

Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,—
The lightning and the gale!

HERMAN MELVILLE (1819–1891)

Melville only began to write poetry seriously in the 1860s, well after the publication of his more famous novels, including *Moby-Dick* (1851). Neglected for many years, his poems on the Civil War are now thought to rival those of his contemporary, Walt Whitman.

Misgivings
(1860)

When ocean-clouds over inland hills
Sweep storming in late autumn brown,
And horror the sodden valley fills,
And the spire falls crashing in the town,
I muse upon my country's ills—
The tempest bursting from the waste of Time
On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime.
Nature's dark side is heeded now—
(Ah! optimist-cheer disheartened frown)—
A child may read the moody brow
Of yon black mountain lone.
With shouts the torrents down the gorges go,
And storms are formed behind the storm we feel:
The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

Writing in long, loose lines and a self-described "barbaric yawp," Whitman introduced to American poetry a democratic, all-encompassing vision and a freedom of style that liberated the form from its traditional constraints.

I Hear America Singing

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he
stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of
the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

I Sit and Look Out

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all op-
pression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with them-
selves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected,
gaunt, desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of
young women,
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be
hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs and pris-
oners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be
kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon la-
borers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;
All these—all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out
upon,
See, hear, and am silent.

Miracles

Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,

Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
 Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
 Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the
 water,
 Or stand under trees in the woods,
 Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night with
 any one I love,
 Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
 Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
 Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
 Or animals feeding in the fields,
 Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
 Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so quiet and
 bright,
 Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in spring;
 These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
 The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.
 To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
 Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
 Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
 Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.
 To me the sea is a continual miracle,
 The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—the ships
 with men in them,
 What stranger miracles are there?

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
 I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
 Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
 It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
 Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
 And you O my soul where you stand,
 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to con-
 nect them,
 Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

O Captain! My Captain!

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
 The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
 The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
 While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
 Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
 For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
 For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!
 This arm beneath your head!
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
 My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
 The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
 From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
 Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
 But I with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

From 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.

*The first and last stanzas of "Song of Myself" are excerpted here.

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 par-
ents 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.

* * *

52

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab
and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and mea-
sure them,

When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much ap-
plause in the lecture-room,

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

FRANCES E. W. HARPER (1825–1911)

A prolific author in almost every literary genre, Frances Harper used her writing as a vehicle for advocating racial equality (she was herself the daughter of freed slaves) and women's rights.

Bury Me in a Free Land

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill,
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave:
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not sleep if I saw the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast,
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start if I heard the bay
Of blood-hounds seizing their human prey,
And I heard the captive plead in vain
As they bound afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
 Can rob no man of his dearest right;
 My rest shall be calm in any grave
 Where none can call his brother a slave.

I ask no monument, proud and high,
 To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
 All that my yearning spirit craves,
 Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

Songs for the People

Let me make the songs for the people,
 Songs for the old and young;
 Songs to stir like a battle-cry
 Wherever they are sung.

Not for the clashing of sabres,
 For carnage nor for strife;
 But songs to thrill the hearts of men
 With more abundant life.

Let me make the songs for the weary,
 Amid life's fever and fret,
 Till hearts shall relax their tension,
 And careworn brows forget.

Let me sing for little children,
 Before their footsteps stray,
 Sweet anthems of love and duty,
 To float o'er life's highway.

I would sing for the poor and aged,
 When shadows dim their sight;
 Of the bright and restful mansions,
 Where there shall be no night.

Our world, so worn and weary,
 Needs music, pure and strong,
 To hush the jangle and discords
 Of sorrow, pain, and wrong.

Music to soothe all its sorrow,
 Till war and crime shall cease;

And the hearts of men grown tender
 Girdle the world with peace.

EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

A near-recluse for most of her life, Emily Dickinson was highly imaginative in her use of language and syntax, and concentrated on such themes as death, loss, and beauty with a disarming casualness. Though Dickinson is today regarded as one of America's greatest poets, fewer than ten of her poems were published during her lifetime.

'Because I could not stop for Death'

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

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

We passed the school where children played,
 Their lessons scarcely done;
 We passed the fields of gazing grain,
 We passed the setting sun.

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

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

'Death sets a thing significant'

Death sets a thing significant
 The eye had hurried by,

Except a perished creature
Entreat us tenderly

To ponder little workmanships
In crayon or in wool,
With "This was last her fingers did,"
Industrious until

The thimble weighed too heavy,
The stitches stopped themselves,
And then 't was put among the dust
Upon the closet shelves.

A book I have, a friend gave,
Whose pencil, here and there,
Had notched the place that pleased him, —
At rest his fingers are.

Now, when I read, I read not,
For interrupting tears
Obliterate the etchings
Too costly for repairs.

'Hope is the thing with feathers'

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

'I died for beauty'

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,

When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
"For beauty," I replied.
"And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

'If I can stop one heart from breaking'

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

'I'm nobody! Who are you?'

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

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

'My life closed twice before its close'

My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me,

So huge, so hopeless to conceive,
 As these that twice befell.
 Parting is all we know of heaven,
 And all we need of hell.

'Success is counted sweetest'

Success is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
 Who took the flag today
 Can tell the definition,
 So clear, of victory

As he, defeated, dying,
 On whose forbidden ear
 The distant strains of triumph
 Break, agonized and clear.

'There is no frigate like a book'

There is no frigate like a book
 To take us lands away,
 Nor any coursers like a page
 Of prancing poetry.
 This traverse may the poorest take
 Without oppress of toll;
 How frugal is the chariot
 That bears a human soul!

'This is my letter to the world'

This is my letter to the world,
 That never wrote to me,—
 The simple news that Nature told,
 With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
 To hands I cannot see;
 For love of her, sweet countrymen,
 Judge tenderly of me!

EMMA LAZARUS (1849–1887)

A poet, philanthropist, and advocate of Jewish causes, Emma Lazarus wrote "The New Colossus" to support the building of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. The poem's closing lines are now inscribed on that monument's base.

The New Colossus

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

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX (1850–1919)

A prolific author throughout her life, Ella Wilcox wrote her first novel at the age of nine. Her sentimental and passionate verse was published in newspapers and magazines throughout America, garnering a readership almost unequalled in her time.

Solitude

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
 Weep, and you weep alone.
 For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
 But has trouble enough of its own.
 Sing, and the hills will answer;
 Sigh, it is lost on the air.
 The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
 But shrink from voicing care.
 Rejoice, and men will seek you;
 Grieve, and they turn and go.
 They want full measure of all your pleasure,