

# The Library of America Millennium Project for Public Libraries

## **From Sonnet to Song Lyric:** The Forms of American Poetry from Longfellow, Whitman, and Dickinson to W.C. Handy and Woody Guthrie

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*American poetry comes in many shapes and sizes. It draws on immigrant memories of poetry and song from England, Africa, indeed the world's many nations. And it shows the energy of new encounters and possibilities. The result is poetry of astonishing diversity, both in content and in form. American poets have sung about everything from battlefields to baseball, broken faith to the Brooklyn Ferry. Each poet's decisions about form—whether to rhyme or not, how many lines to use, how plain or fancy the language, which traditions to echo, even how the poem looks on a page or sounds sung aloud—add meaning to that particular story.*

Traditional poetic form reached great heights under the pen of **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (1807-1882), whose lyrics were committed to memory by generations of American students. Longfellow spent his young adulthood abroad, studying European literatures and translating the poetry of Dante, Goethe, and other old world masters. The experience proved an important literary apprenticeship. Longfellow began to write in a range of verse styles, coaxing American English into forms developed in other languages. His memorable poem "The Cross of Snow" takes the form of an Italian sonnet, the same form used by Petrarch and Dante in Italian and by

Milton and Wordsworth in English. The sonnet calls for fourteen lines of ten syllables each; the lines can be divided into two quatrains (four lines each) and a final sestet (six lines). Rhyme helps link each section, following the pattern a-b-b-a (in which the first and fourth lines rhyme, as do the second and third), a-b-b-a, c-d-e, c-d-e. Often the two quatrains set out a problem, which the final sestet resolves.

"The Cross of Snow" follows this strict meter and rhyme scheme while allowing Longfellow to tell a story of private grief. In fact, the poem was so personal that Longfellow chose not to publish it during his lifetime. It was written nearly two decades after Frances Appleton, his second wife of eighteen years, died in an accidental fire at the couple's home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Notice that the poem's words are at turns ordinary ("night," "face," "wall," "night-lamp") and sacred ("halo," "soul," "martyrdom," "benedict"). That is, they match their subject, a "gentle" woman turned "martyr" through her death by fire. The ninth line is surprising—"There is a mountain in the distant West"—since it seems a sudden break in theme as well as rhyme. But this sort of surprise is a faithful adaptation of the sonnet's structure. At the beginning of the closing sestet, the poet introduces a new, unexpected image from the natural world

("a cross of snow"), which he soon links to the religious imagery in the first half of the sonnet and to his memories of his beloved. The opening quatrains about the lost beloved find resolution in the closing sestet about the grieving poet; the theme of constancy moves from her (her haloed picture on the wall) to him (the cross upon his heart, "changeless since the day she died"). Longfellow's many books of verse inspired other American poets to study European forms, and their rhyming cadences echoed throughout the nineteenth century in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and others.

In the same century, however, some American poets wrote in forms barely recognized as poetry. Imagine the shock at **Walt Whitman**'s (1817-1892) first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Here were rambling verses with no obvious meter or rhyme scheme. In place of dignified poetic language, Whitman used words like "crotch" and "belched." He didn't title individual poems, though he would in later editions. And he wrote directly to a "you"—perhaps the reader, or a companion, or even the kind of muse that epic poets like Homer and Milton had addressed far more deferentially. Despite his break with respected literary tradition, Whitman dared to suggest his own importance, announcing in a preface that

"Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest." He offered his own long, evolving poem (which he would revise and expand seven times over the course of his life) as an "original, practical example" of poetry for a new nation.

The theme of freedom runs through the form of *Leaves of Grass* as well as through its words and images. Rhyme is unpredictable. Lines vary in length and rhythm. The poet continually changes his tone, so that he is sometimes conversational, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes even a bit pedantic. He urges "you" to follow him right past "shelves ... crowded with perfumes"—one way of describing the books of traditional poetry that had tutored Longfellow and his heirs in regular rhyme and meter. Whitman worked to let his poem find its own natural shape, mirroring the contours and possibilities of the young United States. Still, the opening lines of *Leaves of Grass* suggest careful attention to form. Notice how certain words repeat, even rhyme, pulling a reader forward. Rhythms and phrases repeat, too, creating sections and lists that are more organized than conversation would be. Even punctuation gives the poem a distinct look, with its open ellipses (...) and capitalized first lines. Whitman did not reject form so

much as invent one appropriate to the subject at hand—in his case, the growing United States.

**Emily Dickinson** (1830-1886) was more faithful to traditional forms, but she did put the strict meter of hymn stanzas to new uses. Dickinson most frequently used an eight-syllable line with four stresses, followed by a six-beat line with three stresses—the same rhythm she found in her household hymn book. This time-tested English form lent itself readily to pious verses such as “Amazing Grace” as well as more folksy, popular ballads (just try singing any Dickinson poem to “The Yellow Rose of Texas” or even “The Theme to Gilligan’s Island”). But Dickinson found new room for spiritual doubt and linguistic play in the form.

Consider “There came a Wind like a Bugle—.” A bugle announces a storm, or maybe something more sinister. What does the “it” in the second line refer to? It might be the wind, and it might be a serpent—“Doom’s electric Moccasin.” Either way, evil is afoot. Trees “pant” and a bell tolls “Doom”; the world beyond Dickinson’s windows and doors rattles with a storm. Instead of blind faith or folk wisdom, the poet balances both doubt and wonder at the survival of evil—and “We”—in this world. But despite its simple form, the poem isn’t easy to read. Notice the

various elements that make Dickinson’s poetry a challenge for the reader, such as her punctuation. Instead of commas and periods, Dickinson used dashes, so that a reader isn’t certain when to pause and when to stop, or whether the poet is suggesting further meanings at the end of a line. Her capitalization invites further thought, too, as does the odd syntax of her sentences. Perhaps Dickinson chose to write demanding poetry in order to separate her verses from the simple hymns they echoed, or even to suggest the difficulty of faith itself. The difficulty in form mirrors the poem’s content; Dickinson invites a reader to contemplate her lines of poetry just as she puzzles over the “flying tidings” through her window.

Some forms with lasting influence on American poetry derive from folk traditions with distant origins. Often they were not intentionally crafted as poetry. **Slaves on southern plantations**, for instance, chanted patterns of call and response to relieve their monotonous labor in cotton and rice fields. Their evolving songs, versions of which spread across the country as folk songs, carried the complex rhythms and improvisations of Western Africa. The songs must have seemed both haunting and inviting to participants. Notice how “I Know Moon-Rise” allows a listener to join in every

other line, even as the story progresses. The regular beat might help a group work together, but it has a somber cadence, in keeping with the lyrics. Like many American poems, "I Know Moon-Rise" suggests at least two traditions brought together. Images of a "soul" and a "judgment day" recall the Bible. But there is another source of wisdom, what the singer "knows," including "moon-rise," "star-rise," and something about the day when "my soul and your soul will meet." This knowledge comes from nature, and labor, and African traditions unfamiliar to most nineteenth-century white listeners. The final lines can be taken as either hopeful or threatening, since the day when "my soul" and "your soul" meet could be one of harmony or of retribution. How one interprets the poem depends upon the listener's perspective.

Twentieth-century American poets continued to experiment and innovate, while drawing on such rich native sources as Whitman, Dickinson, and slave songs. In 1912, Memphis bandleader **W.C. Handy** (1873-1958) became the first to publish a three-line pattern he called the "blues." Handy's compositions began with a sorrowful first line that repeated in the second line—echoing the call-and-response patterns he might have heard from former slaves in the Mississippi Delta. A new third line usually rhymed,

moving the story forward and offering a surprise or a laugh. The beat is regular enough to allow musicians to follow along even if the singer improvised or dropped in an occasional long line or joke. (Indeed, musicians often contributed their own melodic "response" to the singer's call.) The repeated rhythms invited listeners to sway, to laugh, even to dance—a different sort of participation than that encouraged by work songs. Blues interpreters like Handy, Bukka White, and Bessie Smith contrasted tales of hard times with exuberant, life-affirming rhymes. Their fresh takes on folk wisdom carried forward Whitman's charge to sing the poetry of our own shores, inventing new forms when old ones wouldn't do.

**Woody Guthrie** (1912-1967) also used music to lift his poetry into the popular imagination. Like Dickinson, Guthrie often used straightforward hymn-meter to tell complex stories. He even sang, like her, of a storm beyond his window in "Dust Storm Disaster." Note how the meter and rhyme of the 1960 song match those of Dickinson's "There came a Wind like a Bugle—." In Guthrie's song, the perspective zooms in from clouds to individual states to "our city," then finally to a huddled family peering through a window at "doom"—Dickinson's perspective on "Doom," too. In "Talking Dust Bowl," the poet/singer's "I" also

recalls a wry Whitman, dreaming of egalitarianism and describing the broad sweep of America in almost-ordinary talk. Of course, Guthrie's regular rhythm and rhyme reveal his careful attention to form. Guthrie borrowed from the blues, too, wringing a laugh and a rhyme out of the common man's travails. He took what he liked from a rich inheritance of high-minded poems and popular songs, always ready to break form to insert a rambling joke or an openly political message, and showed once again the American poet's ability to cobble diverse traditions into something wholly new.

### Suggested Poems and Excerpts:

From Sonnet to Song Lyric:

The Forms of American Poetry from Longfellow, Whitman,  
and Dickinson to W.C. Handy and Woody Guthrie

1. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Cross of Snow"  
*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century. Volume I: Freneau to Whitman*  
page 441
2. Walt Whitman, first 24 lines to 1855 *Leaves of Grass*  
*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century. Volume I: Freneau to Whitman*  
pages 720.4 –721.8
3. Emily Dickinson, "There came a Wind like A Bugle—"  
*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century. Volume II: Melville to Stickney, American Indian Poetry, Folk Songs and Spirituals.*  
page 311
4. "I Know Moon-Rise"  
*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century. Volume II: Melville to Stickney, American Indian Poetry, Folk Songs and Spirituals.*  
page 777
5. W.C. Handy, "St. Louis Blues"  
*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century. Volume I: Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker.*  
pages 89-90
6. Woody Guthrie, "Dust Storm Disaster"  
*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century. Volume II: E.E. Cummings to May Swenson.*  
pages 805-806
7. Woody Guthrie, "Talking Dust Bowl"  
*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century. Volume II: E.E. Cummings to May Swenson.*  
pages 807-808

### Suggested Discussion Questions:

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1. What elements of Longfellow's poetry do you think contributed to its enormous popularity throughout the nineteenth century? Consider rhyme, rhythm, word choice, subject matter, and any other elements that strike you. (Are there any Longfellow poems or lines you remember from childhood? If so, why do you think you remembered them?)
2. In later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman called the original opening section "Song of Myself." What elements of these lines lend the poem music, or connect one stanza to another, or qualify the poem as a "song"? How does it compare as a song to a spiritual, or to the blues, or to Woody Guthrie's folk songs?

Do you have any guesses as to why Whitman exerted a greater influence on twentieth century American poetry than Longfellow?

3. *Leaves of Grass*, "I Know Moon-Rise," "St. Louis Blues," and other poems in this overview include the words "I," "you," and "we." How do you interpret each of these words in each poem?
4. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass considered slave songs. He wrote: "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear" (*Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, p. 24).

What different meanings do you think could be drawn from within and without the "circle" in "I Know Moon-Rise"? Do you see similar double meanings in the poetry of W.C. Handy or Woody Guthrie? And finally, what do you think prompted Douglass to write "rude and apparently incoherent"?

5. How would you describe the effect in printed poetry of dialect such as "dis body," "dad gum," and "lak ah feel today"? Do you agree with the decision to print the poems this way? What qualities do these words give to the poetry, and what might they take away?
6. Compare Emily Dickinson's description of a storm in "There came a Wind like a Bugle—" to Woody Guthrie's in "Dust Storm Disaster." What is "doom" to each? What is the meaning of the storm? In what ways might the form of each poem fit its meanings?
7. What elements strike you as particularly "American" in any of these poems?

## Some Ideas for Further Reading in American Poetry

### Walt Whitman.

Whitman revised *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life. Consider some of his revisions by reading "Song of Myself" in the 1891-1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (in *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*). Compare these lines to the opening lines of the 1855 edition. What do you think Whitman accomplished with his revisions? How does the new context—and the new punctuation and added lines—affect the impact of these lines?

### Paying Tribute.

Many twentieth-century American poets acknowledged the influence and inspiration of nineteenth-century poets. Consider "A Pact" by Ezra Pound (*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, volume I, p. 514) in relation to the poetry of Whitman, and any poem of your choice by Mina Loy (*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, volume I, pp. 391-412) in relation to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. What similarities, echoes, or continuities do you see between the earlier poet and the twentieth-century poet? What elements of innovation strike you?

### Sonnets.

Consider twentieth-century examples of American sonnets, including "Design" by Robert Frost (*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, volume I, p. 148) and "The Prodigal," a double sonnet by Elizabeth Bishop (*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, volume II, p. 736). What do you think of each poet's adaptation of this traditional form? Do you find that considering previous uses of the sonnet form adds to the meaning or the beauty you see in these sonnets?

### Slave Songs.

Frederick Douglass considered slave songs in several passages of his autobiography, of which he wrote three versions. See, for instance, chapter II in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and chapter XIX ("The Run-Away Plot") in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (both in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*). Douglass asserts that "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy" (p. 24) and offers an example of "the double meanings of some hymns" (p. 308). Does Douglass change your initial impression of slave songs? What expectations or experiences of these songs do you think he anticipated in his readers?

James Weldon Johnson is among the twentieth-century poets who drew on the rich legacy of slave songs. You may want to compare his poem "The Judgment Day" (*American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, volume I, p. 83) to a spiritual such as "I Know Moon-Rise" (*American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, volume II, p. 777). What elements of continuity do you see? As you browse through other poems of Johnson's, consider the various influences you can detect in his poetry. For instance, what do you make of the different types of language he uses—ranging from Biblical to folk dialect—to tell different stories?

### Twentieth-Century Poetry.

Browse through either of the two volumes of *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*. Can you find traces of Longfellow, or Whitman, or Dickinson, or slave song in the work of other poets? What other influences do you think you see? Finally, try to guess which twentieth-century poets might prove influential in the twenty-first century, and why.