Whitman and Dickinson
Compare and Contrast
Whitman: Bio

- Whitman was a man who grew up in the country however lived in the city during his life and worked in the city, constantly exposed to writing and literature. Whitman had a job as a journalist and editor (of *The Freeman*) in addition to being a nurse in the Civil War. Whitman was a social butterfly who was always involved with public events and well liked by many in America. Whitman’s greatest writing, *Leaves of Grass*, was a major piece of his responsible for bringing him the unimaginable praise and respect from many people including Mr. Emerson. (However, many critics disliked Whitman’s different, out of the box, style and content).
Dickinson: Bio

- Dickinson was born into a prosperous and very religious family who lived in New England. Dickinson was very spirited but described herself “a mourner among children” while in school. (Dickinson’s more secluded preferences in her childhood continued into her adulthood as well and her seclusion somewhat impacted the way in which she wrote her poetry.) Dickinson was very passionate with many loves in her life. In one particular event her father took Dickinson on a trip to D.C. to distract her from loving a married man but she was then introduced to Charles Wadsworth and directed her passion towards him until he moved to the west coast. Dickinson then became a recluse and focused on her writing and her chores and gives up on having her poems published and so she writes for herself.
Whitman: Content

- Whitman was a bold and expressive person and his personality showed in his writing. Whitman’s socialness and desire to write for everybody was reflected in the topics of his writing. Whitman’s content was based on topics of patriotism and references to the bible, topics that were applicable to everyone and anyone during that time period. In addition Whitman’s content was positive and uplifting. Whitman looked at what was good about life and simply wrote about it. In his poems Whitman also focuses on the individual and shows that individuals should be treated as such and appreciated. An example of Whitman’s patriotism and his uplifting wisdom can be seen in his poem *I Hear America Singing*. Whitman writes, “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” (9-11). Whitman expresses the celebration for the individual, being proud of his work and therefore for his country which of course, brings a positive and uplifting aspect to his poem.
Dickinson: Content

Dickinson was herself isolated however her strong expression of her own passion and opinions and feelings never cease to appear in her poems. Dickinson fills her poems with much more symbolism due to the fact that her poetry is not meant for all to interpret but instead for her personal purposes and gains. Dickinson’s poems, many times, focus on the themes of life. For example in *I died for Beauty- but was scarce* Dickinson focuses on how life moves on and events and different elements of life slowly pass with time (such as beauty and truth) but life moves on. Dickinson focuses on topics that are ordinary events but unlike Whitman, Dickinson brings the darker side to these ordinary events with a solemnness but passion as well. In many of her poems, Dickinson discusses the harsh truths of death and mortality while intertwining deeper meaning throughout the poem as well to make it not as uplifting as Whitman but much more heavy, much more focused and much more depressing.
Whitman: Style

- Whitman’s style is so unique and different from any other poets which is one of the reasons for his immense success and popularity among the masses. Whitman breaks down the iron box that holds poets accountable to fitting their thoughts into a certain amount of lines while continuing a perfect rhyme scheme and writes basically what he wants with no rhyme or reason. Whitman introduces free verse to the poetry world as he demolishes the set of rules that confine many of these romantics like himself to the very restrictions that many of them are trying to escape. Whitman also uses cadence to create a very organic and flowing style in his writing which allows him to continue with his many rambling lines of thought and observation. Whitman constantly is using this cadence in order to fully express his opinions as well as using the technique of catalogue to capture all that he observed. (In Whitman’s poem I Hear America Singing he writes long lines of great detail. For example, he says, “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear./ Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,” (1-2). With Whitman’s rambling comes a lot of repetition in his writing along with much self contradiction. However, Whitman’s brilliance overcomes his weaknesses as he uses extravagant word choice while becoming the first to break the bonds of rhyme and reason.
Dickinson: Style

Dickinson’s writing is thought out and described to be written with the precision of a diamond cutter. Dickinson made sure to carefully choose her words in order to plant the exact thought in a person’s mind whereas Whitman wrote with so much free verse and in such a natural way so different from Dickinson. Dickinson was a poet who used slant rhyme to its fullest and made sure to mold her poems into the perfect examples of set meter. For example, in her poem *I died for Beauty- but was scarce*, Dickinson shows how she uses slant rhyme to her advantage to make certain words or phrases stand out in order emphasize a meaning. Dickinson writes, “And so, as Kinsmen, met at Night-/We talked between the Rooms-/Until the Moss had reached out lips-/And covered up our names-” (9-12). Dickinson is made different from other poets with her terrible but purposeful misuse of punctuation. Dickinson places capitals where they should not be (but she does this to capture the reader’s attention, focus them to that word, and allow them to understand its importance) and she uses many hyphens which put abrupt jolts into her writing to make it more serious, give the reader time to react and respond to the previous phrase’s importance and to add a certain solemnness to her poems as she diverges from flow and gravitates towards impact.
The Conclusion

- Overall, the conclusion that can be made about these two poets is that they are both unique but on opposite ends of the poetry spectrum. Whitman stands strong and tall, his flowing and optimistic writing is beloved and embraced whereas Dickinson isolates herself to the corner precisely choosing how she will explain the symbolic meaning of death in ordinary life, the whole time her brilliance unrecognized. Finally, the conclusion can be made that Whitman represents a bit of a transcendentalist with his optimism and flow whereas Dickinson represents the dark romantics (aside from extreme settings or situations such as Poe but more with her tone and symbolism) with her topics of death accompanied by precision and rhyme. Both brilliant writers who simply express their brilliance in exact opposition.