song of Myself* is a celebration of American individualism. Discuss with reference to the text that you have read.
3. How are the past, the present and the future linked in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*?
4. Bring out the full significance of the title, "*When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed*?"
5. How does Walt Whitman visualise Death in "*When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloomed*?" Do you agree with Whitman's assessment of Death?
6. *Passage to India* is a celebration of the New World encompassing Asia, Europe and North America.
7. "*Whitman is an imperialist who celebrates American hegemony of the globe in Passage to India.*" Do you agree with this evaluation of the poem?
8. Examine the traces of Transcendentalism in Walt Whitman's major poems that you have studied.
9. How is nature pictured in Whitman's poetry? Do you think he could be described as the Wordsworth of American poetry?
10. "The Self is full of immense possibilities of growth in the New World." Do you agree with this view of the self in Whitman's poetry?

2.8 GLOSSARY

Manhattan:	the most important part of New York; also the name of the island.
Brooklyn:	a suburb where Whitman lived
Great star:	Venus in the western sky
Flambeaus:	flaming torches
Genoese:	Christopher Columbus who discovered North America

2.9 SUGGESTED READING

1. Extracts from Walt Whitman's major poems are from *The Walt Whitman Reader: Selections from Leaves of Grass*. (Courage Books an imprint of Running Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1997.)
Note: the text of this edition is based on the 1891-92 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
2. *Whitman, Slavery and The Emergence of Leaves of Grass* by Martin Klammer (The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1995).
3. *Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1965.

UNIT 3 THE TEXT 2: EMILY DICKINSON

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* (303)
- 3.3 *I'm Saying Every Day* (373)
- 3.4 *It Would Never Be Common-More-I-Said* (430)
- 3.5 *I Measure Every Grief I Meet* (561)
- 3.6 *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* (712)
- 3.7 *My Life Had Stood – A Loaded Gun* (751)
- 3.8 *Rearrange a Wife's Affection* (1737)
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Questions
- 3.11 Glossary
- 3.12 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this Unit is to give you some understanding of some of the most significant poems of Emily Dickinson.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We have already told you that Emily Dickinson led a more or less secluded life in Amherst, Massachusetts. There is no wonder that she is preoccupied with the plight of an individual, especially a woman brought up in New England. Death and immortality are two major preoccupations in the sombre world created by Emily Dickinson. Solitude and introversion are two other preoccupations of the poet who published only seven poems in her life, that too anonymously. Her poems have also been described as her letters to the world. As she did not give titles to her poems, they are remembered either through the first line of the poem or through the numbers allotted to them in Thomas H. Johnson's standard edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

In our selection, we would focus your attention on 303 where the choice to live a completely secluded life has been affirmed. In 373, the poet fancies what her life would be if she were to become a queen. There is another poem, 430 in which the speaker walked as if her body had wings but suddenly she lost her elan and turned into a beggar. In 561, the protagonist tries to visualize the various faces of grief—including death. 712 is one of the most popular of Emily Dickinson's poems where death has been pictured as a most civil person. It is death that gradually leads the protagonist to the stately mansion of immortality. 754 is also a popular poem of Emily Dickinson where the protagonist visualizes her union and adventure with her Lord. In 1737, the poet affirms that she cannot become an obedient wife. She has learnt more from life than she could have ever learnt from being a mere wife. There is both an acceptance and a rejection of the limitations of a conventional woman's life in patriarchal New England. At heart, Emily Dickinson is a rebel, a dissenter.

3.2 "THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY"

303, *THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY* is a short poem in which Emily Dickinson presents the drama of her soul. The narrator says that the soul selects her own companions, her own society. Then, the soul shuts the door. She doesn't let in outsiders and intruders. The majority of the people outside the door may appear divine and enchanting to the ordinary people of the world but to the narrator the "divine majority" doesn't simply exist. The narrator is different and is quite contented to belong to the minority of one.

The narrator is unmoved, that is not disturbed by the exclusion of the so-called divine majority. She also notices a chariot stopping near her low gate. An emperor may get down from the chariot and kneel before the mat in front of the narrator's small, restricted kingdom. But the narrator is not influenced by the emperor's august presence.

The narrator says that she, perhaps the soul, is from a large, ample nation and she chooses one from the crowd and then closes the valves of her attention to the outsiders. In other words, her attention would be focussed on the chosen one.

Who is the chosen one? God? The Bridegroom? Father? The soul?
Solitude? Guess.

303
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—

3.3. "I'M SAYING EVERYDAY"

373, *I'm Saying Everyday* is a poem in which another drama is unfolded vividly. The narrator (I) says that if she becomes a Queen the other day, she will do it in her own way, that is in her own style. She will decorate herself a little. She will also find that she is not an ordinary person. She has become a Bourbon. Nobody will be able to treat her superciliously, that is with cold disdain. Nobody will be able to say that the day before she was a beggar in the market.

People say that the court is a grand, stately place. She will be able to mix and mingle with the Majesty. Who is the Majesty? The King or God? She will also feel that her rank has risen high. She can sing a song to please the Majesty. Her life may be brief but she will mix and mingle with the Majesty. There will be no cricket in the meadow, and no bee will be able to equal her accent.

She feels that she must be ready for the change, for the transformation. She doesn't want to meet the majesty in her old gown. She also doesn't want to be deemed a rustic, an uncivilized, barbarous fellow.

Emily Dickinson

373

I'm saying every day
"If I should be a Queen, tomorrow"—
I'd do this way—
And so I deck, a little,

If it be, I wake a Bourbon,
None on me, bend supercilious—
With "This was she—
Begged in the Market place—
Yesterday."

Court is a stately place—
I've heard men say—
So I loop my apron, against the Majesty
With bright Pins of Buttercup—
That not too plain—
Rank—overtake me—
And perch my Tongue
On Twigs of singing—rather high—
But this, might be my brief Term
To qualify—

Put from my simple speech all plain word—
Take other accents, as such I heard
Though but for the Cricket—just,
And but for the Bee—
Not in all the Meadow—
One accost me—

Better to be ready—
Than did next morn
Meet me in Aragon—
My old Gown—On-

And the surprised Air
Rustics—wear—
Summoned—unexpectedly—
To Exeter—

3.4 "IT WOULD NEVER BE COMMON—MORE—I SAID"

430, *It Would Never be Common-More-I Said* is again a poem in which difference is celebrated. The narrator (I) says that her plight is not common. She is extraordinary. She is unique. She is different—different from everyone. It is morning. The narrator has been in bliss. She has had much joy. There has been a red glow upon her cheeks. There has been a red glow in her eyes as well. She has no need to speak. It is so eloquent, so palpable. She has been walking as if she had wings. Her feet have been as unnecessary to her as boots will be for birds. She has also been bubbling, bursting with joy. She has been giving love to every creature she met. She has been showering gifts on the whole world.

Suddenly, everything changes, changes for worse. She loses her riches, her wealth. There is a Goblin who deprives her of all warmth, all joy. Something fearful happens to her palace. She becomes a beggar. She tries to hold on to sounds. She gropes after shapes. She feels wilderness all around her. Her golden lines are wiped out. She is able to see sackcloth hanging upon the nail. She begins to wonder where her India made brocade is, that is her riches, her wealth.

430

It would never be Common – more I said –
Difference – had begun –
Many a bitterness – had been –
But that old sort – was done –

Or – if it sometime – showed – as 'twill –
Upon the Downiest – Morn –
Such bliss – had I – for all the years –
'Twould give an Easier – pain –

I'd so much joy – I told it – Red
Upon my simple cheek –
I felt it publish – in my Eye –
'Twas needless – any speak –

I walked – as wings – my body bore –
The feet – I former used –
Unnecessary – now to me –
As boots – would be – to Birds –

I put my pleasure all abroad –
I dealt a word of Gold
To every Creature – that I met –
And Dowered – all the World –

When – suddenly – my Riches shrank –
A Goblin – drank my Dew –
My Palaces – dropped tenantless –
Myself – was beggared – too –

I clutched at wounds –
I groped at shapes
I touched the tops of Films –
I felt the Wilderness roll back
Along my Golden lines –

The Sackcloth – hangs upon the nail –
The Frock I used to wear –
But where my moment of Brocade
My – drop – of India?

3.5 "I MEASURE EVERY GRIEF I MEET"

561, *I Measure Every Grief I Meet* is a poem that shows the narrator's (I) preoccupation with grief that she finds in the world. She examines the origin and intensity of grief carefully. She also wonders if there is any grief in the world like her grief. She is not sure if other people are able to endure their grief for a long time. She marvels at the old roots of her pain. She can't remember the date her pain began.

She wonders if life will continue to be full of hurt. She also wonders if others would like to die so that pain might come to an end.

Emily Dickinson

She can see a smile on some faces—a faint, weak smile. It is like the light of a lamp that has very little oil. She wonders if there is any balm for their grief. She wonders if they would continue to bear pain. Perhaps, their pain would touch infinity.

Life is, for the narrator, bristling with pain. Death comes only once. It nails the eyes. She is comforted when she thinks of her pain. And also when she thinks of the cross.

561

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes—
I wonder if It weighs like Mine—
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long—
Or did it just begin—
I could not tell the Date of Mine—
It feels so old a pain—

I wonder if it hurts to live—
And if They have to try—
And whether—could They choose between—
It would not be—to die—

I note that Some—gone patient long—
At length, renew their smile—
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil—

I wonder if when years have piled—
Some Thousands—on the Harm—
That hurt them early—such a lapse
Could give them any Balm—

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve—
Enlightened to a larger Pain—
In Contrast with the Love—

The Grieved—are many—I am told—
There is the various Cause—
Death—is but one—and comes but once—
And only nails the eyes—

There's Grief of Want—and Grief of Cold—
A sort they call 'Despair'—
There's Banishment from native Eyes—
In sight of Native Air—

And though I may not guess the kind—
Correctly—yet to me
A piercing comfort it affords
In passing Calvary—

To note the fashions—of the Cross—
And how they're mostly worn—
Still fascinated to presume
That Some—are like My Own—

3.6 "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH"

712, *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is one of the most popular and anthologized poems of Emily Dickinson. The narrator (I) says that she couldn't stop for death but death was kind enough to stop for her. In the carriage where she was travelling there were only two companions' death and immortality. They drove slowly. Death, the driver of the carriage, was not at all in a hurry. The narrator had given up her life of labour and her leisure as well. She did it because death was not frightening. Death looked civil and acceptable to the narrator.

In the course of their journey, they passed a school where children were playing with vigour. They also passed the fields where the ears of grain were gazing at them. They passed the sun as well, the sun that was setting. The narrator had a gown made of gossamer. She also had a tippet around her neck and a tulle made of soft, fine silk. In other words, she was attired like a bride.

They also passed before a House that seemed like a swelling of the ground. The roof of the House was hardly visible. The cornice was in the ground. Centuries have passed from that day. Yet it seems it has been shorter than a day. The narrator felt that the carriage in which she had travelled in the company of death was heading towards Eternity. In other words, it is only through death that the narrator attains immortality. The poem is justly celebrated and is a remarkable acceptance of death. It also reminds one of Keats' dictum that death is the meed of life.

712

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 strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—he passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

751, *My Life Had Stood – A Loaded Gun* is another popular and anthologized poem by Emily Dickinson. It is a poem in which the narrator (I) admits that her life has been a loaded gun. It is an extremely striking image which perhaps, conveys the explosive potential of the narrator. The loaded gun has been kept in a corner of her apartment. The implication, perhaps, is that the explosive potential of the protagonist has remained confined to a small corner of her apartment. She has had no opportunity to realize her potential in all its fullness. One can also safely affirm that there is something dangerous, something fierce about the protagonist. She is not an ordinary, conventional woman of nineteenth century New England. She is different.

The second phase of the poem indicates a kind of change in the protagonist's life style. She is chosen by her Master. She is also carried away from the narrow confines of her apartment. They live a life of freedom, a life of pioneers. They roam freely in excellent woods. They hunt the doe. When she speaks to her Master, her voice is echoed by the mountains. When she smiles, the whole valley glows. It seems that as the pleasure of companionship bursts out of her face it looks like Vesuvius, a volcano in Italy full of pent-up lava.

When night comes and the day is over, the ardent protagonist guards her Master. She acts like a vigilant watchman. The protagonist says that she is a deadly foe to any intruder who may dare to harm her Master. If she can spot the guy, she would release the trigger of the gun and shoot him dead. The "gun" in the poem is more than a metaphor. It is also literal. The protagonist knows how to wield the gun. There is something of the pioneer and the frontier in this excellent poem. The protagonist is such a deadly shot that the intruder has no chance to escape. He dies.

The protagonist, however, says at the end that He (perhaps the Master) is more likely to live longer than her. It would be better that he lives longer than the protagonist. It is true that the protagonist can press the trigger of the gun and kill, like a pioneer, but she does not have the tenacity and the power to accept death. What the narrator wants to say is that only those who can accept death, who have the power to die, can redeem themselves. One can see the poem 751 affirm the core of the poem 712. Accepting death calmly is a greater virtue than killing the foe.

751

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master's Head—
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

3.8 "REARRANGE A WIFE'S AFFECTION"

Rearrange a Wife's Affection is a poem in which the narrator (I) has denounced the miserable plight of a wife. She has also portrayed the sad life of a single woman. The society pretends to put in order, that is tame and domesticate a woman into the mould of a traditional wife. This is to be achieved by amputating ruthlessly her spotted heart. In other words, through stifling her natural impulses. It is also to be achieved by making her look like a man with a beard. That is, not only her natural impulses are ruthlessly curbed but even her natural looks are made to appear harsh and forbidding.

Note: the phrase "freckled bosom," perhaps, refers to the weaknesses and foibles that a woman is likely to have.

The narrator urges her strong natural impulses to blush that is to feel a sense of shame. She also urges her desires as a woman to blush, that is to feel a sense of shame. The compound of shame and guilt is due to the pressures exerted by the society in New England. The reality, however, is that the protagonist, a single woman—has learnt far more as a spinster than she would have learnt as a traditional wife. She has had no experience of wifehood, that is domestic drudgery and slavery yet seven years of solitary life as a spinster has taught her an unforgettable lesson.

Her life has been such that love has not leaped its socket, that is love has not fulfilled her natural hunger. She also could not experience trust that is basic for one's growth. As a result of which pain, narrow stifling pain, has been entrenched in her life. She has also no taste of constancy in love that would have given her a sense of fulfillment. There has been no balm, no medicine for the anguish and grief that has seared her. Life has been a terrible burden for her, although so far she has endured the burden triumphantly. She is not likely to be crowned, that is to attain fulfillment and happiness. Till sunset, that is till the end of her life, she would be pricked by thorns. It is, perhaps, only after her death that she would finally be crowned. In other words, she would put on her diadem. These lines appear to be prophetic because Emily Dickinson got recognition as a great poet only after her death. As a Romantic poet, her poetry is a mirror of her apprehensions and hope.

There is, however, a big secret in her life. It is big but it is also a sort of bandage over her eyes. That secret, that mystery would never vanish. It would disappear only the day she would die and her tired flesh would at last have some rest. She would be then released from the fever, the agony and the prison of life. She would be buried in the grave and later on she would be united with him, that is the bridegroom.

In other words, it is only after death that she would attain fulness and triumph. She could not endure to be a wife. She also could not be happy as a single woman in nineteenth century New England. That was the dilemma of Emily Dickinson expressed so vividly and trenchantly in 1737.

1737

Emily Dickinson

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!
When they dislocate my Brain!
Amputate my freckled Bosom!
Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness—
Blush, my unacknowledged clay—
Seven years of troth have taught thee
More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket—
Trust entrenched in narrow pain—
Constancy thro' fire—awarded—
Anguish—bare of anodyne!

Burden—borne so far triumphant—
None suspect me of the crown,
For I wear the "Thorns" till *sunset*—
Then—my diadem put on.

Big my Secret but it's *bandaged*—
It will never get away
Till the Day its Weary Keeper
Leads it through the Grave to thee.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

Emily Dickinson led a large secluded life in Amherst, New England. Solitude led to a life devoted to reading and writing.

She had, however, a number of literary mentors. Her poems were, however, her letters to the world. She had published only seven poems in her life. They were anonymous publications.

It was only after her death that her poems were published on a large scale. She made her reputation as one of the most intense and Romantic poet of New England. Her poetry is largely a poetry of rebellion and confession.

3.10 QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the narrator (I) in most of the poems of Emily Dickinson?
2. Bring out the implication of the queen-beggar syndrome in 373 and 430.
3. How does Emily Dickinson visualize grief in 561?
4. Do you agree with the statement that *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* is the most perfectly realized poem written by Emily Dickinson?
5. Compare and contrast 712 and 754 in their treatment of death.
6. "Wifehood seemed a curse to Emily Dickinson." Is it a fair assessment of the poet's outlook as reflected in 1737?
7. "Emily Dickinson's poetry is that of a rebel." Discuss with reference to 1737.

3.11 GLOSSARY

Bourbon:	Royal dynasty of France in medieval age.
Aragon:	a Christian kingdom in North East Spain in eleventh century.
Exeter:	a university town in Devonshire, England.
Calvary:	hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified.
Vesuvius:	a mountain in Italy which erupts and emits fire and lava.
Eider-Ducks:	wild ducks.

3.12 SUGGESTED READING

1. *Modern American Poetry 1865-1950* by Alan Shucard, Fred Moramaco, William Sullivan (Twyane Publishers, Boston, 1989).
2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto, 1960).
3. *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* edited by A. Robert Lee (Vision and Barnes Noble, London, 1985).

UNIT 4 STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Theme and Imagery in Walt Whitman
- 4.3 Theme and Imagery in Emily Dickinson
- 4.4 Free Verse in Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the innovation in structure and style that helped Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson to cultivate their unique voices in American poetry.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We have already told you that Whitman is a bard who celebrates in his poetry the sheer diversity and vitality of American Republic in nineteenth century. His focus is as much on the individual, the American Adam, as it is on the collective. It is not possible to assess the innovation made by Whitman in the realm of American poetry in purely literary and aesthetic terms. We have to bear in mind the fact that much of his life was spent in Brooklyn and New York and his being a journalist made him a partisan in the tortuous growth of American Republic before and after the *Civil War*. He was a bard of American democracy and he embraced not only the classics of European literature but also the slang and syntax of New York's street culture. In other words, his poems are a hybrid of literary sensibility and popular culture fashioned by carpenters, blacksmiths, cab-drivers and political orators of his time. He created a new voice that could express the subaltern's and marginal groups hunger for freedom and dignity within the ambience of American Republic in which class differences and the slavery of the blacks had become explosive issues leading to the Civil War. Betsy Erkilli has rightly observed in her excellent study, *Whitman: The Political Poet*, "The Publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was not an escape from politics but a continuation of politics by other means."

If Whitman is preoccupied with the making of the nation and healing the wounds of the Civil War, Emily Dickinson is preoccupied with the plight of a single woman in New England. Naturally "I" is very important in Emily Dickinson's poems. In other words, the confessional mode is very prominent in her poems. The liberal use of dashes in her poems helps the reader in realizing the passion and intensity behind her words. The pauses in her poems enable the reader to feel the abrupt change in the narrator's thought and feeling. If Whitman is a master of sustained eloquence over larger verbal units, Emily Dickinson is able to intensify the meaning through every word in her poems. Naturally, her poems are exquisite miniatures while Whitman's poems are more elaborate and produce, at best, the effect of a grand symphony.

4.2 THEME AND IMAGERY IN WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman was an innovator in the realm of American poetry in mid-nineteenth century. *Song of Myself* is his first long poem that shows his preoccupation with the

self. Naturally, "I" figures very prominently in the poem in which there is no beginning, no middle, no end. As there is no definite narrative thread, the poem is unfolded in the form of a random collage of scenes, queries, rhetorical passages, lyrical outbursts and affirmations. "You" is as prominent in *Song of Myself* as "I". We have already told you that "I" and "You" constitute the poles between which the poem swings. There is no wonder that the loose rambling poem begins with two memorable lines, "I celebrate myself, And what I assume you shall assume," and comes to an end with equally memorable lines, "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me at one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you", (line, 1345-47). One can safely affirm that the poet's self can be fully realized only in communion with the reader's "You." "*Song of Myself*" is not only a celebration of the poet's all-inclusive self but is also a quest for a meaningful community, transcending the barriers of class, gender and colour. In that sense, "*Song of Myself*" is the most subversive poem ever written by Walt Whitman. There is no wonder that the Boston district attorney, Oliver Stevens, initiated proceedings to suppress the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It has also to be noted that *Boston Intelligence* responded to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in these words, "The author should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of brute" (Whitman, *The Political Poet*, p.308).

"You" in "*Song of Myself*" is not a fixed entity. It refers to the narrator's comrade with whom he has an intensely erotic experience. He is a loving bed-fellow who sleeps by his side at night. Like the Greeks, the narrator believed that man-man relationship helped one to realize the unbreakable bond between individuals. The narrator also catalogues the various mundane facts of life (see lines 13-20) which create a powerful impression of the temporal word of mid-nineteenth century America. The key relationship between "I" and "You" is also symbolized by the master metaphor of "grass." In section six of the poem, there is a most memorable evocation of "the grass." The grass could be a reflection of the narrator's youthful exuberance, could also be the handkerchief of God, could also be a child. The grass could also refer to a kind of vision that accepts both whites and blacks, men and women, Congressman and a native Indian. One can safely affirm that "grass" is the master metaphor that gives a kind of structural cohesion and focus to "*Song of Myself*". "Grass" stands both for the individual and the many, that is the collective. If "grass" brings out the full significance of "*Song of Myself*" the subversive thrust of the poem helps one to understand why Boston critics were so keen to ban *Leaves of Grass* from free circulation in New England. It shows Whitman's courage that he did not submit to censorship that would have made *Leaves of Grass* a conventional, sedate anthology of Victorian poems. He resisted even the pressure of his mentor Emerson who wanted him to delete his controversial poems like "*A Woman Waits for Me*", "*To a Common Prostitute*" and *Children of Adam* from *Leaves of Grass*.

"*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*" is Whitman's second major poem in which his youthful exuberance is curbed and he shows restraint and self-control in describing a specific scene. From the beginning, I-You exchanges and encounter are present in the poem. In "*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*" "You" stands for a working man who is waiting for the ferry. The narrator (I) finds "You" very curious, very dear. He is dressed like ordinary workers but he is so "curious" to the narrator. He seems to stand alone and holds the narrator's attention. It is not only the present that strikes the narrator. The past and the future also hold his attention. The narrator is reminded of those who crossed the ferry in the past. He is also reminded of those who will do it in future. There is a kind of unbreakable bond between the past, the present and the future. "You" refers to an individual, and also refers to many who crossed the ferry in the past and those who will do it in the future. In other words, "You" is all-inclusive and embraces both men and women, whites and blacks, and country and town. One can see a kind of thematic unity between "*Songs of Myself*" and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*."

What is new in "*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*" is Whitman's focus on a specific scene and his capacity to celebrate the grandeur of Manhattan island along with his self-

knowledge in highlighting "the wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me" (line 78). Towards the end of the poem, there is a glowing evocation of the harbour where ships from all parts of the globe are anchoring. One can say that in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", Whitman not only continues I-You exchanges but also foreshadows American dream of globalization as presented in "Passage to India."

"*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*" is, perhaps, the most conventional poem written by Walt Whitman. Many of the conventions of pastoral elegy, including the mourning of nature and pathetic fallacy, the funeral procession, the placing of flowers on the coffin, the juxtaposition of death with nature's renewal and the return of spring have been used by the poet freely. There is no wonder that the elegy is not as provocative and controversial as "*Song of Myself*." The mood of melancholy and grief is all pervasive in the poem. The image of Venus drooping in the western sky is the most memorable metaphor used by the poet to mourn the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln. The recurrence of the image of the drooping star intensifies the mood of melancholy and grief. As against the image of the drooping star, Whitman has counterpoised the positive image of the blooming of the lilac and the warbling of the thrush in the swamp. In the last two lines of the elegy Whitman has condensed the thematic core of the poem, "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, there in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim" (line, 208-209). Like all great elegies like Shelley's "*Adonais*" and Arnold's "*Thyrsis*", "*When Lilacs last in the Door-yard Bloomed*" is also an assertion of hope in a world driven by anger, hate and death. Walt Whitman's stark originality in this elegy lies in portraying death as a deliveress. (Kindly see lines 137-164 in the poem.) Acceptance of death, without making a distinction between death due to illness or old age, and death as a violent act, gives to the poem an air of calm resignation. The poet's aim in philosophically accepting Lincoln's death was to minimise the animosity between the North and the South and to achieve a kind of reconciliation between the pro-Lincoln North and anti-Lincoln South. In other words, Whitman's intention in "*When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed*" was to heal the wounds of the Civil War.

There is no wonder that in "*Passage to India*" (1871-72) there is a sea-change in Whitman's mood because the poem reflects the buoyant optimism and exuberance of the post Civil War period. The dark forebodings of the Civil War are left far behind and the poet becomes a kind of bard, that is a singer who sings and celebrates the glory and exuberance of the New World. In the confident tone of an epic poet or a bard Whitman celebrates the opening of the Suez Canal, the completion of the Pacific Railroad linking the length and breadth of North America, and the laying down of cables across the Atlantic ocean, leading to a strong link between Europe and North America. The growth of modern science and technology has reduced the barriers of space and time and lead to the growth of a strong, cohesive and interdependent world. Whitman is also able to see the link between the past and the present. In first section of "*Passage to India*" the bard of American democracy asks in a rhetorical mode, "For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?" (line 13). As the poem is unfolded, one can see a kind of Hegelian dialectics operating. If the past is the thesis, the present is the antithesis and the future, visualized in such an ecstatic mood, is the synthesis of the thesis and the antithesis.

"*Passage to India*" is used as a refrain in section three and four of the poem and reminds us of the new frontier that has to be reached in the New World based on science and technology. In section two of the poem, the refrain has been slightly expanded in this manner "Passage O Soul to India" (line 16). In Section ten of the poem the refrain has been expanded still more, "Passage indeed O soul to primal thought," (line 165). In the last section of "*Passage to India*", the refrain has been repeated twice in a modified form, "*Passage to more than India*" That is, India is not the last, formidable frontier. Once India is assimilated and her ancient wisdom and lore is absorbed, there would be other frontiers to reach and conquer. Once globalization is achieved, the next movement would be into vast space. The bard is

able to visualize the new frontier beyond India in these memorable lines, "O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter! Passage to you?" (lines 241-42).

The word "Passage" is repeated again and again in the last section of the poem and Whitman gives us a feeling that life is a perpetual journey. One cannot rest on one's laurels in the struggle of life. One has to go on and on. The lure of life as an adventure, as a perpetual journey, is also enhanced by the image of Christopher Columbus who is vividly presented as an explorer, as a tireless seeker of the New World. The unknown is symbolized in the last section of the poem through a memorable line, "Sail forth? steer for the deep waters only" (line 249). It is through the phrase "deep waters" that the distant, and the unknown is signified. There is a kind of bare simplicity and grandeur in the language and imagery used by Walt Whitman in "*Passage to India*." There is no wonder that Whitman regarded the poem as the best expression of his restless self. To sum up, Whitman is not only a bard of American democracy but a bard of the world as an interdependent entity. That is, as a global village in which science and technology of the West would be fused and synthesized with the wisdom and lore of the East.

4.3 THEME AND IMAGERY IN EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson's focus is on the plight of a single woman in nineteenth century New England. There is no wonder that solitude, grief, death and redemption figure prominently in her poems. We have already told you that her poems are fragments and could also be considered her letters to the world. In other words, they are in a confessional mode and give us a chance to peep into the drama of her soul. In her poem 303, she has used the image of the door to convey an idea of her solitude. The protagonist shuts the door firmly and doesn't allow outsiders and intruders to disturb her privacy. The protagonist becomes an introvert and deliberately excludes from her attention the external world of hurry, bustle and noise. The firmness of the protagonist's introversion is conveyed by the simile "Like stone" (line 12). It is clear that Emily Dickinson can make use of ordinary, common place objects like "door" and "stone" in order to intensify the meaning. In 373, the poet has used the image of a "Bourbon" to convey the idea of her being far from a beggar. There is something regal, something queenly about her. Emily Dickinson has also used the image of the "Bee" and the "Cricket" in order to signify the resonance of her voice. In other words, the protagonist's royal status is not due to her birth but due to her unique voice. She could cultivate it due to her solitude and isolation from ordinary life.

In 430, Emily Dickinson lays stress on her difference from ordinary men and women. She has also used the image of "wings" and "boots" to convey her singularity. She has been walking as if wings propelled her frame. She also affirms that boots would be useless to her as they are to birds (lines 13-16). Once again one can notice the poet's capacity to use plain words in order to intensify her meaning. There is a touch of a fairy tale when the poet uses the image of a "Goblin" in order to convey her transformation into a beggar. Towards the end of the poem, Emily Dickinson uses the binary contrast of the "Sackcloth" and "Brocade" in order to convey the gap between reality and dream. While the coarse material of the sackcloth indicates the protagonist's actual humdrum status, the fine material of the India-made brocade is only a figment of the protagonist's imagination. In other words, the protagonist is in a miserable state of mind. Emily Dickinson has again visualized the various faces of grief in 561. She has used the image of a lamp that has "so little oil" and gives out a faint light to illumine darkness. She has also used the image of "nails" in order to convey the idea of death's irrevocability, that is absolute finality. Once death comes, eyes are nailed (line 28).

712 is one of the most memorable poem written by Emily Dickinson. It is an unforgettable picture of her encounter with death. While death is portrayed as a civil

and mild companion, the sheer horror of death is signified by the phrase "gazing grain" (line 11). Grain could be taken as a symbol of life and fertility but "gazing" conveys the stillness and fixity of eyes after death. The juxtaposition of "gazing" and "grain" seems to signify trenchantly the awesome fact of death encompassing life. There is also the presence of an extended bridal image in the poem in lines (15-16). It makes the poem so authentic and gripping.

751 is another remarkable poem of Emily Dickinson in which she has used the image of "a loaded gun" in order to describe the awesome potential of the protagonist. This poem has described the protagonist's adventure and togetherness with her Master. The protagonist's boundless joy and ecstasy has been signified by the phrase "a Vesuvian face" (line 10). It is a most original image and conveys most appropriately the protagonist's ecstasy in the company of her Master. At the end of the poem the protagonist has a realization that she can kill the enemy and guard her Master but she is still not ready to die, that is to accept death as the culmination of life. It is true that the protagonist has "an emphatic Thumb", that is she can release the trigger of the gun firmly and kill the intruder but she is still not ready to accept death. "The loaded gun" is both literal and metaphorical and signifies the protagonist's awesome potential of growth and fulfillment. In the absence of a willingness to accept death as the culmination of life, the protagonist's fulfillment is likely to be partial and incomplete. In other words, 751 is both a celebration of the protagonist's fierce loyalty to her Master and also a critique of her partial fulfillment.

Emily Dickinson's 1737 is a stern critique of the plight of a wife in mid-nineteenth century New England. She has used the strong word "amputate" in order to convey the mutilation of a young woman's natural impulses. The word "freckled" signifies the spots and natural weaknesses that a young woman is likely to have. The grotesque image of "bearded like a man!" shows the unnatural state in which a young woman finds herself. She ceases to be a natural graceful young woman. "Wifhood" has been pictured as a state in which a young woman's mind ceases to grow. The word "bandaged" is used by the poet to convey the wounded sensibility of a single woman. In other words, neither a married woman nor a single woman is able to attain fulfillment and maturity in New England. Emily Dickinson has used the word "thorns" in order to convey the miserable plight of a single woman, and used the image of "my Diadem" (line 16), in order to convey the remote possibility of attaining fulfillment after death. The word "Sunset" is perhaps a signifier of death. There is no wonder that the protagonist's preoccupation with death is almost unending. Without death, there cannot be any fulfillment. That seems to be the core of Emily Dickinson's confrontation with life.

4.4 FREE VERSE IN WALT WHITMAN AND EMILY DICKINSON

Free verse (verse libre), poetry without a fixed metrical pattern, having a loosely organized rhythm. "(The Oxford Companion to American Literature, James D. Hart, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.295). It is clear that free verse can be understood largely in terms of what it doesn't possess. There is an absence of a regular metre and rhyme. Since the constraint of metre and rhyme is not there, free verse is supposed to give an opportunity to the poet to express his ideas, feelings and responses with utmost freedom. T.S. Eliot has also tried to define free verse in terms of three negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhythm, (3) absence of metre. (Selected Prose, Penguin Books in association with Faber and Faber, 1953). One has, however, to go beyond the negations in order to have some idea of what free verse actually possesses and in what way it differs from prose which also is marked by an absence of metrical pattern and rhythm.

As far as Walt Whitman is concerned, free verse does not have any traditional metre and rhyme. He makes use of prose that has both literary words and slang juxtaposed and gives the flavour of living American speech. In Whitman, there is something grand and epic about free verse. Sentences follow sentences and they are linked by syntactic devices. In a poem like "Passage of India" Whitman has also made a skillful use of refrains and glowing images. Through repetition of certain key words and refrains the poet is able to give a lilt and resonance to his verse. In other words, free verse, as used by Whitman, has its own rhythm, loosely knit, yet rhythm all the same. It is the pressure of ideas, feelings and emotional responses that give a kind of shape and urge to Whitman's free verse. Where this kind of pressure is not built up Whitman's free verse becomes flat and prosaic. He is as uneven a poet as Wordsworth was in England. The difference between his best and his worst verse is enormous.

As compared to Whitman's free verse, the free verse of Emily Dickinson is condensed and packed with images. She also uses pauses, indicated by the liberal use of dashes, in order to convey the subtle changes of her thought and feelings. While Whitman wants to absorb the whole world into his free-flowing verse, Emily Dickinson wants to portray the drama of her soul in all its minuteness and specificity. While Whitman uses the hammer like a blacksmith, Emily Dickinson uses the knife with the precision and deftness of a surgeon. That is free verse, emancipated from traditional metrical patterns, is developed by Whitman and Emily Dickinson in their own unique mode. If free verse has the strength of an epic in the hands of Whitman, in the hands of Emily Dickinson it has the exquisite fineness of a miniature painting. While Whitman's free verse has vigour, Emily Dickinson's free verse has precision.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

Whitman's major poems are a reflection of the cracks in the edifice of American Republic due to the Civil War (1861-65) which intensified the North-South divide. In his own way, he wanted to heal the wound of the Civil War.

In other words, Whitman's endeavour was to strengthen the bond between man and man, man and woman and man and nature. At its best, his poems have something of the epic and are concerned with the making of a nation.

Emily Dickinson's poems are minute dissection and exquisite portrayal of the plight of a single woman in New England. Death is one of the major preoccupation of her poetry. Acceptance of death is, perhaps, the core of her vision.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. "Song of Myself" is more than a simple song. It is an I-you dialogue. Discuss.
2. The theme of human brotherhood in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is predominant." Do you agree?
3. Abraham Lincoln is never explicitly mentioned in "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed" yet his martyrdom is celebrated by the poet. Could you tell us why?
4. "Passage to India" is a poem that celebrates globalization and space exploration. Do you agree?
5. What is the difference between the free verse of Walt Whitman and the free verse of Emily Dickinson?

6. Examine the charge of immorality against the poetry of Walt Whitman.
7. Do you think there was a Feminist voice of dissent in Emily Dickinson's poems?

**Structure and
Style**

4.7 SUGGESTED READING

1. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* by James D. Hart (New York, Oxford University Press, 1965).
2. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* edited by John Hayward (Penguin Books, in Association with Faber and Faber, 1953).
3. *Whitman* edited by Roy Harrey Pearce (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Engle Wood Cliffs, N.J. 1962).

UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Walt Whitman
- 5.3 Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Emily Dickinson
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 A Select Bibliography

5.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the shifting critical response to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson from the nineteenth century to the contemporary time.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

We have already told you that Emerson had greeted the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. In spite of his reservations about the erotic in Walt Whitman, Emerson felt that the first great American poet had arrived on the somewhat dreary literary scene. But on the whole, the literary establishment was too conservative to respond adequately to Whitman's radical, subversive poetry. It was, however, in the twentieth century that critics like F.O. Matthiessen, R.W.B. Lewis and Charles Feidelson could accept Walt Whitman's radicalism and also appreciate the American idiom in all its particularity. It was F.O. Matthiessen who pointed out that *Leaves of Grass* was primarily a language experiment. It has been the singular achievement of contemporary critics who could relate Walt Whitman's radical text to the tumultuous time of the Civil War in America. The foremost critics of the contemporary age like Betsy Erkilli in *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), David S. Reynolds in *Walt Whitman's America* (1996) and Martin Klammer in *Whitman, Slavery, And The Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995) have recreated for us the relevance of Whitman's poetry both for his time and also for our time.

As far as Emily Dickinson is concerned only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. Even her literary mentor like Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt that her poems were too fragile and delicate to be published in *The Atlantic*. Emerson felt that the lady wrote as if she was suffering from some kind of fever. It was, however, the publication of the Harvard edition of Emily Dickinson's poems in (1955) that brought her poems in limelight. Conrad Aiken described her as the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism. Allen Tate felt that Emily Dickinson's poems are so different from conventional poems popular in her time. That is why he felt that her poems are not widely read. Ivor Winters was of the view that Emily Dickinson was a product of New England Puritanism and also its staunch critic. It is, however, the singular achievement of contemporary critics like Donna Dickinson in *Emily Dickinson* (1985) and Helen McNeil in *Emily Dickinson* (1986) to bring out the contemporary relevance of Emily Dickinson's unconventional, dash-laden, trenchant poems. They are a mirror of a woman who realized intensely the miserable plight of a single woman who wanted to live a full and vigorous life of unhindered creativity. In other words, Emily Dickinson's poems are radical and subversive in their own way. One can safely say that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are two of the most authentic voices of nineteenth century American poetry.

UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Walt Whitman
- 5.3 Nineteenth Century, Modern and Contemporary response to Emily Dickinson
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 A Select Bibliography

5.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to give you an idea of the shifting critical response to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson from the nineteenth century to the contemporary time.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

We have already told you that Emerson had greeted the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. In spite of his reservations about the erotic in Walt Whitman, Emerson felt that the first great American poet had arrived on the somewhat dreary literary scene. But on the whole, the literary establishment was too conservative to respond adequately to Whitman's radical, subversive poetry. It was, however, in the twentieth century that critics like F.O. Matthiessen, R.W.B. Lewis and Charles Feidelson could accept Walt Whitman's radicalism and also appreciate the American idiom in all its particularity. It was F.O. Matthiessen who pointed out that *Leaves of Grass* was primarily a language experiment. It has been the singular achievement of contemporary critics who could relate Walt Whitman's radical text to the tumultuous time of the Civil War in America. The foremost critics of the contemporary age like Betsy Erkilli in *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), David S. Reynolds in *Walt Whitman's America* (1996) and Martin Klammer in *Whitman, Slavery, And The Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995) have recreated for us the relevance of Whitman's poetry both for his time and also for our time.

As far as Emily Dickinson is concerned only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. Even her literary mentor like Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt that her poems were too fragile and delicate to be published in *The Atlantic*. Emerson felt that the lady wrote as if she was suffering from some kind of fever. It was, however, the publication of the Harvard edition of Emily Dickinson's poems in (1955) that brought her poems in limelight. Conrad Aiken described her as the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism. Allen Tate felt that Emily Dickinson's poems are so different from conventional poems popular in her time. That is why he felt that her poems are not widely read. Ivor Winters was of the view that Emily Dickinson was a product of New England Puritanism and also its staunch critic. It is, however, the singular achievement of contemporary critics like Donna Dickinson in *Emily Dickinson* (1985) and Helen McNeil in *Emily Dickinson* (1986) to bring out the contemporary relevance of Emily Dickinson's unconventional, dash-laden, trenchant poems. They are a mirror of a woman who realized intensely the miserable plight of a single woman who wanted to live a full and vigorous life of unhindered creativity. In other words, Emily Dickinson's poems are radical and subversive in their own way. One can safely say that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are two of the most authentic voices of nineteenth century American poetry.

5.2 NINETEENTH CENTURY, MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE TO WALT WHITMAN

Alan Shucard has made a pointed reference to the detractors of Walt Whitman in *American Poetry* (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1988) in the seventh chapter of the book. There was an anonymous reviewer in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* of 1st January 1860. He was of the view, "He has undertaken to be an artist without learning the first principle of art, and has presumed to put forth 'poems' without possessing a spark of the poetic faculty" (p.176). Even an accomplished critic like Mathew Arnold said in a letter to W.D.D. Connor, "While you think it is . . . [Whitman's] highest merit that he is so unlike anyone else, to me this seems to be his demerit" (*ibid*, p.176). While we are today attracted by the originality of Walt Whitman's diction and syntax, a critic like Mathew Arnold, steeped in the classical tradition, found Walt Whitman's originality unacceptable. Another reviewer in the *London Critic* of 1 April, 1856 was of the view, Walt Whitman is as unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics. His poems—"we must call them so for convenience-- . . . resemble nothing so much as the war-cry of the Red Indians" (*ibid*, p.176). There were also some reviewers who were not so hostile. A reviewer in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* of 29 September, 1855 described Walt Whitman as "A rude child of the people!—no imitation—no foreigner—but a growth and idiom of America" (*ibid*, p.177).

The critics of the Transcendentalist school were far more perceptive in their response to Walt Whitman than the critics who belonged to the establishment. For example – Thoreau wrote in a letter to his friend Harrison Blake, "Though rude and sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem—an alarm or trumpet note ringing through the American camp. Wonderfully like the Orientals, too, considering that when I asked him if he had read them, he answered, 'No: tell me about them'" (*ibid*, p.177). One can also refer to Emerson's letter to Walt Whitman, "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I find incomparable things said incomparable well, as they must be . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start" (*ibid*, p.177). There is no wonder that there is something of the Transcendentalist's faith in the divinity of man in Walt Whitman's poetry. By and large, American critics have been preoccupied with the stress on the individual and individualism in Walt Whitman's poetry.

In the twentieth century Walt Whitman became the focus of a lively debate between the William Carlos William School of Critics and the T.S. Eliot School of Critics. While the former were rooted in the specific nature of the American locale and reality, the latter went abroad physically and intellectually like Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Among the former, mention can be made of Vernon Parrington who lauded Walt Whitman as a heroic democrat, and "a great figure, the greatest assuredly in our literature" (*Whitman: The Political Poet*, p.8). F.O. Matthiessen laid stress on the linguistic resourcefulness of Walt Whitman along with an appreciation of his radicalism as a Christian socialist (*ibid*, p.8-9). In *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (1955), Richard Chase considered Walt Whitman as a comic, albeit neurotic genius, and a master of New Critical wit and irony (*ibid*, p.9). R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955) laid stress on the new Adam that figures so prominently in Walt Whitman's poetry. The expatriates like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, however, found Walt Whitman's poetry too political and radical for their literary taste. Ezra Pound, in particulars found Walt Whitman to be "a pig-headed father" (*ibid*, p.8).

It has been the singular achievement of contemporary critics like Joseph J. Rubin in *The Historic Whitman* (1973), Betsy Erkill's *Whitman: the Political Poet*, and David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1996) that Walt Whitman's radical poetry has been evaluated in the context of the *Civil War* and the cracks in the American Republic. It has also been pinpointed that Walt Whitman's explicitly political poems degenerate into journalistic propaganda but his authentic radicalism is best expressed in his most personal poems like *Song of Myself*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and *A Passage to India*. One can, however, still find the largely psychological and transcendental approach in Paul Zweig's *Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (1984) and David Cavitch's *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman* (1985).

5.3 NINETEENTH CENTURY, MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY RESPONSE TO EMILY DICKINSON

Nineteenth century response to Emily Dickinson's poems showed a kind of inability to comprehend the hard core of her poetry. Her literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson felt that her poems were too delicate and, perhaps, fragile and formless to be published in a popular journal like the *Atlantic*. A literary master like Emerson was of the view, "A Miss Dickinson (sic) writes verses as if threatened with fevers... The few pieces of hers that I have before me are . . . heavy with religious sentiment," (*Emily Dickinson* by Donna Dickenson, 1985, p.40). In other words, Emerson regarded Emily Dickinson as a New England Puritan steeped in the orthodoxy of sin and redemption. There is no wonder that Emily Dickinson remained practically unknown and unappreciated in the nineteenth century.

It was in 1890 that *Poems by Emily Dickinson* was published by Robert Brothers of Boston. This slender volume was followed in 1891 by one hundred sixty six poems under the title *Poems, Second Series*. These poems were read by discerning readers. In 1896, Mrs. Todd edited *Poems, Third Series*. It was, as we have told you earlier, the publication of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), that history was made and all the poems of Emily Dickinson were made available to the readers whose number kept on growing. Apart from the intensity of vision that is found in her poems, including a preoccupation with death and immortality, attention of the critics was also caught by her wit, precision of language and Emerson-like use of epigrams and irony. In other words, Emily Dickinson was a far more complicated modern poet rather than a dogmatic Puritan. The description of Emily Dickinson as a New England nun doesn't do justice to her complexity as a modern American poet. Among the modern critics, however, the stress continued to be on the religious and metaphysical dimension of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Conrad Aiken regarded her as a singular mixture of Puritan and free thinker. The problems of good and evil, of life and death, immortality and transcendence, however, continued to preoccupy her mind. Allen Tate pointed out that Emily Dickinson's poetry is bristling with ideas and the ideas revolve round heaven and hell, sin and redemption. In other words, she is steeped in Puritan dogma of sin and redemption as a result of God's grace. Allen Tate also felt that in the history of Puritanism, Emily Dickinson came between Hawthorne and Emerson. Ivor Winters was of the opinion that Emily Dickinson not only affirmed New England Puritanism but also questioned and discarded much of its theology. Some critics are, however, of the view that questions are far more important in Emily Dickinson's poetry than final answers. The quest is far more important than the destination.

We have already told you that the contemporary critics like Donna Dickenson in *Emily Dickinson* (1985), Helen McNeil in *Emily Dickinson* (1986) and Jane Donahue Eberwein in *Strategies of Limitations* (1985) have attempted to look upon Emily

Dickinson's poetry from a fresh perspective. They regard her poems as the mirror of a single woman who wanted to live a life of free creativity and bold exploration of the female psyche. The pain that figures so prominently in Emily Dickinson's tough and provocative poems is not an abstraction. It is the concrete experience of a woman, a single woman who was resolutely constricted by the conventions of New England's male-dominated patriarchy. One could end this brief note with a quotation from Helen McNeil, "I am acutely conscious that recent criticism, including mine, has only barely begun to understand the breadth of Dickinson's accomplishment" (*Emily Dickinson*, p.XI).

5.4 LET US SUM UP

Walt Whitman was a poet who was partially understood by the critics of his own time. Emerson greeted him warmly but he had strong reservations about his eroticism. Thoreau regarded him as something of a beast.

While the modern critics laid emphasis on Walt Whitman's free verse and transcendentalism, the contemporary critics regard him largely as the healer of the wounds of the Civil War. They also pinpoint the presence of slang and street culture in Walt Whitman's radical, subversive poetry.

The modern critics of Emily Dickinson laid stress on her preoccupation with New England Puritanism but the contemporary critics look upon her poetry from a feminist perspective. They remind us that Emily Dickinson was a single woman hemmed in by the conventions of patriarchy in New England. Far from submitting to patriarchy, she subverted it trenchantly.

5.5 GLOSSARY

Eclaire:	make bright, illumine
Rondure:	globe moving in space
Sirius:	the brightest star in the sky
Jupiter:	fifth largest planet from the sun
Trinitas:	three parts or aspects

5.5 A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*, (New York, Basic Books, 1984).
2. Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1980).
3. Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*, (New York, Macmillan, 1955).
4. Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, And The Emergence of Leaves of Grass*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1995).
5. William E. Barton, *Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman*, (Kennitat Press, Port Washington, New York, 1965).
6. A. Robert Lee (editor), *Nineteenth Century American Poetry*, (Vision and Barnes Noble, 1987).
7. S. Musgrove, *T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman*, (Haskell House Publishers Ltd., New Work, N.Y., 1970).

8. Alan Shucard, *American Poetry*, (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1988).
9. David S. Reynolds, *Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996).
10. Roy Harvey Pearce (editor), *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Prentice-Hall, Inc.), Englewood Cliffs, N.I. 1962).
11. Helen McNeil, *Emily Dickinson*, (Virago, Pantheon, Pioneers, New York, 1986).
12. Donna Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson*, (Berg, Leamington spa/Dover, NH/Heidelberg, 1985).
13. Jane Donahue Ebrewein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*, (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1985).
14. Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
15. Betsky Erkill, *Whitman: The Political Poet*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989).
16. Richard B. Sewall (editor), *Emily Dickinson*, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1963).
17. Thomas A. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, (Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).
18. *The Walt Whitman Reader: Selections from Leaves of Grass*, (Courage Books an imprint of Running Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1997).