**Socially Critical American Poetry Handout:** *Transcendentalism, Realism, Imagism, Harlem Renaissance*

***Focus for annotation: How is language used to communicate a message of social criticism? What devices do you notice? What specifically is being criticized and why?***

**TRANSCENDENTALISM**

**Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)**

**1. Because I Could Not Stop For Death** *(published posthumously in 1890)*

Because I could not stop for Death –

He kindly stopped for me

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

And Immortality.

We slowly drove -- He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess -- in the Ring --

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain

We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather -- He passed Us --

The Dews drew quivering and chill –

For only Gossamer, my Gown –

My Tippet -- only Tulle --

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground --

The Roof was scarcely visible --

The Cornice -- in the Ground –

Since then -- 'tis Centuries –

and yet Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity –

**Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**

**2. Song of Myself** *(Excerpts; first edition 1855; latest edition with numbered selections 1881)*

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their

parents the same,

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,

Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,

Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,

I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,

Nature without check with original energy.

6

A child said What is the grass?

fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child?

I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,

I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,

It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out

of their mothers' laps,

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,

Darker than the colorless beards of old men,

Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,

And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken

soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the

end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

**3. I Hear America Singing (1860)**

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,

The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,

The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,

The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,

The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,

The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,

The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

**4. When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer (1865)**

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,

When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,

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

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,

Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

**5. By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame (1867)**

By the bivouac's fitful flame,

A procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow—but first I note,

The tents of the sleeping army, the fields' and woods' dim outline,

The darkness lit by spots of kindled fire, the silence,

Like a phantom far or near an occasional figure moving,

The shrubs and trees, (as I lift my eyes they seem to be stealthily watching me,)

While wind in procession thoughts, O tender and wondrous thoughts,

Of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away;

A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground,

By the bivouac's fitful flame.

**REALISM**

**Robert Frost (1874-1963)**

**6. A Time to Talk** *(1920)*  
When a friend calls to me from the road  
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,  
I don't stand still and look around  
On all the hills I haven't hoed,  
And shout from where I am, 'What is it?'  
No, not as there is a time to talk.  
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,  
Blade-end up and five feet tall,  
And plod: I go up to the stone wall  
For a friendly visit.

**IMAGISM**

* **A style of poetry devoted to economic use of language**
* **Characterized by clear, precise description of moments in time with no excess verbiage**

**William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)**

**7. This is Just to Say** *(1934)*

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold

**HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

**Langston Hughes (1902-1967)**

**8. I Too, Sing America** *(1945)*

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I’ll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody’ll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They’ll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.