

AMERICAN AUTHORS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: WHITMAN, DICKINSON, LONGFELLOW, STOWE, AND POE

In the nineteenth century, social changes and the rise of new media revolutionized the way people discovered and read literature. As a result, the audience for American literature grew tremendously, and many authors became celebrities.



On the house-boat "The Log Cabin"
[http://www.loc.gov/pictures/
item/89708628/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/89708628/)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Newspapers became more popular, and included not only poems and stories, but also articles and photo essays about their authors. As new technologies made it easier to reproduce images in print, portraits of authors and illustrations of scenes from their works appeared in more and more pamphlets, sheet music, and magazines. Nineteenth-century authors were more likely to have their works read by the general public and readers were more likely to be familiar with an author's appearance.

This primary source set showcases five prominent American authors and includes examples of the different media that promoted, and sometimes significantly altered, their public images and literary works. Looking at these primary sources provides an opportunity to explore both the authors' literary texts and the ways in which those works, and the authors themselves, were portrayed in the media at the time of their renown.

Author Overviews

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82) was a New Englander who studied languages in Europe after graduating from Bowdoin College. He returned to the United States and taught first at Bowdoin and then Harvard, while publishing lyric poetry and fiction and nonfiction prose. European influences are evident in his writing, but so is an interest in American history. He used the latter to create a national mythology. Some of his more renowned works are "The Song of Hiawatha," "The Village Blacksmith," *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, and "Paul Revere's Ride." Longfellow's poetry was popular; indeed, some critics have said that Longfellow wrote with "the masses" too firmly in mind.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96) was the daughter of one prominent clergyman and the wife of another. She moved from New England to Cin-

cinnati when she was 21. Stowe observed slavery firsthand while living in Cincinnati. Nearly 20 years later, she wrote one of the most influential books in U.S. history: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First published as a serial in the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era*, the novel came out as a two-volume book in 1852. An international bestseller, the book led readers to question the evils of slavery and galvanized the abolitionist movement. It also inspired numerous other authors of the time to address social problems through their writing.

Walt Whitman (1819-92) grew up in a large New York family that had serious financial problems. He left school at age 11. By the age of 20, Whitman already had founded and sold a newspaper, the *Long Islander*. He worked at other newspapers for another decade. He also wrote poetry and in 1855 self-published the first edition of his classic work, *Leaves of Grass*. While some dismissed the book as obscene, Ralph Waldo Emerson saw merit in the book, endorsing it in a lengthy letter. Revised many times throughout Whitman's life, *Leaves of Grass* remains one of the most influential works of American poetry. Although Whitman did not use traditional rhyme and meter in most of his poetry, there were exceptions, including "O Captain, My Captain," a popular poem written on the death of President Lincoln.

Emily Dickinson (1830-86) spent most of her life secluded in the family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. Dickinson's poetry, typically brief and deceptively simple, is characterized by unconventional uses of rhyme and punctuation as well as rich metaphor. However, she achieved acclaim for her poetry only after her death. Even then, the first published volumes were heavily edited to conform to conventions of syntax, punctuation, rhyme, and rhythm. Dickinson's reclusive life, combined with the posthumous publication of her poetry, has sparked some debate about where she

found inspiration for her poetry; the brilliance of her art form, however, continues undisputed; some critics rank her second only to Walt Whitman among nineteenth-century American poets.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) was orphaned at a young age and became the ward of John and Frances Allan. He and Allan clashed over money and other matters. As a young man, Poe had short, troubled stints at the University of Virginia and in the U.S. Army. Poe had some success as a writer of poems and short stories, but he also continued to be plagued by alcohol and money problems. Both his mother and Frances Allan died young, as did his wife, Virginia Clemm, a much-younger cousin. These tragedies affected his writing. Poe died at the age of 40, apparently of alcohol poisoning. Despite the problems in his personal and financial life, Poe's detective stories and macabre poetry remain popular into the 21st century.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Some of the documents show the authors' revisions or corrections on their work. Ask students to examine these documents. What do they reveal about the authors' writing and thinking processes? Can the students infer reasons for the changes made by the authors? What can students learn about the work and processes of a professional writer from examining these documents?
- Students can apply what they learn about revisions to their own work. Ask them to write a descriptive paragraph or a short poem and then revise it over several days, dating each version. How does their work change over time?
- Many of the documents include reviews or other responses to an author's work or life. Have students select one of these evaluations and identify the point of view expressed in it. How does the review's writer convey this perspective? Have students select one or two key points on which they disagree with the review and write responses to the specific claims.
- Organize the class into groups and assign one of the authors to each group. Ask the groups to find out something about the author's life and times. How does the work reflect the time in which the author worked and the author's life experiences? Have groups report their findings and conduct a class discussion of similarities and differences among the authors. Students should cite textual evidence to support their analysis. Construct a timeline tracking historical events as well as major events in each author's life.
- The primary source set also includes examples of illustrations and other images inspired by an author's writing. Encourage students to evaluate these images and explore the connections between an illustration and the text. How does the illustration contribute to the meaning or tone of the text? How does it differ from the students' own interpretation of the text?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Words and Deeds in American History: Selected Documents Celebrating the Manuscript Division's First 100 Years

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mchtml/corhome.html>



Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>



Poet at Work: Recovered Notebooks from the Thomas Biggs Harned Walt Whitman Collection

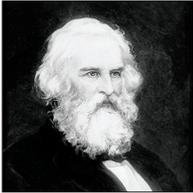
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/whitman/>

PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



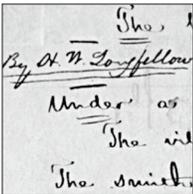
Steichen, Edward, photographer. "On the house-boat 'The Log Cabin.'" Photochemical print. Munich: A Bruckman & Co., 1908. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/89708628/>



Marshall, William Edgar, artist. "Henry W. Longfellow, head and shoulders portrait." Between 1900-12. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994022497/PP/>



Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, poet. "The Village Blacksmith." Manuscript. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Collection, ca. 1840. From Library of Congress: Manuscript Division.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mcc/033\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/033)))



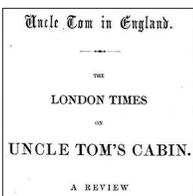
Schleiffarth, George, composer. "The Village Blacksmith." Sheet music. Chicago: Lyon & Healy, 1884. From Library of Congress: *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music*.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/sm1884.21599>



"Representative Americans." Photographic print. 1893. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93503630/>



Uncle Tom in England: The London Times on Uncle Tom's Cabin. New York: Bunce & Brother, 1852. From Library of Congress: Rare Book and Special Collections Division

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Milne, Colin R. "A dream caused by the perusal of Mrs. H. Beecher Stowe's popular work *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Lithograph. Louisville, KY: J. C. Frost & G. W. Hall, 1853. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004665375/>



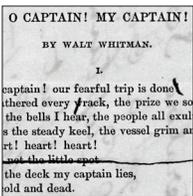
Loder, E. J., composer, and M. A. Collier, lyricist. "Eliza's flight." Score. Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1852. From Library of Congress: Music Division.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/mussm:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(sm1852+501770\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/mussm:@field(NUMBER+@band(sm1852+501770)))



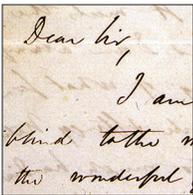
Alexander, John White, photographer. "Walt Whitman." Photograph. Detroit, MI: Detroit Publishing Company, between 1900 and 1920. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994022394/PP/>



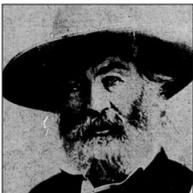
Whitman, Walt, author. "Letter and Corrected Reprint of Walt Whitman's 'O Captain, My Captain' with Comments by Author, 9 February 1888." Manuscript. (Walt Whitman Collection.) From Library of Congress: Manuscript Division.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mcc/055\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/055)))



Emerson, Ralph Waldo, author. "Letter, Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman Extolling Whitman's Poetry, 21 July 1855." Manuscript. (Charles E. Feinberg-Walt Whitman Collection.) From Library of Congress: Manuscript Division.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mcc/012\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/012)))



"Personal Recollections of Walt. Whitman" *The Washington Times*, October 5, 1902, 10. From Library of Congress: *Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers*.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87062245/1902-10-05/ed-1/seq-26/>



"Emily Dickinson, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing right." Lithograph, 1894. From Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96518224/>



Banks, Ernst, composer, and Emily Dickinson, lyricist. "The banks of the Yellow Sea." Sheet music. 1942. From Library of Congress: *Performing Arts Encyclopedia*.

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihhas/loc.natlib.ihhas.200035570/default.html>

