

FROM ANNE BRADSTREET TO W. H. AUDEN: AMERICAN POETS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Abstract: Taking at the outset the recently published anthology *101 Great American Poems*, this article takes a close look at the thirty-nine American poets who established literary prominence through the period of three and a half centuries. For analytical purposes, these poets are classified into several different categories: major and minor poets, romantic and realist poets, and women poets. Further investigation is conducted to find out the salient literary features pertaining to each of these categories. Finally, it is equally important to see how these poets “worked together” in shaping the so-called American poetry.

Key words: American poets, major and minor poets, romantic and realist poets, women poets, American poetry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The anthology *101 Great American Poems*, compiled by the American Poetry and Literary Project (henceforth APLP), was published in 1998 with the aim of making poetry “available to the public in far greater volume than it is” (p. iii). The poems in this anthology “cover more than 350 years of American culture and history” (p. iv). They are presented in chronological order, referring not to the dates of their respective composition but to the lifetimes of the poets who wrote them. The first poet included in the anthology is Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), and the last poet is W. H. Auden (1907-1973). The period of more than 350 years of American culture and history is apparently dated from 1612 (the year when Bradstreet was born) to 1973 (the year when Auden died), hence covering 361 years. The year 1612 means 164 years before the Declaration of Independence (1776), and the year 1973 refers to the time when Richard Nixon was the U.S. President. This chronology is to show the place of the poems in American history, but not to suggest that poetry always relates itself to politics or history. To illustrate, Bradstreet’s poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (p. 1) has nothing to do with political or historical events; it is about romantic love of a devoted seventeenth-century wife.

...
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
...
Then while we live, in love let’s persevere
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

And Auden’s poem “The Unknown Citizen” (pp. 79-80), while it may sound political, goes far beyond politics. It is best considered to be humans’ last defense against government morality that often justifies taking individuals as mere numbers in statistics. “JS/07/M/378 ... was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint / ... / For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.” As satirized by this poem, Modern Man (p. 79) has fallen and lost his human dignity: he has become a cog in a giant machine. So you needn’t have asked, “Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.”

Included in the anthology are thirty-nine poets. All of them are American-born poets, except Claude McKay (1890-1948) and W. H. Auden (1907-1973). McKay was born in Jamaica and later came to America to study and remained to write; and Auden was born in England and became an American citizen in 1946. In 1948 he won the Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), the only American-born poet to win the Nobel Prize for literature in the same year as Auden won the Pulitzer Prize, moved to England and had assumed British citizenship when the prize was awarded. The thirty-nine poets included in the anthology may be seen from many different perspectives, and hence classified into a number of different categories (i.e., major and minor poets, romantic and realist poets, and women poets), each with its own literary characteristics. As a final note, this article will take a brief look at the shaping of American poetry through the period of three and a half centuries.

2. MAJOR AND MINOR POETS

Major poets are those whose works are of the first rank and of lasting importance and thus best represent American poetry. With respect to the APLP's considerations, they are presumably the poets whose poems are included in the biggest number in the present anthology. Going through the descending order of included publication are three eminent poets: Emily Dickinson (10 poems), Robert Frost (9 poems), and Walt Whitman (7 poems). Nobody would deny that Dickinson, Frost, and Whitman are among the greatest and most influential American poets. The first is well-known for her passionate lyric, the second for creating exquisite poetry out of ordinary speech, and the third for his powerful free verse glorifying life through the celebration of nature and culture. Next to these three great poets in terms of included publication are Langston Hughes (6 poems), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe (5 poems each), and Wallace Steven and William Carlos Williams (4 poems each). They are followed by Edwin Arlington Robinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Claude McKay (3 poems each). The rest, having two or one poem published in the anthology, include both prominent and less prominent poets.

It should be noted in passing, however, that judging writers as major or minor poets simply on the basis of included publication in the anthology could be misleading. For instance, Abraham Lincoln, Marianne Moore, and W. H. Auden are among those having only one poem published in the anthology. Nevertheless, there seem to be different reasons for including these names in the anthology. Lincoln is the embodiment of freedom and egalitarianism, Moore was a highly accomplished poet, and Auden was "a classic in his own lifetime" (Levy 1983: 2). In other words, the inclusion of Moore and Auden in the anthology is based on true poetic reasons, but the inclusion of Lincoln is driven by less literary motivation. (No other prestigious books of American poetry, to the best of my knowledge, include any poems by Lincoln. His literary talent is generally recognized through his historical Gettesburg Address, not by his little known poems.) It may give comfort and satisfaction to the APLP to include Lincoln as a poet of the nation, primarily because the goal of the project, as stated above, is to make poetry available to the public in far greater volume.

Each poem, like each individual, is a unique world in itself (Strand 1991: xiv). Therefore it is no surprise that poems written by major and minor poets may sometimes be of equal literary accomplishment. For illustration, let us compare "I Sit and Look Out" (p. 23) by Whitman (1819-1892) and "Peace" (p. 62) by Sara Teasdale (1884-1933).

I Sit and Look Out

I sit and look out upon the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression
 and shame,
 I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves,
 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 the martyrs and
 prisoners,
 I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots who shall be
 kill'd to preserve the life of the rest,
 I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers,
 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.

Whitman's free verse, as shown by the above poem, excels through its unique and liberating rhythm, brave exploratory style, rich and penetrating diction, vivid portrayal of realities, and effective repetition. Notice also the power of irony conveyed by the title of the poem and the last sentence. The title "I Sit and Look Out" suggests the poet being an objective observer: taking a distance between himself and the subject he deals with. But the poem shows otherwise; he takes human sorrows personally and deeply. The last sentence *I sitting look out upon, / See, hear, and am silent* also implies the opposite meaning. By claiming to stand as a "silent" witness, the poet is in fact "screaming" an angry protest against injustice and wishes to see the world ruling itself with justice. He wishes that sorrows would be replaced by happiness, oppression by cooperation, and war by peace. The dream for peace is also the subject of Teasdale's poem below.

Peace

Peace flows into me
 As the tide to the pool by the shore
 It is mine forevermore,
 It will not ebb like the sea.

I am the pool of blue
 That worships the vivid sky;
 My hopes were heaven-high,
 They are all fulfilled in you.

I am the pool of gold
 When sunset burns and dies—
 You are my deepening skies,
 Give me your stars to hold.

Suggesting personal as well as spiritual peace, this poem is peace in itself. It consists of three calm quatrains with the varying a-b-b-a rhyme. Notice that the content words in the poem, except "burns" and "dies" (in the third line of the last stanza), all suggest peace and

tranquility. The linked metaphors in the poem are the peaceful overflow of the sea, contained by the pool of blue, worshipping the heaven-high of brotherhood—fulfilled only in you. When, at sunset, the pool of blue changes into the pool of gold, it reaches higher to the sky and deeper into you. More clearly, the persona in the poem says, “I am a humble pool by the shore reaching up to you, my sky. I turn blue reflecting your color, and I look golden reflecting your sunset. At night, when you are nothing but vast blackness up there, I am pleading to you—for the sake of spiritual peace and holy brotherhood—’Give me your light, give me your stars to hold’”.

Both Whitman’s “I Sit and Look Out” and Teasdale’s “Peace” are very good poems, but the former is greater than the latter. Whitman’s poem communicates a richer experience, and successfully accomplishes a more significant purpose. Teasdale’s subject is “the peaceful and passionate relationship between me and you”, whereas Whitman’s subject is “my very deep concern with human sufferings all over the globe” (see Perrine and Arp 1982: 247-49). In this regard, from a critical and analytical look at one or two well-written American poems, it is hard for us to tell whether the poems were written by a major or minor poet. Poets are indeed judged as “major” or “minor” partly on the basis of literary excellence pertaining to each poem they wrote. But more importantly, as stated at the beginning of this section, the judgment should come from a more comprehensive evaluation: to what extent their works as a whole may be considered a major breakthrough, and hence of lasting importance, in the life-history of American poetry. If these criteria are right, then we can have at least the following names listed as major American poets: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and W. H. Auden. All of them are poets of lasting importance and considerable influence. And yet, if I were to choose one who best represents America and American ideals, my choice would be on Walt Whitman. His masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, whose “deathbed” edition contains 383 poems, is a revolutionary symbol of poetic liberation in form and content. Whitman’s freedom of style liberated poetic form from its traditional constraints. As for its content, *Leaves of Grass* is great literary song celebrating self and selfhood, freedom and egalitarianism, brotherhood among humans and between humans and nature, and deep religiosity in a pantheistic sense. In other words, it lays bare the essence of democracy.

3. THE ROMANTICISTS AND THE REALISTS

Romanticism in literature is the quality of admiring feeling rather than thought, and wild beauty rather than things made by man, whereas realism is the showing of things as they really are.¹ In a broader sense, according to Miller, Jr. et al. (1976: 719), romanticism stresses man’s glory and freedom rather than his limitations. Romantic writers take an optimistic view of individuals; they prefer to stress the past over the present, and to dwell on the exciting, the exotic, and the beautiful. On the other hand, realism is a way of representing life as it seems to the common reader. Material selected by realist poets tends to deal with ordinary people in everyday experiences. In reality, however, romanticism and realism are indications more of degrees or tendencies rather than measurements by absolute standards. I agree with Perrine and Arp (1984: 9) who state that poetry is a kind

¹ These are dictionary definitions of “romanticism” and “realism” (see *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* p. 963 and p. 918). Both terms are conceptually related to “classicism”, namely, the quality of being simple, balanced, and controlled, not giving way to feeling, and following ancient models (p. 191).

of multidimensional language. It presents the totality of experience by appealing to the whole person. Toward this end, poetry involves at least four dimensions of human mental faculty: intelligence, emotions, senses, and imagination. Romantic poets are devoted to feeling or emotions without neglecting the other three dimensions; and realist poets, especially those the so-called imagists, are most able in blending senses and imagination into their poems without neglecting intellectual and emotional appeals. While romanticism is often related to a historical period in literature, it is equally justifiable to assume that romanticism and realism may pertain to individual poets. And yet we have to keep in mind that romanticism often relates to poets of the past while realism relates only to modern poetic invention of the twentieth century.

Elements of romanticism are obvious—to cite just a few examples—in the works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). For Longfellow, poets are “architects of Fate”, working “with ornaments of rhyme” within the confining “walls of Time” (p. 6). A song (poem), like an aimless arrow, may be released into the air without a specific target. However,

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke
And the song, from beginning to end
I found again in the heart of a friend

A lover of beauty, Longfellow was a master of the music of language. His celebrated poem “The Day is Done” (pp. 8-10), a result of a skillful juxtaposition of iambic with anapestic trimeters, presents a graceful sway of evening music.

The day is done and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in his flight

The poem flows rhythmically both in telling the completion of jobs well done and in keeping the musicality of peaceful stanzas with the continuing but varied a-b-c-b rhyme. Longfellow shows not only reverence toward great poets: “[...] the grand old masters / [...] the bards sublime / Whose distant footsteps echo / Through the corridors of Time”, but also admiration of minor poets whose works are imbued with sincere emotions.

Read from some humbler poet
Whose songs gushed from his heart,
As showers from the cloud of summer
Or tears from the eyelids start;

Who, through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies.

Romanticism in Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, presents itself less in the imaginary world of ideals but more in the world of dreams. In fact, Poe’s *The Raven and Other Favorite Poems* (1991, Dover Thrift Edition) contains four “dream” poems: “Dreams”, “A Dream within a Dream”, “A Dream”, and “Dream-Land”. “The Raven” itself (pp. 16-19), presumably Poe’s most famous poem, lies in the border of dreams. It portrays the cheerless side of human psyche where the poetic persona—the weak and weary “I”—tries to converse with the raven, but the black bird says nothing but a singular answer, “Nevermore”. The setting of this poem is “a midnight dreary”, and the visiting

bird is a “[g]hastly, grim, and ancient Raven, wandering from the Nightly shore”. In response to the nocturnal visit, the poetic persona tells us,

Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

Everything in this poem seems to be floating from and into ink-stained dreams, where the poetic persona is the endless, desperate personification of failed attempts to regain his lost “Lenore”, who is now “the radiant maiden” held by “the distant Aidenn” or Paradise. Not only does he have to suffer from losing his beloved, but also to withstand the cruel act done to him by the bird of evil.

“Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

From beginning to end, the poetic persona is a helpless victim of the nightmare. The last stanza is a grueling agony of his total defeat.

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

However, apart from his personal realm of murky dreams, Poe is also credited with his stately allusions of the classical world. In his poem “Helen” (p. 19), namely, Helen of Troy in Greek mythology (Stoneman 1991: 82-83), Poe, fascinated by the charming beauty of this Goddess, gives us the famous lines,

On desperate seas long wont to roam
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

The exultation of Greece and Rome is typical among those who consider classics to be Greek and Roman models in art and literature. In his “Shine, Republic” (pp. 64-65), Robinson Jeffers believes that “The love of freedom has been the quality of Western man”. Just as Tacitus and Aeschylus relate in their dignity to Washington, the classical world also relates in spirit and adventure to modern America. “For the Greeks the love of beauty, for Rome of ruling; for the present age the passionate love of discovery.” This is to say that art, politics, and science are related to each other through the same driving force: “in noble passion we are one.”

And you, America, that passion made you. You were not born to prosperity,
you were born to love freedom.
You did not say “en masse”, you said “independence”. But we cannot have
all the luxuries and freedom also.

It was unusual why Jeffers said so. Since there is no dating of the poem, is it likely that the poem was written during the Great Depression, when America was staggering and struggling to keep its economy going? The poem seems irrelevant to today’s America; it has both luxuries and freedom. The above couplet reveals not only the poet’s romantic patriotism, but also his romanticized and too highly idealized America.

In contrast with the romanticists, realist poets, especially adherents to imagism, gained popularity not through big themes, such as freedom and patriotism, but by selecting

everyday objects and presenting them as they are. The most often cited examples of imagism are “The Red Wheelbarrow” (p. 60) by William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and “In a Station of the Metro” (p. 62) by Ezra Pound (1885-1972).

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much
depends upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

This poem is a “painting” by words. The focus is “the red wheelbarrow”, and therefore “so much depends on [it]”. Notice also how the poet puts the objects and their colors in sharp contrast: “wheelbarrow” vs. “chickens”—still vs. live objects; “red” vs. “white”—their contrast made more lucid by glazing rain water. The lining pattern in this poem is also a crucial determining factor. Without it, the poem would in fact be a single sentence (with participial and prepositional modifiers) and lose much of its imagery and literariness: *So much depends upon the wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.* Now let’s compare Williams’ poem with Pound’s.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Examining the structure of this poem, one might say that it is a metaphor with the link verb *is* omitted. The judgment is not wrong; but the creation of the poem has a much more complex history than that. As reported by Kennedy (1990: 73),

Pound said he wrote this poem to convey an experience one day from a train in the Paris subway (*Métro*), he beheld “suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another”. Originally he had described his impression in a poem of thirty lines long. In [the] final version [above], each line contains an image, which, like a picture, may take the place of a thousand words.

The imagery or poetic image in both Williams’ and Pound’s poems is visual imagery, which appeals to the sense of sight. Other types of imagery are auditory and tactile imagery, appealing respectively to the senses of hearing and touch. Haiku—a poem of three lines, Japanese in origin, with the 5-7-5-syllable fixed pattern—is a very effective form for creating poetic images. Below is an English translation of haiku by Matsuo Basho, in which sight and sound are presented simultaneously.

Heat-lightning streak—
through darkness pierces
the heron’s shriek.

In this poem darkness is presented as a black screen. Simultaneously, it is torn apart by the flash of lightning and pierced by the shriek of a heron. The poem is thus an electric shock to both the senses of sight and hearing.

Imagery is one basic element of poetry. Therefore, an accomplished poet, at one point of his or her career, may possibly write poems with strong images. And imagism, theoretically speaking, is closer to realism than romanticism. (Recall that realism is the showing of things as they really are, or a way of representing life as it seems to the

common reader.) Besides William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pouns, another well-known realist is Robert Frost (1874-1963). As noted in the anthology, “[h]is poems, written mostly in plain speech using a traditional meter, frequently compare the outer, natural world to the inner world of the psyche” (p. 44). Thus the complexity of his poems lies not in the text but in the minds of the readers, probably as a result of different ways of reading and interpretation. For example, the last stanza of Frost’s well-known “Stopping by the Wood on a Snowy Evening” (p. 50) may suggest either denotative or connotative meaning.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep

In this stanza, “keeping promises, finishing the rest of a long journey, and going to sleep afterward” may have either literal or figurative meaning. While both interpretations are possible, many readers, being accustomed to symbolic use of language in poetry, prefer the figurative meaning. That is, while the business at hand may be both enchanting and overwhelming, we should not forget greater aims in life. There are many other things to do along this life-journey, before death finally stops us. Thus the possibility of giving varied interpretations to realist poetry may occasionally bridge the gap between realism and romanticism.

4. WOMEN POETS

It is of special interest to note that the first two poems included in the anthology were written by women poets, one poem each: Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) and Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is the poet with the biggest number of poems (i.e., 9 poems) included in the publication. Women poets are thus accorded prestige and prominence by taking the first place in the list and the highest amount in publication. Overall, out of thirty-nine poets in the anthology, there are eleven women poets (28%). This is a very significant representation, considering that the early history of America generally gives us a picture of “Wild West” and male struggle, not a picture of graceful aristocracy where women could accomplish prominence through reign or literature. Besides the three women poets mentioned above, the other eight (with the records of their lifetimes and included publication) are Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911, 2 poems), Emma Lazarus (1849-1887, 1 poem), Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919, 1 poem), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946, 1 poem), Sara Teasdale (1884-1933, 1 poem), Marianne Moore (1887-1972, 1 poem), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950, 2 poems), and Jean Toomer (1894-1967, 2 poems). The records of their lifetimes indicate that, except Bradstreet and Wheatley, all of them were born during the nineteenth century. Hence, women poets played a crucial role during the early growth and formation of American poetry.

All of the eleven women poets in the anthology are given brief comments, except Dickinson. Being a prominent major poet, she deserves more elaborate presentation. As discussed earlier, Bradstreet is noted for her romantic love, and Teasdale for her wonderful lyrical poem “Peace”. Wheatley and Harper were black women poets who lodged a protest against slavery; and Toomer, also a black poet, explored “the sensibility of blacks in both rural and urban settings” (p. 74). As an illustrative example of “slavery” poems, let us take a few lines from Harper’s poem “Bury Me in a Free Land” (p. 27).

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.

...

My rest shall be calm in any grave
When none can call his brother a slave.

...

Harper's open and blunt protest against slavery owes to her family's painful experience. Her parents were freed slaves, and so to a certain extent slavery was part of her gruesome personal experience. In fact the persona in the above poem is so desperate and helpless that she can only make her last demand from the grave. It is a demand for freedom and equality, which are parts of basic human rights.

The inclusion of "slavery" poems in the anthology indicates three significant things. First, America in the past was wrong for allowing slavery, and now she honestly admits that she was wrong. Second, "slavery" poems to a certain degree constitute the historical witness for America's past wrong-doing, and this witness is accorded the right place in literature so that the national sin and blunder of the past will never happen again. Third and finally, the inclusion of "slavery" poems in the anthology may well be considered American self-criticism, which is an essential mechanism for the building and rebuilding of the nation that believes in democracy.

Ella Wilcox is often unknowingly credited with the following proverbs, which are in fact the first two lines in her poem "Solitude" (p. 33).

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone.

....

And Gertrude Stein, like E. E. Cummings, intentionally violated syntax for specific poetic effects; and like Edith Sitwell, she was fond of experimenting with the sound of language. The following lines from "Susie Asado" (pp. 41-42) illustrate these points.

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.

...

This is a please this is a please there are the saids to jelly. These are the wets these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy.

...

This verbal play reminds us of children's verse/lore, where the linguistic principle of **arbitrariness** (i.e., meaning is not determined by sound, nor sound by meaning) no longer holds tightly, and is replaced instead by **iconicity** (i.e., sound is suggestive of meaning). Thus poetry may sometimes take us back to our childhood: playing with sound for the sheer joy of it. Finally, Marianne Moore is credited with her defense for poetry, and Edna Millay, the Pulitzer Prize winner in 1923, was regarded as one of the twentieth century's masters of sonnet form.

Emma Lazarus is accorded high literary prestige, especially for her remarkable poem "The New Colossus" (p. 33). It was written in support of the building of a pedestal

for the Statue of Liberty in 1886. “The poem’s closing lines are now inscribed on the monument’s base.”

“Give me your tired, you 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!”

Lazarus was an earnest philanthropist and an ardent advocate for human rights. The above quote is a vivid and true expression of her humanitarian spirit. At the beginning were freedom and egalitarianism; and now Lady Liberty is reaching out, lifting her lamp beside the golden door, offering freedom and promising hopes to the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse, the homeless, and the tempest-tost. Who are they? Humans neglected by their fellow humans? Against such a gruesome view, poetry rings true when it helps to keep humanizing the mankind.

Finally, we come to the eminent poet Emily Dickinson. A contemporary of Whitman (1819-1892), Dickinson (1830-1886) is still considered America’s foremost woman poet. However, unlike Whitman who gained national acclaim and fame after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Dickinson’s “unflinchingly honest, psychologically penetrating, and technically adventurous poems” were unknown to the American public until “Death kindly stopped for [her]”. From her *Selected Poems* (1990, Dover Thrift Edition), we know that “of her more than 1,700 extant poems, only a handful were published in her lifetime” (p.v). And from the anthology under discussion, we know that 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” (p. 29). Naturally, her first poem included in the anthology is about her “casual friendship” with Death.

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.

In the next three stanzas, the poetic persona and Death continued driving slowly, passing the school (where children were playing and learning their lessons), passing the fields of gazing grain, and passing the setting sun. Eventually they paused before a house that seemed to be a swelling ground. Its roof was scarcely visible; its cornice was but a mound. Then the fifth/last stanza concludes the journey,

Since then ‘tis centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses’ heads
Were toward eternity.

This is a formidable poem. Poets usually look at death with pride and dignity (as in Donne’s “Death, Be Not Proud”, in Bryant’s “Thanatopsis”, and in McKay’s “If We Must Die”), with slight ridicule (as in Sandburg’s “The Junk Man”), or with anger and contempt (as in Owen’s “Futility”)—but not with casualness, as Dickinson does. Besides the “death” poem above, she also wrote several other poems (e.g., “Death sets a thing significant”, “My life closed twice before its close”, and “I died for beauty”) celebrating her easy and comfortable acquaintance with Death. These poems show us the new face of Death, and hence make us think of seeing the new face of Life.

The striking difference between Whitman and Dickinson brings greater richness to American poetry. In his “Song of Myself” (p.25) he declares,
 I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

...

In contrast, Dickinson sees not celebrated selfhood but emptiness of individuality, not radiating atoms but gloomy reality, not glorious optimism but torturing uncertainty. Her existential loneliness is most obvious in “I’m nobody! Who are you?” (p. 31).

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!

Both Dickinson and Whitman bring us into the unfathomable depths of selfhood. With Dickinson we are thrown into a bottomless pit; with Whitman we are overwhelmed by the burst of abundant but long untapped spiritual energy. This striking contrast of poetic experience reminds us of the saying “A true poet is one who has tasted the pang of every hell and the bliss of every heaven”. Poetry, I would assume, is the art of saying the unsayable. And the unsayable may bring us rain or sunshine, tears or happiness.

5. THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN POETRY, A VERY BRIEF NOTE

The present state of American poetry has been the accumulative results of more than three and a half centuries’ formation process. However, much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a “blank space” in poetics history. Looking at the lifetime records of the first two poets (i.e., Bradstreet (1612-1672) and Wheatley (1753-1784)), we find out that there is a void of eighty years between Bradstreet’s death (1672) and Wheatley’s birth (1753). The anthology leaves us uninformed as to how much poetry, if any, was written during this “blank space” period. In fact, the true formation of American poetry did not begin until the nineteenth century, as made clear by the lifetime records of the next eight poems included in the anthology: Bryant (1794-1878), Emerson (1803-1882), Longfellow (1807-1882), Poe (1809-1849), Lincoln (1809-1865), Holmes, Sr. (1808-1894), Melville (1819-1891), and Whitman (1819-1891). The rest of the poets were born during the nineteenth century, except the last three: Hughes (1902-1967), Cullen (1903-1946), and Auden (1907-1973); they were born at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus the APLP’s claim that American poetry covers more than 350 years of American culture and history is true, but with the caveat that the first 150 years of this period is nearly a blank space.

As related to the history of the English language, American poetry is essentially “Modern English” poetry. Remnants of Middle English are in scanty use in some poems by earlier writers,² but the presence of these archaic forms is not significant nor causes any

² Remnants of Middle English appearing in earlier poems include some lexicon and syntax. The second pronominals *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, and *ye* are found in slight use in Bradstreet’s “love” poem, Bryant’s “death” poem, Poe’s “Helen” and “The Raven”, Lincoln’s “childhood” poem, and Masters’ “The Unknown”.

difficulty to modern readers' understanding of the poems. Today, American poetry has stood firmly on its new ground. It is free from European domination, or more specifically from the mighty presence of British literature,³ except for its passion for romanticism. The separation of America, including American poetry, from the Old World is best expressed by Whitman's "Europe" (not published in the anthology), written to celebrate the 72nd and 73rd anniversaries of the Declaration of Independence. The poem opens with the following lines.

Suddenly out of its stale and drowsy lair, the lair of slaves,
 Like lightning it lep't half startled at itself,
 Its feet upon the ashes and the rags, its hand tight to the throats of kings,
 O hope and faith!
 O aching close of exiled patriots' lives!
 O many a sickened heart!
 Turn back unto this day and make yourselves afresh.

...

Whitman perceives Europe as a dejected old wild animal, waking up from its slumber in confusion, and unconsciously committing a suicide by strangling its own reign of feudalism. Then Whitman addresses his fellow countrymen—the exiled and suffering compatriots, telling them to hold strongly on faith and hope, and to dwell fully on the present and make themselves afresh. Of course, there is much exaggeration in Whitman's passionate call. What is important here is that patriotism in this poem implies strong nationalism and, more importantly, Americanism. In fact, Americanism is one central theme of Whitman's monumental *Leaves of Grass* (1892 [1958]). This book of poetry contains, among other things, "To the States", "I Hear America Singing", "Long, Too Long America", "America", and "The United States to Old World Critics". Therefore, it is justifiable to say that England has Shakespeare, and America has Whitman.

The echo of Whitman is audibly heard in Carl Sandburg (1878-1967). Also writing in free verse, Sandburg is similarly engaged in the celebration of the common man. Since there are only three of Sandburg's poems published for the anthology, the APLP is right in including "Chicago" (p. 53) and "I Am the People, the Mob" (54). These two poems are the hallmarks of Sandburg's poetry. As discussed earlier, the first half of the twentieth century saw the strong influence of imagism, especially in the poetry of Williams and Pound, and realism, especially in the poetry of Frost and Eliot. The daring verbal experiments by E. E. Cummings (1894-1962) are of particular interest. Among his poetic experiments, his shrewd skill in "jeopardizing syntax" is remarkable. Unfortunately, only one of Cummings' poems is published in the anthology, "since feeling is first"⁴ (p. 74), in

The verb forms *doth*, *shalt*, *returneth*, and *quoth* are found respectively in Bradstreet's "love" poem, Bryant's "death" poem, and Poe's "worm" poem and "The Raven". The adverb *yon*, meaning "over there", is also used in Poe's "Helen". The archaic syntactic structure *verb + not* is found in Bryant's "death" poem (Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night) and in Longfellow's "arrow" poem (It fell to earth, I knew not where).

³ In this respect, it is relevant to note that by the nineteenth century American English, vis-a-vis British English, was already a well-established variety of English. The only poem in the anthology using British English spelling is "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" (pp.1-2), by Wheatley (1753-1784). Besides the word *honourable* in the title, the poem also contains the word *labour*. Notice also that the aristocratic titles "the Right Honourable" and "Earl of ..." indicate specific ranks for nobility in the royal family circles. To today's Americans, such titles would sound strange and ridiculous.

⁴ Note that for his poetry Cummings is strongly against the use of capital letters, including when he wrote his own name, e. e. cummings.

which the “broken syntax” does not show up. I wish the APLP’s choice had been on “anyone lived in a pretty how town”. Its first stanza runs enigmatically as follows.

anyone lived in a pretty how town
 (with up so floating many bells down)
 spring summer autumn winter
 he sang his didn’t he danced his did.

Black sentiments in “slavery” poems, as discussed earlier, show direct appeals and clear intentions. But among the latest generation of black poets in the anthology, their poetry presents more intricate implications. For example, “Sense You Went Away” (p. 41), a four-stanza poem of longing by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), expresses a more subtle protest. Below are the first and last stanzas of the poem.

Seems lak to me de stars don’t shine so bright,
 Seems lak to me de sun done loss his light,
 Seems lak to me der’s nothin’ goin’ right,
 Sence you went away.

...

Seems lak to me I jes can’t he’p but sigh,
 Seems lak to me my th’oat keeps gittin’ dry,
 Seems lak to me a tear stays in ma eye,
 Sence you went away.

As regards its content, the poem clearly tells us that the poetic persona misses his sweetheart very badly. The whole world looks dim and he just wants to cry. With respect to the language of the poem, however, the poet seems to suggest the following: I avoid using standard American English, and intentionally write in Black English dialect, to let you know that Black English is equally good for poetry. In other words, let Black English exist and prevail as it is.

Black English is also the salient feature of “Mother to Son” (p. 77) and “Still Here” (p. 78), two poems written by Langston Hughes (1902-1967). His other four poems in the anthology may well be called “black” poems, because all of them strongly convey black sentiments. From these poems, we may assume that the abolition of slavery more than a century ago did not automatically eradicate problems of racism in the United States. These problems apparently prevailed until the early part or even the first half of the twentieth century. Accordingly, “black” poetry—as shown by the anthology—was often used, and possibly also abused, as an effective means of expressing dissatisfaction among the black community. We may give a sigh of relief, however, not to find in the anthology a single “KKK” poem or any of its kind which advocates white supremacy.⁵

In retrospect, “a literary garden where a thousand flowers bloom” is an appealing but probably not the right metaphor for American poetry. I would prefer the **prairie metaphor**, where thousands of possibilities are there, waiting to be realized through hard work, ingenuity, creativity, imagination, and the spirit of adventure.

6. CLOSING REMARKS

The present article is only one way of looking at the anthology *101 Great American Poetry*. There are many other possible ways of looking at the anthology, much like Wallace Stevens’ poem: there are “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird” (pp. 58-60).

⁵ “KKK” stands for Ku Klux Klan, a secret political organization (in the U.S., especially in the South-East) that advocates white supremacy; its members must be Protestant white men born in the United States (see *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, p. 612).

Moreover, in the same way as a poet may be judged as minor or major, a poem may be judged as good or great (Perrine and Arp 1982: 247-49). A good poem is one that has met all the necessary requirements for accomplishing its purpose, so that it may give its reader literary pleasure and significance. And a great poem, in addition to being good, gives its reader deeper enjoyment, because it dwells more fully on its subject and hence presents a much richer experience. As the reader might recall, Teasdale's "Peace" is very good poetry, and Whitman's "I Sit and Look Out" is great poetry.

Great poetry engages the whole person—senses, imagination, emotion, intellect; it does not touch us merely on one or two sides of our nature. Great poetry seeks not merely to entertain us but to bring us—along with pure pleasure—fresh insights, or renewed insights, and important insights, into the nature of human experience. Great poetry, we might say, gives us a broader and deeper understanding of life, of our fellows, and of ourselves (ibid., p. 248).

As a result, the title of the anthology *101 Great American Poetry* requires further qualifications. These 101 poems are not of the same literary values. A critical evaluation of each poem would give us an across-the-board judgment: some of the poems are good poetry, some very good poetry, and some really great poetry. Therefore, the adjective "Great" in the anthology title should be understood not in the strict sense of the above definition, but in a broad sense by referring to its general appeal to the American public.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century—when today's America seems best represented by the business empires of General Motors, Wall Street, and Microsoft; the glamorous silver screens of Hollywood; and the unbridled physiques of Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali, and Michael Jordan—it is truly delightful to know that, together with the genius of Edison, Einstein, and Oppenheimer, there prevails the blooming poetry of Longfellow, Whitman, and Dickinson. From Ann Bradstreet to W. H. Auden, American poetry has proven its literary standing through the centuries. And Auden's optimism⁶ should be appealing to any avid poetry reader and writer.

Follow poet, follow right,
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

...

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

The unconstraining voice out of the dark, the healing power out of deserted humanity, and the joy of freedom out of space-and-time's bondage—these are essentials of poetry. And what is better in life than freedom, love, and mutual appreciation?

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⁶ The cited quatrains are the closing lines of Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (not included in the anthology), but the appeal of the poem is universal enough so that it is considered relevant to the present purpose.

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And American poetry found its true beginnings in Whitman and Dickinson, who did their writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, not at either end.) But it's not really a matter of calendar. American poetry is ready for something new because our poets have been writing in the same way for a long time now. There is fatigue, something stagnant about the poetry being written today. Lyric poets pursue knowledge of and through themselves; epic poets, at the other extreme, require a knowledge of the world and how it works. That is because the epic poem renders a world order, and does so with a moral urgency. My suggestion here is that the ubiquity of the lyric poem today, to the exclusion of other modes of poetry, is another sign of poverty in the art form. Read through biographies about the greatest classic 19th century poets and check out their poetry. The 19th century saw the growing importance of women in poetry. Women like Elizabeth Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Amy Lowell showed the world just how well a woman can perform when given the chance at a quality education. Many other poets, such as E.E. Cummings, started a poetry revolution. What the literature world thought poetry meant began being challenged towards the end of the century. New thoughts on poem writing poured into the 20th century, expanded, and is still being explored today. American literature - American literature - Poetry: The post-World War II years produced an abundance of strong poetry but no individual poet as dominant and accomplished as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, or William Carlos Williams, whose long careers were coming to an end. The major poetry from 1945 to 1960 was Modernist in its ironic texture yet formal in its insistence on regular rhyme and metre. Through his personal charisma and his magazine *The Fifties* (later *The Sixties* and *The Seventies*), Robert Bly encouraged a number of poets to shift their work toward the individual voice and open form; they included Galway Kinnell, James Wright, David Ignatow, and, less directly, Louis Simpson, James Dickey, and Donald Hall. Major American poets of the nineteenth century include Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Edgar Allan Poe was another significant writer who greatly influenced later authors. Mark Twain was the first major American writer to be born away from the East Coast. The first writer to be able to support himself through the income generated by his publications alone was Washington Irving. He completed his first major book in 1809 titled *A History of New-York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*. [21]. 19th Century Poets. American French British Indian Canadian. Most of us have grown up reading the poetic verses of 19th century great poets. Be it Robert Browning or Charles Baudelaire, E.E. Cummings or Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Louisa May Alcott or William Morris, the poets have rendered a part of their self in their works which is why one can connect to it soulfully. While some poets revolve their work in a particular culture and genre there are others who portray the social and cultural state through the poetic traditions. The last century saw an influx of poets who penned in varying genres from narrative poetry to epic ones, dramatic, satirical light, lyrical, elegies, verse, prose style and even speculative poetry.