

## Poets in America

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# Walt Whitman and His Captain

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## Walt Whitman Wrote A Letter

February 9, 1888



Detroit Publishing Company, Library of Congress.

*Portrait of Walt Whitman*

Have you ever kept rewriting a story or poem because you just weren't satisfied with it? Walt Whitman wrote his poem about President Lincoln, "O Captain! My Captain!" in 1865, but he revised it in 1866, and again in 1871.

After the wrong version of his poem was published in the Riverside Literature Series No. 32, Whitman wrote to the publishers on February 9, 1888. "Somehow you have got a couple of bad perversions in 'O Captain,'" he wrote, "I send you a corrected sheet."

Do you know why Whitman wrote the poem about Abraham Lincoln?

*O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

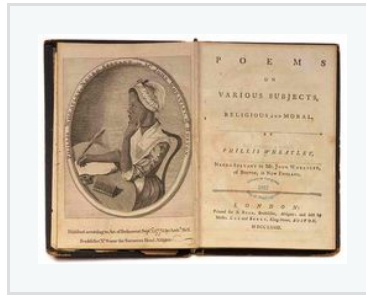


Whitman wrote the poem in response to the assassination of the president just as the Civil War was coming to an end. His poem was so popular, and he was requested to recite it so often, that he said, "I'm almost sorry I ever wrote [it] . . ."



# Phillis Wheatley, the Poet

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*An engraving of poet Phillis Wheatley from her book, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*

## Phillis Wheatley, the First African American Published Book of Poetry

**September 1, 1773**

Phillis Wheatley was only seven or eight years old when she was captured and taken from her home in West Africa. A slave ship brought her to Boston in 1761. Knowing nothing of the talents she would soon show the world, John Wheatley, a prosperous tailor, and his wife, Susanna, purchased the young girl directly from the ship and named her Phillis Wheatley.

Wheatley grew up to be a poet. Her collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published on September 1, 1773. How did she become the first African American writer to publish a book of poetry, when most slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write?

One day, the Wheatleys saw Phillis writing on a wall with chalk. Rather than punish her, the Wheatleys encouraged her to learn. Their daughter tutored her in reading and writing. Wheatley also studied English literature, Latin, and the Bible, but what she did best was to write poetry. Her first poem was published in the *Newport Mercury* newspaper in 1767.

Six years later, in the service of the Wheatley family, Phillis Wheatley sailed to London where she hoped to meet Selina Hasting, the Countess of Huntingdon. While they were not able to meet in person, the Countess helped Wheatley publish a volume of her poetry in 1773. Wheatley had another surprise waiting for her back in America.

Soon after she returned home, Wheatley was given her freedom. As a free woman, she published



both an antislavery letter and a poem to George Washington, whom she had met. Washington wrote to Wheatley, thanking her and praising her "great poetical Talents."

Phillis Wheatley married John Peters, a free black man, in 1778 and published three more poems. Her husband, however, was not as successful in business. Wheatley became a servant later on in her life, and when she died, she was very poor. Although she died poor, she died a free woman.



# Paul Laurence Dunbar

The text and image are from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.

## Paul Laurence Dunbar Was Born

June 27, 1872

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes*

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Do you like writing stories or poetry? If you enjoy writing at all, you and Paul Laurence Dunbar have something in common. Dunbar was born on June 27, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio, and was the child of former slaves. He grew up to be an internationally acclaimed poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, and lyricist. By the turn of the century, Dunbar was the most famous black writer in America.



Library of Congress

*Steele High School where Paul L.  
Dunbar went to school*

When Dunbar was young, his mother told him stories of the South. Then, later on in life, Dunbar wrote his own stories about African Americans in the South. One of his best friends was his classmate Orville Wright. (Orville and his brother Wilbur invented the airplane.) The two friends published a newspaper called *The Dayton Tattler*. Unfortunately, their money ran out after just three issues, but Dunbar did not give up writing. In 1893, while working as an elevator operator, Dunbar published his first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*.

After two more of Dunbar's books were published, his poetry became very popular. Dunbar read his poems to audiences in the United States and in England. When he returned from England, Dunbar



took a job as an assistant librarian at the Library of Congress.

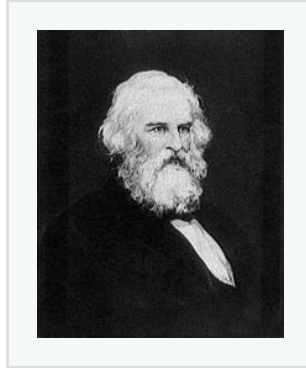
Have you ever tried to write a song? In 1902, Booker T. Washington commissioned Dunbar to write the school song for the Tuskegee Institute. However, Washington was not pleased with Dunbar's "Tuskegee Song." Dunbar wrote back to Washington this letter to defend his work.

Dunbar published 22 books and many poems before his death in 1906. He was just 33 years old when he died. What would you like to write a story or poem about?



# Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Poetry

The text and images are from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.



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*Portrait of Henry Wadsworth  
Longfellow*

## Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Was Born

**February 27, 1807**

Have you ever stood up in front of your class and recited a poem? When your grandparents and great-grandparents were in school, they may have been required to recite this poem, "The Village Blacksmith," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

*Under a spreading chestnut tree,  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.*

Longfellow was born on February 27, 1807, in Portland, Maine. His poetry was very popular in the 19th century, and many of his poems are still familiar today. Have you ever read his poem about Paul Revere's midnight ride on August 18, 1775?





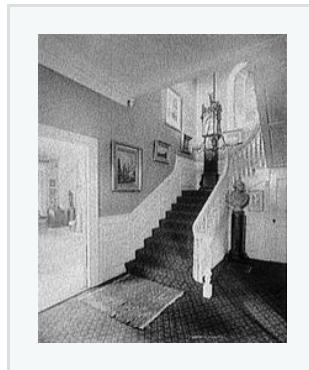
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*Longfellow's writing desk at  
Wadsworth-Longfellow House,  
Portland, Me*

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere*

"Paul Revere's Ride" was published in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* in 1863. Paul Revere was the patriot who rode on horseback through the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord warning of the upcoming British attack. Longfellow's poems were also popular in Europe. After he died in 1882, he became the only American commemorated in the Poet's Corner in England's Westminster Abbey.

While Longfellow was a professor at Harvard University, he lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his second wife, Fanny Appleton, (his first wife died) and his six children. One day, while he was at home, something happened that inspired him to write a poem about his children.



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*The hall in Longfellow's home in  
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

In "The Children's Hour," Longfellow wrote about an evening when his daughters tried to catch him by surprise. What do the first two verses of the poem have to do with the photograph on this page?



*From my study I see in the lamplight,  
Descending the broad hall stair,  
Grave Alice, and laughing Allegra,  
And Edith with golden hair.*

*A whisper, and then a silence:  
Yet I know by their merry eyes  
They are plotting and planning together  
To take me by surprise.*

Can you imagine his daughters playing on this staircase? Longfellow's poems may seem old-fashioned now, but he was considered a "new poet" in his day. What would a modern-day poet write about you?



# John Keats' Ode "To Autumn"

The text and image are from "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.

## John Keats Wrote Ode "To Autumn"

September 19, 1819

What's your favorite season? Summer, spring, winter, or fall? Ever write about your favorite time of year? On September 19, 1819, English poet John Keats was inspired by the changing season and wrote an ode "To Autumn." Here's how it begins:

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; ...*

The lyric poem is all about the beauty of the season and the melancholy mood that occurs as fall turns into winter.

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, --...*



Library of Congress

*"Site of Thoreau's hut, Lake Walden,  
Concord, Mass.," 1908.*

John Keats wrote several odes, which many people say are his greatest poetic achievements. With the exception of "To Autumn" which he wrote in September, he wrote all the odes between March and June of 1819. During this time, he was struggling with a fatal illness as well as mourning the death of his brother. He also had an intense love affair with Fanny Brawne, who later became his fiancée. Sadly, John Keats died from tuberculosis at the age of 25 in 1821.

Observation and description of the natural world were typical of the English Romantic movement (Romantic writing is characterized by an idealization of the past.) Poets John Keats, William

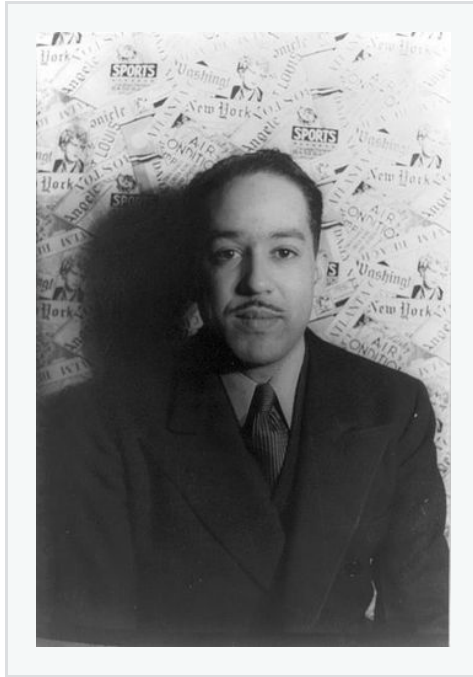


Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had an influence on American writers such as Henry David Thoreau. Living on Walden Pond, Thoreau continued the tradition of Romantic poets in his journals describing his surroundings.



# Langston Hughes

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By Carl Van Vechten [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

*Photograph of Langston Hughes*

## Langston Hughes Was Born February 1, 1902

Do members of your family like to tell stories? The tradition of storytelling inspired poet and writer Langston Hughes, who was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902. Hughes spent much of his childhood with his grandmother, who filled his imagination with stories of the past. As a result, Hughes developed a deep interest in African American culture and history that he later wrote into his many stories, autobiographies, histories, and poems.

Hughes wrote the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" the summer after he graduated from high school. It starts like this:

*I've known rivers:*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older*

*Than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*



Hughes loved to write and was determined to make his work known. In 1925, while working as a busboy at a hotel in Washington D.C., he slipped three poems into the shoulder bag of guest Vachel Lindsay, who was famous for his performances of poetry. Lindsay liked the poems and as a result, Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. There he earned his degree and published collections of poetry and stories. Hughes was part of the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of artistic expression by African Americans centered in the community of Harlem in New York City in the 1920s.

In 1941, Hughes wrote the poem "The Ballad of Booker T" about the controversial educator, Booker T. Washington. A freed slave, Washington became a political leader for African Americans in 1881. Some people believe he was too cooperative with the white leaders. Hughes understood Booker's situation and explained it in the poem:

*Sometimes he had  
Compromise in his talk –  
For a man must crawl  
Before he can walk –  
And in Alabama in '85  
A joker was lucky  
To be alive.*

Ask your family if anyone has read poetry or stories by Langston Hughes. And while you're at it, ask your parents and grandparents to tell some stories about the past. Maybe they will inspire you.