The Neal Steinman Poetry Trail
This poetry trail is dedicated Neal Steinman who served as Bond Counsel for the Atlantic County Utilities Authority from 1980 to 1993. Without his extraordinary leadership, contributions such as the Wastewater and Solid Waste programs and the Haneman Environmental Park would have never been implemented. In his honor, we have presented his favorite passage from "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman and have created this trail so that his memory lives on at the ACUA forever.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,
   And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand,
   and the egg of the wren,
   And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Walt Whitman
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Robert Frost (1874 - 1963)

Robert Lee Frost was one of America's leading 20th-century poets and a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize. An essentially pastoral poet often associated with rural New England, Frost wrote poems whose philosophical dimensions transcend any region.

Frost's importance as a poet derives from the power and memorability of particular poems. "The Death of the Hired Man" combines lyric and dramatic poetry in blank verse. "After Apple-Picking" is a free-verse dream poem with philosophical undertones. "Mending Wall" demonstrates Frost's simultaneous command of lyrical verse, dramatic conversation, and ironic commentary. "The Road Not Taken," "Birches" and the oft-studied "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" exemplify Frost's ability to join the pastoral and philosophical modes in lyrics of unforgettable beauty.

The poetic and political conservatism of Frost caused him to lose favor with some literary critics, but his reputation as a major poet is secure. He unquestionably succeeded in realizing his life's ambition: to write "a few poems it will be hard to get rid of."

An interpretation of "The Road Not Taken"

Frost wrote this poem to fool his readers. He makes it seem like choosing a path to continue on is a very important decision that should be given careful thought. The way he does this is by subtly admitting that both paths are identical when he says, they were "worn really about the same." He is commenting that most people expend too much energy in trying to make the "correct" decision when in reality, it is what you do after you make your decision that really matters.

Fact:

Robert Frost wrote a poem for John F. Kennedy's inauguration but the sun was too bright to read it so he recited a different one from memory instead.
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The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bend in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, on the West Hills of Long Island, New York. His mother, Louisa Van Velsor, of Dutch descent and Quaker faith, whom he adored, was barely literate. She never read his poetry, but gave him unconditional love. His father of English lineage, was a carpenter and builder of houses, and a stern disciplinarian. It is doubtful that his father read any of his son's poetry, or would have understood it if he had. Young Walt, the second oldest, was withdrawn from public school at the age of eleven to help support the family. At the age of twelve he started to learn the printer's trade, and fell in love with the written and printed word. He was mainly self-taught. He read voraciously, and became acquainted with Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Scott early in life. He knew the Bible thoroughly, and as a God-intoxicated poet, desired to inaugurate a religion uniting all of humanity in bonds of friendship.

In 1836, at the age of 17, he began his career as an innovative teacher in the one-room school houses of Long Island. He permitted his students to call him by his first name, and devised learning games for them in arithmetic and spelling. He continued to teach school until 1841, when he turned to journalism as a full-time career. He soon became editor for a number of Brooklyn and New York papers. From 1846 to 1847 Whitman was the editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Whitman went to New Orleans in 1848, where he was editor for a brief time of the "New Orleans Crescent". In that city he had become fascinated with the French language. Many of his poems contain words of French derivation. It was in New Orleans that he experienced at first hand the viciousness of slavery in the slave markets of that city. On his return to Brooklyn in the fall of 1848, he founded a "free soil" newspaper, the "Brooklyn Freeman". Between 1848 and 1855 he developed the style of poetry that so astonished Ralph Waldo Emerson. The "sunbeam" that illuminated a great deal of Whitman's poetry was Music. It was one of the major sources of his inspiration. Many of his four hundred poems contain musical terms, names of instruments, and names of composers. He insisted that music was "greater than wealth, greater than buildings, ships, religions, paintings." Whitman's final essay relives his thirty years of struggle in writing the well acclaimed Leaves of Grass. In 1892, one year after writing this essay, Whitman died.

Fact

Walt Whitman's father, Walt Sr., constantly struggled to support his ever-growing family of nine children, four of whom were handicapped.
Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.

Walt Whitman

an excerpt from
Song of the Open Road
Carl Sandburg (1878-1967)

Carl August Sandburg was born the son of Swedish immigrants August and Clara Anderson Sandburg. Carl Sandburg quit school after 8th grade and worked until entering Lombard College. Sandburg's college years shaped his literary talents and political views. While at Lombard, Sandburg joined the Poor Writers' Club, an informal literary organization whose members met to read and criticize poetry.

Sandburg was virtually unknown to the literary world when, in 1914, a group of his poems appeared in the nationally circulated Poetry magazine. Two years later his book Chicago Poems was published, and the thirty-eight-year-old author found himself on the brink of a career that would bring him international acclaim.

Sandburg's Complete Poems won him a second Pulitzer Prize in 1951. Sandburg died at his North Carolina home July 22, 1967. In the small Carl Sandburg Park behind his Galesberg birthplace, his ashes were placed beneath Remembrance Rock, a red granite boulder.

An interpretation of “Fog”

Sandburg characterizes the fog as a quiet, yet stubborn cat that sneaks “over the harbor and city” which inconveniences people. He mentions that even though it is temporarily annoying, the fog is does not stay very long. Fog has an unpredictable personality of quietly coming and going just like typical housecat which is why Sandburg chose to compare the two in his poem.

Fact

Fog occurs when moisture from the surface of the Earth evaporates; as this evaporated moisture moves upward, it cools and condenses into the familiar phenomenon of fog. Fog differs from clouds in that fog touches the surface of the Earth, while clouds do not.

The Rum Tum Tugger

The Rum Tum Tugger is a Curious Cat: If you offer him pheasant he would rather have grouse. If you put him in a house he would much prefer a flat, If you put him in a flat then he’d rather have a house. If you set him on a mouse then he only wants a rat, If you set him on a rat then he’d rather chase a mouse. Yes the Rum Tum Tugger is a Curious Cat-- And there isn’t any call for me to shout it: For he will do As he do do And there's no doing anything about it!

T.S. Eliot
T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in Missouri on September 26, 1888. He lived in St. Louis during the first eighteen years of his life and attended Harvard University. In 1910, he left the United States for the Sorbonne, having earned both undergraduate and Masters degrees and having contributed several poems to the Harvard Advocate. After a year in Paris, he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, but returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914. The following year, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood and began working in London, first as a teacher, and later for Lloyd's Bank.

It was in London that Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary Ezra Pound, who recognized his poetic genius at once, and assisted in the publication of his work in a number of magazines, most notably “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in Poetry in 1915. His first book of poems, Prufrock and Other Observations, was published in 1917, and immediately established him as a leading poet of the avant-garde. With the publication of The Waste Land in 1922, now considered by many to be the single most influential poetic work of the twentieth century, Eliot's reputation began to grow to nearly mythic proportions; by 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world.

His major later poems include Ash Wednesday (1930) and Four Quartets (1943); his books of literary and social criticism include The Sacred Wood (1920), The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1933), After Strange Gods (1934), and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1940). Eliot was also an important playwright, whose verse dramas include Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion, and The Cocktail Party.

He became a British citizen in 1927, long associated with the publishing house of Faber & Faber, he published many younger poets, and eventually became director of the firm. After a notoriously unhappy first marriage, Eliot separated from his first wife in 1933, and was remarried, to Valerie Fletcher, in 1956. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, and died in London in 1965.

An interpretation of “The Rum Tum Tugger”

Eliot addresses the fact that cats are unpredictable creatures in this poem. They have their own agendas and act on their own free will. They do not seem to care what their owners want them to do because they are a very stubborn species. Eliot is portraying the fact that cats are never satisfied but that catowners understand this and think that their personalities are part of a cat’s charm.

Did you know?
This poem was adapted into a song for the musical *Cats* that ran on Broadway for 22 years.

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Carl Sandburg

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

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T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

Carl Sandburg
Williams Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, near the city of Paterson. He studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. There he became friends with Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle and started to think of his medical career as a means of supporting himself while he composed poetry, even as he interned in New York City and pursued postgraduate studies in Germany. Williams made Rutherford his lifelong home and practiced medicine until he retired, writing at night and spending weekends in New York City with other writers and artists.

Williams consciously wrote poetry that provided a counterpoint to that of Frost, Pound, and Eliot. In his work, he wished to speak like an American within an American context of small cities, immigrants, and workers. He wanted his poetic line to reflect the rhythm of everyday speech and drew his subject matter from ordinary surroundings—a painting, a red wheelbarrow, a dish of plums. Williams's collections include Spring and All (both poetry and prose; 1923); Paterson, which was published in five books (1946, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1958); and Pictures from Brueghel (1962). Williams also wrote essays, some of which are collected in In the American Grain (1925).

An interpretation of “The Red Wheelbarrow”

This poem is all about imagery. Williams wants the reader to imagine the scene and get a sense of humans and nature working together to survive. He paints a vivid picture by stating the colors of the objects to highlight the contrast between the red wheelbarrow and the white chickens. “With careful word choice, attention to language, and unusual stanza breaks Williams has turned an ordinary sentence into poetry” (Gale Poetry Resource Center).

Did you know?

Many artists who read this poem are inspired to paint pictures, take photographs or create images in Photoshop to depict this famous scene just as Robert Hunt did on the facing page.

The First Book

Open it.
Go ahead, it won't bite.
Well … maybe a little.
More a nip, like. A tingle.
It's pleasurable, really.
You see, it keeps on opening.
You may fall in.
Sure, it's hard to get started;
remember learning to use
knife and fork? Dig in:
You'll never reach bottom.
It's not like it's the end of the world—
just the world as you think
you know it.

Rita Dove
The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

 glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

William Carlos Williams

Rita Dove (1952-present)

Rita Frances Dove was born August 28, 1952 in Akron, Ohio. She served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995. She received her undergraduate degree in English in 1973 from Miami University of Ohio and spent two semesters as a Fulbright Scholar at the Universität Tübingen in Germany. She earned her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1977. She taught creative writing at Arizona State University from 1981 to 1989 and now holds the chair as Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

Her most famous work is *Thomas and Beulah* published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 1986, a collection of poems based on the lives of her grandparents, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1987.

Rita Dove writes many poems about African Americans, but also focuses on other subjects of a more universal nature.

An Interpretation of “The First Book”

Rita Dove wants more people to give reading a chance. She believes that once someone reads a good book for pleasure, they will want to read other books and will eventually become a bibliophile. This same idea holds true for anything new or intimidating— if you just start whatever it is that you are hesitant to do then you will find that it is not as bad as you initially perceived it to be. The quote comes to mind, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," Dove is using this same concept in the context of people who are neglecting to discover books and as a result, are missing out on expanding "the world as [they] think [they] know it."

Fact

The world's oldest multiple-page book - in the lost Etruscan language - has gone on display in Bulgaria's National History Museum in Sofia. It dates back to 600BC which means the book is 2,605 years old! It contains six bound sheets of 24 carat gold, with illustrations of a horse-rider, a mermaid, a harp and soldiers.
Helen Keller (1880-1968)

Helen was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama on June 27, 1880. However, her real life began one day in March of 1887, when she was almost seven years old. She was always to call that the most important day I can remember in my life. It was the day when Annie Sullivan, a 20-year-old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, came to be her teacher. They were inseparable until Annie's death in 1936.

Even as a little girl Helen expressed a desire to go to college. In 1900, she entered Radcliffe College and graduated from there cum laude in 1904. Throughout these years, Annie Sullivan laboriously spelled books and lectures into her pupil's hand. While still at Radcliffe, Helen Keller began the writing career, which was to continue for 50 years. In addition to *The Story of My Life*, she wrote 11 other books and numerous articles on blindness, deafness, social issues and women's rights.

Despite the broad range of her interests, Helen Keller never lost sight of the needs of others who were blind and deaf-blind. She was a personal friend of Dr. Peter J. Salmon, Executive Director of the Industrial Home for the Blind and lent her support to the establishment of what has become known as the Helen Keller National Center for the Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults. She was a visitor to a number of facilities and programs operated by IHB.

In 1936, Helen Keller moved to Westport, Connecticut, where she lived until her death on June 1, 1968, at the age of 87. In his eulogy at her funeral, Senator Lister Hill said of her, "She will live on, one of the few, immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world there are no boundaries to courage and faith."

Keller was a highly intelligent and sensitive woman who wrote, spoke and labored incessantly for the betterment of others.

An interpretation of *The Story of My Life*

Helen Keller always had a positive attitude despite being both deaf and blind. In this excerpt, she emphasizes how wonderful the sense of touching can be. Her feeling senses are heightened to compensate for her lack of seeing and hearing abilities. Touching allowed her to use her imagination to envision the beauty of nature. Her constant optimism and help from Annie Sullivan allowed to her accomplish more than any other deaf-blind person in history. Helen Keller is remembered as an amazing person who never let her disabilities get in her way.

Fact

Helen was the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college.

The Leaf and the Tree

When will you learn, myself, to be a dying leaf on a living tree? 
Budding, swelling, growing strong, 
Wearing green, but not for long, 
Drawing sustenance from air, 
That other leaves, and you not there, 
May bud, and at the autumn's call 
Wearing russet, ready to fall? 
Has not this trunk a deed to do 
Unguessed by small and tremulous you? 
Shall not these branches in the end 
To wisdom and the truth ascend? 
And the great lightning plunging by 
Look sidewise with a golden eye 
To glimpse a tree so tall and proud
It sheds its leaves upon a cloud? 

Here, I think, is the heart's grief:
The tree, no mightier than the leaf, 
Makes firm its root and spreads it crown 
And stands; but in the end comes down.

That airy top no boy could climb
Is trodden in a little time
By cattle on their way to drink.
The fluttering thoughts a leaf can think, 
That hears the wind and waits its turn, 
Have taught it all a tree can learn.
Time can make soft that iron wood.
The tallest trunk that ever stood,
In time, without a dream to keep,
Crawls in beside the root to sleep.

Edna St. Vincent Millay
What a joy it is to feel the soft, springy earth under my feet once more, to follow grassy roads that lead to ferny brooks where I can bathe my fingers in a cataract of rippling notes, or to clamber over a stone wall into green fields that tumble and roll and climb in riotous gladness!

Helen Keller

Excerpt from
The Story of My Life

An interpretation of “The Leaf and the Tree”

Millay is gently reminding her readers that every living thing dies. Even though it is bigger and stronger, a tree will eventually experience death just as a small leaf will. Millay hopes that by understanding death, it makes it easier to acknowledge the fact that it is a part of life. By accepting this idea, it motivates people to make the most of their lives without living in fear.

Fact

There is an excellent children's book called The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life For All Ages that explains the different phases of life and helps children deal with the issues associated with death and to help them cope with loss.
Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, on October 27, 1914. After grammar school he moved to London where, in 1934, his first book of poetry, *Eighteen Poems*, was published. At this early age, he revealed unusual power in the use of poetic diction and imagery; the volume won him immediate critical acclaim. He also published *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and *In Country Sleep* (1951); both works are generally regarded as containing his finest writing. Thomas's other works include *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939) which contains both poetry and prose.

After the war, Thomas was a literary commentator for BBC radio. *Under Milk Wood* (1954), a play for voices, was originally written for radio broadcast; when Thomas read it for its first public performance in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1953, it was still unfinished. The work became his most famous piece. Noted for his readings of his own verse, Thomas became legendary in the United States, where he gave many lecture tours and gained a wide following. Nevertheless, his last years were shadowed by an increasingly tragic view of his own tempestuous life. His death in New York City on November 9, 1953 was brought on by alcoholism.

An interpretation of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”

The narrator is speaking to his weak father who is laying on his death bed. The child knows that his/her father is a wise man who has lived a good life and that he deserves to live longer. The child keeps helplessly repeating “Do not go gentle into that good night/Rage, rage against the dying of the light” to encourage the father to fight to stay alive. The reader gets the impression that the narrator is not ready to say goodbye to him yet and is saying these things in desperation. Thomas is commenting that all great, strong men deserve to live long and fulfilling lives because they have made the world a better place for their families and everyone else around them.

Fact

Dylan Thomas is the world’s most well-known English-language poet from Wales.

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an excerpt from

**Song of the Rolling Earth**

The earth does not argue,
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,
Does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten, promise,
Makes no discriminations, has no conceivable failures,
Closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out,
Of all the powers, objects, states, it notifies, shuts none out.

*Walt Whitman*
Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

An interpretation of “Song of the Rolling Earth”

Whitman wants the reader to understand that the earth is a friend to all. Its non-judgmental ‘personality’ allows individuals to be themselves and appreciate the goodness of nature. By personifying the earth as a friend, the reader should begin to realize that they should take advantage of the opportunity to spend time with an amicable acquaintance. Being outdoors is an uplifting and pleasant experience and everyone is invited to utilize the earth as a new friend.

Fact

Walt Whitman lived out his final years in Camden, New Jersey.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

Gwendolyn Brooks was an award-winning African American woman poet. Born in Topeka, Kansas, she grew up in and remained in Chicago, Illinois. Although she also wrote a novel, an autobiography and some other prose works, she was noted primarily as a poet. Her 1949 book of poetry, \textit{Annie Allen}, received a Pulitzer Prize, the first won by an African American. In 1968, she was made Poet Laureate of Illinois. Other awards she received included the Frost Medal, the Shelley Memorial Award, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters award. Her poetry is rooted in the poor and mostly African-American South Side of Chicago. She initially published her poetry as a columnist for the Chicago Defender, an African American newspaper. Although her poems range in style from traditional ballads and sonnets to using blues rhythms in free verse, her characters are often drawn from the poor inner city. She is seen as a leader of the Black Arts movement.

After her first book of poetry was published in 1945, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship. After John F. Kennedy invited her to a Library of Congress poetry festival in 1962, she began a college teaching career which saw her teach at Columbia College Chicago, Northeastern Illinois University, Elmhurst College, Columbia University, Clay College of New York, and the University of Wisconsin. She was the 1985 Library of Congress’ Consultant in Poetry, a one year position whose title changed the next year to Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. In 1994, she was chosen as the National Endowment for the Humanities’s Jefferson Lecturer, one of the highest honors for American literature.

An interpretation of “We Real Cool”

The characters speaking in this poem are supposedly high school dropouts that are hanging out in a pool hall when they should be at school. Brooks intended for the reader to say the word “We” softly to demonstrate the basic uncertainty that these young rebels feel even though they are enjoying being “cool” and not having to go to school. At the end, the speaker blatantly states, “we die soon” which proves to the reader that him and his friends know that they will not last very long living such a carefree and impulsive lifestyle without an education.

Fact

Brooks' mother discovered Gwendolyn's gift for writing when she was only seven years old.

The Arm

A doll's pink, broken-off arm was floating in a pond the man had come to with his dog. The arm had no sad child nearby to say it was hers, no parent to rescue it with a stick or branch.

\textit{Stephen Dunn}
We Real Cool

The Pool Players

Seven at the Golden Shovel

Stephenson Dunn (1939-present)

Stephen Dunn was born in New York City in 1939. He earned a B.A. in history and English from Hofstra University, attended the New School Writing Workshops, and finished his M.A. in creative writing at Syracuse University. Dunn has worked as a professional basketball player, an advertising copywriter, and an editor, as well as a professor of creative writing.


He has taught poetry and creative writing and held residencies at Wartburg College, Wichita State University, Columbia University, University of Washington, Syracuse University, Southwest Minnesota State College, Princeton University, and University of Michigan. Dunn is currently Richard Stockton College of New Jersey Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing and lives in Port Republic, New Jersey.

An interpretation of “The Arm”

This poem has a sad tone because the doll’s arm has been discarded into the pond. The fact that the doll has been dismembered and the owner of the doll did not care enough to rescue their toy sends a message that everything is temporary. Youth does not last for very long and it is sad when children reach adolescence and start making conscience decisions that are moving themselves away from the naivete of childhood.

Fact

Placed head to toe, Barbie (R) dolls and family members sold since 1959 would circle the earth more than seven times.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks
Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892 - 1950)

Edna St. Vincent Millay, born in 1892 in Maine, grew to become one of the premier twentieth-century lyric poets. She was also an accomplished playwright and speaker who often toured giving readings of her poetry. Millay enjoyed her free-spirited childhood and adolescence and the creativity that it inspired.

At the age of twenty, she entered her poem *Renascence* into a poetry contest for the *The Lyric Year*, and ended up winning fourth place. It was that poem which really started her literary career, beginning with a scholarship to the prestigious Vassar College. Millay kept up her writing, both poetic and dramatic while studying at Vassar. It was during this time that she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her book *The Harp-Weaver and other Poems*.

After graduation she moved to Greenwich Village which suited her personality because the area was known as a particularly free-thinking and artistic borough. Millay eventually married and then died in 1950 of a smoking-related illness at her home in New York.

An interpretation of “First Fig”

Millay uses a candle as a metaphor for life. By stating that the candle will burn out relatively soon, it encourages the reader to live their own life to the fullest. Millay reminds her readers that they should hold an optimistic view on life and enjoy everything that it has to offer. By focusing on death or enemies, it is only taking for granted the time one is given to live on this earth. Every human being must appreciate the present and not dwell on the past or the future. Millay cleverly addresses both her friends and her foes in the poem to demonstrate that no one should dwell on hating anyone else because life is too short to have enemies.

Fact

Although it is considered a fruit, the fig is actually a flower that is inverted into itself.

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*an excerpt from “Motto”*

I stay cool, and dig all jive,
That’s the way I stay alive.
My motto, as I live and learn, is
Dig and be dug, in return.

*Langston Hughes*
Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Born in Joplin, Missouri, James Langston Hughes was a member of an abolitionist family. He began writing poetry in eighth grade and continued writing throughout high school and college. Hughes dropped out of the engineering program at Columbia University and continued writing poetry instead. His first published poem was also one of his most famous, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, and it appeared in Brownie's Book. Later, his poems, short plays, essays and short stories appeared in the NAACP publication Crisis Magazine and in Opportunity Magazine and other publications. One of his favorite pastimes was sitting in the clubs listening to blues, jazz and writing poetry. He returned to Harlem, in 1924, the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. During this period, his work was frequently published and his writing flourished. At this same time, Hughes accepted a job with Dr. Carter G. Woodson, editor of the Journal of Negro Life and History and founder of Black History Week in 1926. Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, where he received his B.A. degree in 1929. In 1943, he was awarded an honorary Lit. D by his alma mater, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935 and a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1940. Hughes was a prolific writer throughout his life. In the forty-odd years between his first book in 1926 and his death in 1967, he devoted his life to writing and lecturing. He wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of "editorial" and "documentary" fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies. Hughes died of cancer on May 22, 1967.

An interpretation of “Motto”

Hughes is giving his readers encouragement to live life to the fullest and reiterating that you should “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Hughes wants people to enjoy their lives and not focus on hate or discrimination. By writing optimistic and upbeat poetry during the Harlem Renaissance, he made a name for himself as an important African American leader in a time where Civil Rights were in turmoil.

Fact

Langston’s residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission. His block of East 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place".
American poet, essayist, and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts. After studying at Harvard and teaching for a brief time, Emerson entered the ministry and was a preacher until 1831. After traveling to Europe, Emerson returned home to New England, where he became known for challenging traditional thought. In 1835, he married his second wife, Lydia Jackson, and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. Known in the local literary circle as “The Sage of Concord,” Emerson became the chief spokesman for Transcendentalism, the American philosophic and literary movement. Emerson wrote a poetic prose, ordering his essays by recurring themes and images. His poetry, on the other hand, is often called harsh and didactic. Among Emerson’s most well known works are Essays, First and Second Series (1841, 1844). His best-known addresses are The American Scholar (1837) and The Divinity School Address, which he delivered before the graduates of the Harvard Divinity School. A believer in the “divine sufficiency of the individual,” Emerson was a steady optimist and his beliefs important to the history of American culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson died of pneumonia in 1882.

"Trust thyself" was Emerson’s motto and it was adopted by well-known Americans such as Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and W. E. Channing.

William Shakespeare

Under the Greenwood Tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

Who doth ambition shun,
And loves to live i’ the sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleased with what he gets,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.

Fact
"Trust thyself" was Emerson’s motto and it was adopted by well-known Americans such as Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and W. E. Channing.
William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon. The son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, he was probably educated at the King Edward IV Grammar School in Stratford, where he learned Latin and a little Greek and read the Roman dramatists. At eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman seven or eight years his senior. Together they raised two daughters: Susanna, who was born in 1583, and Judith (whose twin brother died in boyhood), born in 1585.

Little is known about Shakespeare's activities between 1585 and 1592. In 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's company of actors, the most popular of the companies acting at Court. In 1599 Shakespeare joined a group of Chamberlain's Men that would form a syndicate to build and operate a new playhouse: the Globe, which became the most famous theater of its time. With his share of the income from the Globe, Shakespeare was able to purchase New Place, his home in Stratford.

Shakespeare's sonnets were composed between 1593 and 1601, though not published until 1609. That edition, The Sonnets of Shakespeare, consists of 154 sonnets, all written in the form of three quatrains and a couplet that is now recognized as Shakespearean. Shakespeare wrote more than 30 plays. His earliest plays were primarily comedies and histories such as Henry VI and The Comedy of Errors, but in 1596, Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet, his second tragedy, and over the next dozen years he would return to the form, writing the plays for which he is now best known: Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra. In his final years, Shakespeare turned to the romantic with Cymbeline, A Winter's Tale, and The Tempest. Sometime after 1612, Shakespeare retired from the stage and returned to his home in Stratford. He died on April 23, 1616.

An interpretation of "Under the Greenwood Tree"

The narrator wants the birds in the tree and other animals around him to understand that he will not harm them. He is a lover of nature and wants to portray to the animals that humans, such as himself, are kind. The narrator warns that harsh winter is coming, which is the real enemy, and may kill those who do not migrate or seek shelter from the cold.

Fact
Shakespeare was a member of the “Friday Street Club” which met on the first Friday of every month at the Mermaid Tavern in London. Other famous members included Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, John Donne, Robert Herrick, John Selden and Sir Walter Raleigh.
Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

Theodore Roethke was born May 25, 1908, in Saginaw, Michigan. From 1925 to 1929 he attended the University of Michigan where he drank heavily but still managed to graduate magna cum laude.

When the Great Depression came, Roethke took any job he could find and ended up teaching English at Lafayette College and Michigan State College. He had his first occurrence of mental illness while teaching and was then diagnosed with manic depression. During these times of depression Roethke would look inside himself and use what he found in his poems.

In 1941 Roethke finally came out with his first volume of verse called *Open House* in which the material was based heavily on himself. After a second breakdown in 1945, he then wrote a second volume of poems called *The Lost Son and Other Poems* which was also well-received. *Words for the Wind* was written in 1957 and won the Bollingen Prize, National Book Award, Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize, Longview Foundation Award, and finally the Pacific Northwest Writers Award.

Theodore Roethke died of a heart attack in 1963. Sixty-one poems that he had written were published after his death in *The Far Field* (1964) which won the National Book Award.

An interpretation of “The Waking”

Roethke’s poem is filled with statements that have conflicting ideas such as *We think by feeling* and *The shaking keeps me steady*. This makes it confusing to readers to figure out exactly what he means. Readers like this poem because it sounds like a song due to the rhyme scheme and repetition of lines and sounds. This poem has many interpretations but most believe that Roethke wrote this poem to represent the cycle of life and death.

Fact

In order to properly function and be fully rested, children need 10 hours, adolescents (ages 11-22) need 9 hours, 15 minutes and adults need 8 hours, 15 minutes of sleep each night.

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here, And you must treat it as a powerful stranger, Must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It answers, I have made this place around you, If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven. No two branches are the same to Wren. If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you, You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows Where you are. You must let it find you.

David Wagoner
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

*Theodore Roethke*
Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Christina Rossetti was born in London. Her first poems were written in 1842 and printed in the private press of her grandfather. In 1850, under the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, she contributed seven poems to the Pre-Raphaelite journal, The Germ. Rossetti is best known for her ballads and her mystic religious lyrics. Her poetry is marked by symbolism and intense feeling. Rossetti's best-known work, Goblin Market and Other Poems, was published in 1862. The collection established Rossetti as a significant voice in Victorian poetry. The Prince's Progress and Other Poems, appeared in 1866 followed by Sing-Song, a collection of verse for children, in 1872.

By the 1880s, recurrent bouts of a thyroid disorder made Rossetti an invalid. While the illness restricted her social life, she continued to write poems. Among her later works are A Pageant and Other Poems (1881), and The Face of the Deep (1892). Rossetti also wrote religious prose works, such as Seek and Find (1879), Called To Be Saints (1881) and The Face of the Deep (1892). In 1891, Rossetti developed cancer, of which she died in London on December 29, 1894. Rossetti’s brother, William Michael, edited her collected works in 1904, but the Complete Poems were not published before 1979.

An interpretation of “A Green Cornfield”

The narrator is reliving a special afternoon she once spent in a cornfield. For the first time she acknowledged “the million stalks” and realizes how much humans should appreciate the rich, fertile soil of the earth and its ability to produce food for humanity. She finds solace in watching the butterflies and pauses to listen to the sky-larks serenading one another. She unintentionally loses track of time while in the cornfield because she is treasuring each moment of listening to the sounds of the creatures and the witnessing the commonly unnoticed beauty of nature.

Fact:

Sweet corn, which is the corn that we eat fresh, is the result of a gene mutation in field corn. This mutation occurred in the 1800s in the United States and prevented sugar in the kernel from being converted to starch.

Walt Whitman

The earth never tires;
The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first--
Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first;
Be not discouraged--keep on--
there are divine things, well envelop’d;
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.

Song of the Open Road
The earth was green, the sky was blue:
I saw and heard one sunny morn
A skylark hang between the two,
A singing speck above the corn;
A stage below, in gay accord,
White butterflies danced on the wing,
And still the singing skylark soared,
And silent sank and soared to sing.

The cornfield stretched a tender green
To right and left beside my walks;
I knew he had a nest unseen
Somewhere among the million stalks.

And as I paused to hear his song
While swift the sunny moments slid,
Perhaps his mate sat listening long,
And listened longer than I did.

Christina Rossetti
An interpretation of the quote

Whitman had an enormous appreciation for the beauty of nature. He realized that the people who spend time outdoors and live with the earth are happier, more content individuals. Hikers, backpackers and those who campout tend to be less superficial and more in tune with their natural surroundings.

Fact

Walt Whitman's international reputation attracted the attention of prominent literary figures such as Charles Dickens, William M. Thackeray, and Oscar Wilde who visited him in Camden, New Jersey.

maggie and milly and molly and may

went down to the beach (to play one day)
and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and
milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;
and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles and
may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.
For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

c.e. cummings
Edward Estlin Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894. He received his B.A. in 1915 and his M.A. in 1916, both from Harvard. During the First World War, Cummings worked as an ambulance driver in France, but was interned in a prison camp by the French authorities (an experience recounted in his novel, The Enormous Room) for his outspoken anti-war convictions. After the war, he settled into a life divided between houses in rural Connecticut and Greenwich Village, with frequent visits to Paris.

In his work, Cummings experimented radically with form, punctuation, spelling and syntax, abandoning traditional techniques and structures to create a new, highly idiosyncratic means of poetic expression. Later in his career, he was often criticized for settling into his signature style and not pressing his work towards further evolution. Nevertheless, he attained great popularity, especially among young readers, for the simplicity of his language, his playful mode and his attention to subjects such as war and sex. At the time of his death in 1962, he was the second most widely read poet in the United States, after Robert Frost.

An interpretation of “maggie and milly and molly and may”

The beach is a special place because it is located at one edge of the vast ocean. Many people love the relaxation of the beach and enjoy listening to the repetitive crashing of waves on the beach. Some find themselves lost in thought while peering out at the water. The ocean serves as a muse for those who are creative; it serves as the subject of many visual works of art and acts as a setting for many written works. There is something for everyone to do at the beach and spending time there gives both adults and children the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the sea and the happiness that a hot summer day can bring.

Did you know?

Maggie as a name for girls has been one of the 1,000 most popular names in the United States every decade since 1880.

*Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.*

Walt Whitman
Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Soon after his birth, Hayden was taken in by a foster family, Sue Ellen Westerfield and William Hayden, and grew up in a poor section of Detroit. He lived through a traumatic childhood that significantly affected his adult life. His childhood traumas resulted in debilitating bouts of depression which he later called "my dark nights of the soul." As an escape, Hayden read constantly.

He attended Detroit City College and left in 1936 to work for the Federal Writers' Project, where he researched black history and folk culture.

After leaving the Federal Writers' Project in 1938, marrying Erma Morris in 1940, and publishing his first volume, Heart-Shape in the Dust (1940), Hayden enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1941. In pursuit of a master's degree, Hayden studied under W. H. Auden, who directed Hayden's attention to issues of poetic form, technique, and artistic discipline. After finishing his degree in 1942, then teaching several years at Michigan, Hayden went to Fisk University in 1946, where he remained for twenty-three years, returning to Michigan in 1969 to complete his teaching career.

His Ballad of Remembrance (1962) was awarded a prize at the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. Hayden wrote eight collections of poems which helped to establish him as a major influence in American poetry, effectively bridging modernist and postmodernist eras.

An interpretation of "Those Winter Sundays"

This poem addresses the fact that when the speaker was young he doubted his father's love; as a child he assumed love was expressed in certain, more obvious ways. It is not until the speaker has grown significantly older that he realizes that love is often expressed silently and indirectly, and he is then able to recognize it in the early morning gestures of his father. Though there is still a sadness at the end of the poem, a lament for the opportunity to thank the father, or treat him better, there is also a feeling of resolution. It is as if homage is being paid finally in the making of the poem.

Fact

Robert Hayden's name at birth was Asa Bundey Sh effey.

Where the Sidewalk Ends

There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind.

Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street winds and bends
Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
To the place where the sidewalk ends.

Yes we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go,
For the children, they mark, and the children, they know
The place where the sidewalk ends.

Shel Silverstein
Shel Silverstein (1932-1999)

Shel Silverstein was born in Chicago in 1932 and achieved fame as a children's writer after the publication of *The Giving Tree* in 1964. In 1974 Silverstein published a collection of poems for children called *Where The Sidewalk Ends*. Bringing him comparisons to the likes of Dr. Seuss and Edward Lear, *Where The Sidewalk Ends* contained humorous short stories and poems. The book has proven popular with both children and adult readers and it continues to sell many copies, as does Silverstein's 1981 follow-up collection of poems, *The Light In The Attic*.

Silverstein illustrated his own books with black-and-white line drawings. Being himself a book collector, he took the feel and look - the paper, the type, the binding - of his titles very seriously. He did not allow his books to be published in paperback but still has 14 million hardcopies in print. Shel Silverstein died on May 10, 1999 from a heart attack.

An interpretation of “Where the Sidewalk Ends”

Silverstein wrote this poem for people who are struggling through a difficult time. His optimistic tone makes it seem as if there is a “light at the end of the tunnel” just as there is a definite end to the sidewalk. Even though the narrator is stuck in a dark place at the moment, he will eventually reach a brighter place if he thinks positively and keeps walking towards the goal. Adults should use this poem to anticipate better days while children should use this poem to help them come to the realization that their imaginations can take them anywhere they want to go.

Fact

Cement has been around for at least 12 million years. When the earth itself was undergoing intense geologic changes natural cement was being created.

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold, then with cracked hands that ached from labor in the weekday weather made banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call, and slowly I would rise and dress, fearing the chronic angers of that house, speaking indifferently to him, who had driven out the cold and polished my good shoes as well.

Robert Hayden

What did I know, what did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?
John Muir (1838-1914)

John Muir was a Scottish-American environmentalist, naturalist, traveler, writer, inventor, and scientist. He is, however, probably best remembered as one of the greatest champions of the Yosemite area’s natural wonders. He thought that nature was a primary source revealing the character of God and that the Sierra Nevada was sacred ground, even calling it the “Range of Light.” Anticipating the animal rights movement, Muir argued with vigor about what he considered the questionable ethics of hunting (calling it the “murder business”). He also anticipated modern conservation biologists by recognizing that everything in nature is connected and that the preservation of large tracts of unfragmented wilderness was the only real way to ensure a healthy ecosystem.

Fact
John Muir’s struggle against the devastation of the subalpine meadows surrounding Yosemite Valley resulted in the creation of Yosemite National Park on October 1, 1890.

Curtains

Rich people don’t need them. 
Poor people tie theirs into fists 
or draw them tight as modest brides 
up to the neck.

Inside they hide bright walls. 
Turquoise or lipstick pink. 
Good colors in another country. 
Here they can’t make you forget 
the dinette set that isn’t paid for, 
floorboards the landlord needs to fix, 
raw wood, linoleum roses, 
the what you wanted but didn’t get.

Sandra Cisneros
Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1954. She and her six brothers grew up in Mexico and Chicago. Cisneros earned a B.A. in English from Loyola University of Chicago and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Her books of poetry include Loose Woman (1994), My Wicked, Wicked Ways (1987), The Rodrigo Poems (1985), and Bad Boys (1980). She is also the author of Caramelo (2003); Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991), which won the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voices Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the Lannan Foundation Literary Award; and The House on Mango Street (1984), which won the American Book Award in 1985, and a bilingual children’s book, Hairs: Pelitos (1994). Her articles and reviews have appeared in publications including Glamour, The New York Times, and Revista Chicano-Riquena. Among her honors are fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the MacArthur Foundation. She has taught many colleges and universities, including the University of California, University of Michigan, and the University of New Mexico. She lives in San Antonio, Texas.

An interpretation of “Curtains”

Cisneros is a Mexican American poet who is commenting on the constant struggle that impoverished Mexican Americans face. The sad tone suggests that many families do not have the luxury of living in suitable conditions. She points out that Mexican Americans find the strength to rise above the poor conditions of their lives. The last line of the poem is really powerful and states her message clearly—“the what you wanted but didn’t get.” Many people live their lives constantly wanting things that they cannot afford. Cisneros feels it is important for people of all races in America to understand the lives of Mexican Americans and has taken it upon herself to write about the struggles they face to help raise awareness.

Fact

Sandra Cisneros was in the news in Texas for two years over the color of her house. She lives in a historic district of San Antonio, so when she painted her house a very brilliant purple in 1997, the city board objected. For two years the dispute went on, until the paint faded to a shade of lavender, which the city deemed “historically appropriate.”

“Every natural thing is a conductor of divinity.”

John Muir
I think that I shall never see
A poem as lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.