

MENG 6240:
Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson
Spring 2016

Instructor: John Schwiebert
Office: EH #457
Phone: (801) 626-6289
E-mail: jschwiebert@weber.edu
Office Hours: M,W,F, 10:30-11:30 and 12:30-1:30

Course Overview

Walt Whitman (1819-92) and Emily Dickinson (1830-86) were the two most significant American poets of the 19th century. They were contemporaries but, as far as is known, neither ever read the other's work. (The first book-length selection of Dickinson's poems was published just two years before Whitman's death, and Dickinson's only known comment about Whitman was to say she had been "told that he was disgraceful.") Very much people of clay, in the years since their deaths they have become literary icons: Whitman, the "Good Gray Poet," brawny and blustery, the archetypal celebrant of the sensuous physical world; Dickinson, the iconically "repressed" woman, famously reclusive, unrecognized during her lifetime and almost fanatical in her analysis of the soul's inner landscapes. Though grossly oversimplified, these popular images help explain the powerful grip the poets have had on succeeding generations of writers and readers. Who were the human beings behind the legends? What was distinctive about each poet's work? How did they develop their unique voices and styles? Were they poetic antipodes, as some have suggested, or more like kindred spirits? What do their lives suggest to us about vocation, publication, and the functions of poets and poetry in society? Above all, what is their legacy to us as *we* write and live today? These are a few of the questions we will address in this course.

Whitman and Dickinson demand hard work from their readers: Whitman described reading as "a gymnast's struggle" and Dickinson referred to her work as her "Letter to the World" (which, presumably, was supposed to write back to her). You can't really *read* these poets without exerting yourself and writing – thinking for yourself. Thus in this course we will be reflecting and creating as well as reading, very much as the two poets did when they read. The project of poetry, as understood by Whitman and Dickinson, is to build a new or better self. A better society or world may follow, but it begins with *you* and with a commitment to live an intentional "life of the mind."

Required Texts and Supplies

• Whitman, Walt. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Library of America, 1982.

- Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R.W. Franklin. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998.
- Habegger, Alfred. *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Schwiebert, John. *MENG 6240: Whitman and Dickinson: Supplemental Text* (available, along with the Whitman and Dickinson texts, in the Ogden WSU bookstore)
- A looseleaf notebook with filler paper for a course reading notebook
- Pocket-sized notepads for recording on-the-spot notes (see chapter 6 of the Supplemental Text)

Secondary Texts (for reference; not required for purchase)

- Belasco, Susan, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, eds. *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Farr, Judith, ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.
- Gordon, Lydall. *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*. New York: Penguin, 2010.
- Grabher, Gudrun, Roland Hagenbuchle, and Cristanne Miller, eds. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts P, 1998.
- Greenspan, Ezra, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Kummings, Donald D., ed. *A Companion to Walt Whitman*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- LeMaster, J.R. and Donald D. Kummings, eds. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland, 1998.
- Martin, Wendy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Reynolds, David S., ed. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- . *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1995. (Still the best biography of Whitman.)
- Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. 2 vols. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974.
- Wineapple, Brenda. *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson & Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. New York: Knopf, 2008.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1986.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

1. Describe Whitman and Dickinson's practices of reading and writing and apply them, as appropriate, in your own life and work;
2. Identify and describe the major stages in Whitman and Dickinson's poetic development and their significance within the larger American literary tradition;
3. Identify and describe Whitman and Dickinson's continuing impact on American and global literature and culture.

Statement of Learning Outcomes. The MENG program is dedicated to helping students master the following learning outcomes. This particular class focuses on learning outcomes (L.O.'s) #1, #2, and #4.

"Learning outcome #1: Gather, analyze, and communicate information effectively as well as think creatively and critically.

"Learning outcome #2: Cultivate skills in close reading, critical thinking, logical argument from evidence presented, creative expression, and persuasive writing.

"Learning outcome #3: Apply various theoretical perspectives and literary terminology to interpretations of literary texts to showcase an understanding of theoretical perspectives.

"Learning outcome #4: Acknowledge and articulate the significance of key primary text(s) in one specific literary genre, period, culture or style.

"Learning outcome #5: Demonstrate knowledge of an interaction with current scholarly criticism.

"Learning outcome #6: Demonstrate ability to employ academic conventions and protocols for written or multimodal presentations, including the application of appropriate conventions, citation formats and style manuals."

I will evaluate your success in outcomes 1, 2, and 4 by reading and responding to weekly papers and your final course project (see below).

Course Requirements. Your final grade will be based on four factors: attendance and participation, a course reading notebook, an oral presentation, and a final course portfolio.

1. Attendance and Participation (30% of final grade). We will function in a workshop environment – writing, meeting in small groups, and discussing as a class. Therefore, attendance in class is crucial. Three hours of unexcused absences will lower your final grade by one half letter; six will lower it by a full letter, and every additional three hours of unexcused absence will lower your final grade by an additional half letter.

2. A course notebook (45% of final grade). The course notebook is explained in detail in Part I of the Supplemental Text. Use your notebook to:

- Create writings that respond to assigned or unassigned readings

- Do in-class writings such as quick-writes and notes on discussions
- Plan ideas for papers and essays
- Do any other writings of the sort discussed in the Supplemental Text.

Every week I will collect a word-processed version of your best or favorite notebook entry for the week. This entry should be at least 600 words long, revised, and word-processed. I will read this entry carefully and return it to you at the next class meeting with written comments. (Meets Learning Outcomes #1, 2, and 4.)

3. An oral presentation (10% of final grade). Your oral presentation should be between 15 and 20 minutes long and should incorporate:

- a) Material from at least one primary source;
- b) Material from at least two secondary sources (biographical or critical works).

The following is a suggested, but nonexhaustive, list of topics. If you want to do a topic that isn't on the list, please discuss it with me first.

- Whitman's or Dickinson's education (formal and/or self-education)
- Whitman's or Dickinson's beliefs about the role of poetry and the poet
- Whitman's or Dickinson's reading (i.e., what they read and how it influenced them)
 - Whitman's or Dickinson's notebooks (or, in Dickinson's case, personal letters) and creative processes. (One possibility here would be to compare Whitman's or Dickinson's methods of notetaking and journal-writing with your own or with those of other writers)
 - Whitman or Dickinson and science
 - Whitman's or Dickinson's influence on modern/contemporary literature or on a specific poet
 - Whitman or Dickinson and popular culture (see especially David Reynolds's writings in the course bibliography)
 - The "foreground" to *Leaves of Grass* 1855; Whitman's personal crisis in the late 1850s
 - Non-literary influences on Whitman: music, oratory, vernacular speech and slang, nature and the sea, grand opera, sciences and pseudosciences, etc. (choose one and focus on it)
 - Whitman and popular culture
 - Whitman and the Civil War (*Specimen Days*)
 - Whitman and Lincoln
 - Whitman's notebooks; his reading and writing practices
 - Whitman's political vision
 - Whitman and the human body
 - Whitman as nature writer
 - Whitman's popular reception; critical reviews; the growth of his reputation

- Whitman's relationships with his contemporaries (Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, etc. – choose one)
- Dickinson's family (or her relationship with any individual member of it)
- Dickinson's early correspondence; childhood and early friendships
- Dickinson and religion (e.g., her experiences at Mt. Holyoke, her beliefs about God)
- Dickinson's friendships, particularly her friendship with Susan Gilbert Dickinson
- Dickinson as a letter writer
- Dickinson and religion (e.g., her resistance to religious conversion while a student at Mt. Holyoke; her views about resurrection, afterlife, or "things unseen")
- Dickinson and Shakespeare
- Dickinson and Victorian women writers (Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte and Emily Bronte – focus on one)
- Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (the subject of a recent dual biography by Brenda Wineapple)
- Early publication history of Dickinson's poems (the editions of 1890, 1891, 1896)
- Dickinson's popular reception; critical reviews; the growth of her reputation

The Oral Presentation meets Learning Outcomes #1, 2, and 4.

4. A final portfolio of your best writings from the semester (15% of final grade).

The portfolio should include three items, word-processed and formatted according to MLA guidelines:

1) A 2,000 + word selection of highlights from your course notebook. Attach a word-processed introduction in which you describe the contents of your selection, discuss the experience you had with notebook-writing, and reflect on any ways that the experience affected or enhanced your understanding and appreciation of Whitman and/or Dickinson.

2) An expanded reflection (300+ words) on one favorite Whitman or Dickinson poem or passage in a poem. Do not use secondary sources for this piece; it should be a direct interaction between yourself and Whitman or Dickinson. I encourage you to reflect personally and idiosyncratically, as Whitman and Dickinson themselves would.

3) A course project of approximately 1,500–2,000 words. The course project should incorporate information from at least two secondary (biographical or critical) works as well as from the primary writings (poems, journalism, creative prose, personal letters) of Whitman or Dickinson. If you wish, your course project may be an expanded study of the topic you chose for your oral presentation.

The Course Project meets Learning Outcomes #1, 2, and 4.

Alternative Creative Project. As an alternative to a traditional project, I welcome creative projects, such as original poetry, fiction, or a reflective essay that is inspired in some way by the course readings.

If you do a creative project, please include a 500–700 word introduction in which you discuss the origins and evolution of your project and how the experience of writing the project enhanced your understanding of Whitman or Dickinson. Your introduction should include documented (MLA style) references to at least three primary and secondary sources. In effect, your introduction will be a brief research essay in which you interpret or otherwise comment on your creative text. (The Alternative Course Project meets Learning Outcomes #1, 2, and 4.)

Students with Disabilities

Students requiring accommodations or services due to a disability must contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) in room 181 of the Student Service Center. SSD can arrange to provide course materials (including this syllabus) in alternative formats if necessary.

Arts and Humanities Plagiarism Guidelines

Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, falsification, accessing unauthorized course or test information, using unauthorized resources or breaches of copyright law and will not be tolerated in this class. The penalty for academic dishonesty in this course is a grade of failure in that assignment.

Core Beliefs

According to PPM 6-22 IV, students are to “determine, before the last day to drop courses without penalty, when course requirements conflict with a student’s core beliefs. If there is such a conflict, the student should consider dropping the class. A student who finds this solution impracticable may request a resolution from the instructor. This policy does not oblige the instructor to grant the request, except in those cases when a denial would be arbitrary and capricious or illegal. This request must be made to the instructor in writing and the student must deliver a copy of the request to the office of the departmental head. The student’s request must articulate the burden the requirement would place on the student’s beliefs.”

Emergency Closure

If for any reason the university is forced to close for an extended period of time, we will conduct our class via e-mail. Look for announcements on Weber e-mail.

Class Schedule

ST = Supplemental Text; CP = *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of Walt Whitman*; Poems = *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. The following schedule is tentative. Be sure to bring this schedule and syllabus with you to each class meeting in case there are changes.

The Supplemental Text is intended to provide background information relevant to the readings for each particular week. Therefore, each week I recommend reading the chapters in the Supplemental Text first, before reading the Whitman and Dickinson texts.

Appendix C in the Supplemental Text provides "Topics for Writing and Discussion" for many of the assigned readings by Whitman [**and Dickinson?**]. You are not *required* to address these topics if you have alternative or preferred topics of your own for writing. You may use the "Topics for Writing and Discussion" when you are at a loss for what to write about.

Week 1. Course and Personal Introductions

- ST, preface and Part I
- "To You," pp. 375-77

Week 2. Early Whitman

Note: As you do the readings for weeks 1-8, start by reading the appropriate pages in Appendix A, which contains background and study materials for each week's assignments.

- ST, Parts I and II
- ST, chapter 21
- "Chronology," pp. 1347-51
- *Specimen Days*, pp. 689-706 (up to "Opening of the Secession War")
- "The Eighteenth Presidency!" pp. 1307-25
- Library Reserve: David S. Reynolds, "Walt Whitman, 1819-1892: A Brief Biography"

Week 3. "Song of Myself" (1855)

- ST, Part IV
- ST, chapters 22-26
- LG 1855, "Preface" and "Song of Myself," pp. 5-88
- "There was a child went forth," pp. 138-39
- [• OPTIONAL: remainder of LG1855, pp. 89-145]

Week 4. *Leaves of Grass*, the first and second editions

- ST, Part III
- ST, chapter 27 (“Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*, 1856–60”)
- “The bodies of men and women engirth me...,” pp. 118–24
- “I Sing the Body Electric,” pp. 250–58
- “Song of the Open Road,” pp. 297–307
- “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” pp. 307–13

Week 5. Quicksand Years: *Leaves of Grass* 1860

- ST, Part V
- ST, chapters 28–31
- “Children of Adam” poems, pp. 248–67
- “Calamus” poems, pp. 268–87
- “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” pp. 388–94
- “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” pp. 394–96

Week 6. The Wound Dresser: Whitman and the Civil War

- ST, chapters 32–34 and 37 (“Additional Notes...”)
- *Specimen Days*, pp. 706–78 (up to “An Interregnum Paragraph”)
- “Drum-Taps,” pp. 416–58
- “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” pp. 459–67
- “O Captain! My Captain!” pp. 467–68
- Library Reserve: Susan Belasco, “*Leaves of Grass* and the Poetry Marketplace of Antebellum America”

Week 7. “The Good Gray Poet”

- ST, chapters 35–36
- *Specimen Days*, pp. 779–850 (up to “Begin a Long Jaunt West”)
- “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” pp. 656–72
- “Passage to India,” pp. 531–40
- “Prayer of Columbus,” pp. 540–42
- *Democratic Vistas*, selections, pp. 937–38, 960–62, 982–83, 992–94
- “Nationality – and Yet,” p. 1050
- “Foundation Stages – Then Others,” p. 1066
- “Our Real Culmination,” p. 1074
- “An American Problem,” p. 1074
- “Health (Old Style),” p. 1272
- “Some Personal and Old-Age Jottings,” p. 1293
- Library Reserve, Ed Folsom, “Appearing in Print: Illustrations of the Self in *Leaves of Grass*”

Week 8. Late Whitman; Whitman’s *Short Poems*

- ST, “Coda: The Greatest Lover (II)”
- *Specimen Days*, pp. 850–926
- “The Dalliance of the Eagles,” p. 412
- “The City Dead-House,” p. 494
- “Out from Behind This Mask,” p. 508
- “Miracles,” pp. 513–14
- “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” p. 564
- “Five Thousand Poems,” p. 1184

Week 9. Emily Dickinson: Family Context; First Poems

- ST, chapters 38–40
- Poems, #1–225
- Habegger, Introduction and Part One

Week 10. Dickinson: Childhood

- ST, “Essay: First-Thought and Second-Thought People”
- ST, chapters 41–42
- Poems, #226–550
- Habegger, Part Two

Week 11. Dickinson: Youth

- ST, chapters 43, 44, and 49 (“Literary Contexts”)
- Poems, #551–775
- Habegger, Part Three

Week 12. Dickinson: College and Aftermath

- ST, chapters 45–48
- Poems, #776–1000
- Habegger, Part Four

Oral Presentations (Whitman and Dickinson)

Week 13. Dickinson: Society and Seclusion

- Poems, #1001–1225
- Habegger, Part Five

Oral Presentations (Whitman and Dickinson)

Week 14. Dickinson: Creative Floodtide

- Poems, #1226–1450
- Habegger, Part Six

Rough draft of final course project due

Oral Presentations (Whitman and Dickinson)

Week 15. Dickinson: Last Years

- Poems, #1451-end
- Habegger, Part Seven

Oral Presentations (Whitman and Dickinson)