Research Paper
ENG303B

American Literature - Semester 2
Mrs. Verner

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Grass in American Romantic and Modernist Poetry

by Barbara Phillips

Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn
Indicative that suns go down;
The notice to the startled grass
That darkness is about to pass.

~Emily Dickinson

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.

~Ezra Pound

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Introduction

The “thirteen” in my title is an homage to Wallace Stevens’ poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” This suggested to me that common things, overlooked by most, can be, to the poet, a rich source of inspiration. Grass, the perennial green herb covering countless suburban lawns and public parks across America is so commonplace as to be completely overlooked by most people. If people think about grass at all it would most likely relate to maintenance - mowing, weeding, edging, and so on. However, this ordinary plant has proven to be appealing to poets. It appears with surprising frequency in American Romantic and Modernist poetry. What is it about grass that attracts the interest of poets -- and how have they used it as a symbol to communicate larger truths about the world we live in and our place in it? Its very commonness and ubiquity seems to lend it to poetic license.

In this paper, I will analyze how a selection of American Romantic and Modernist poets have used grass as symbol to express a range of ideas. For example, the Romantic poet, Emily Dickinson, wrote that the grass can be a hiding place for a snake (“A Narrow Fellow in the Grass”) while Edna St. Vincent Millay, in her 1917 poem “Renascence”, wrote that grass conceals the heart of God (“God, I can push the grass apart / And lay my finger on Thy heart!” (201-202)). These are just two of the striking and fascinating images that Romantic and Modernist poets have given to grass -- from hope to childhood, to democracy, to God’s handkerchief, to amnesia, to a veil, to a symbol for the eternal circle of life, and more.

In this paper, I will look at Romantics Emily Dickinson (“A narrow fellow in the Grass,” “Because I could not stop for Death,” “The Grass so little has to do”), and Walt Whitman (“Leaves of Grass”), and Modernists Carl Sandburg (“Grass,” “Summer Grass”), T. S. Eliot (“We Are the Hollow Men”), Edna St. Vincent Millay (“Renascence”), Robert Frost (“The Road Not Taken”), Angelina Weld Grimké (“Mona Lisa”), and e. e. cummings (“when god lets my body be”).

Grass as a place of concealment

Both Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay observe that the grass conceals startling surprises - both harrowing and ecstatic. In 1865, poet Emily Dickinson wrote “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass” (Galens). Without ever using the word “snake,” Dickinson describes the creature hiding in the grass so vividly that her meaning is perfectly clear. Using the word “fellow” twice, she elevates him from the lower rungs of the animal kingdom and endows him with a human-like autonomy, one of “nature’s people.”

The grass, or ground, -- the snake’s native territory -- is compared to a “floor” giving the sense of a more formal dwelling place. The narrow fellow also “occasionally rides” -- as if the grass were his mode of transport, and momentarily reveals his presence when he divides the grass “as with a comb,” making the grass seem like his element in the same way that water is a fish’s element.

The “narrow fellow” half-seen in Dickinson’s grass is - at least on the surface - quite different from what Edna St. Vincent Millay finds hidden in the grass -- which is no less than the heart of God.

The fascinating contrast between these two women’s views of what is concealed between the densely growing blades suggests a [more...] How does a narrow fellow “riding” in Dickinson’s grass, barely seen, yet present, compare with the heart of God in Millay’s grass? For one thing, both are a surprise to the women who discover them. Both suggest larger truths about nature - and that nature is both familiar (grass) and yet mysterious and beautiful.

Both Dickinson and Millay explore their relationship with God, but outside the bounds of conventional religion. While Dickinson avoids drawing a direct connection between the “narrow fellow” of the Garden of Eden, Satan, she suggests the devious nature of the narrow fellow by referring to him as a whip and a lash, by emphasizing the fact that the snake is deceptive and never fully shows himself to the poet. The poet remembers surprising the narrow fellow when she was a barefoot child making her seem all the more vulnerable to the wily snake. She drives her point home by noting, in closing, that any chance encounter with the snake instantly causes a shock that never fails to give her a chilled feeling of “zero at the bone.” In other words, the narrator is fully aware and alive anytime that she has an encounter with the narrow fellow.

By contrast, Millay is ecstatic to discover something concealed in the grass - God's heart. In her epic narrative of over two-hundred lines of tetramic couplets, she tells the story of her descent into the darkest depression depicted as a death and burial. In the grave, she initially feels rest and relief, but the beauty of Nature, first in the voice of the rain, and later in the voice of the grass, calls her back to the land of the living. It is the grass that whispers in her ear the reassuring message that she will be saved.

"In the 1920s, Edna St. Vincent Millay was America's most read, most beloved poet" (Milford ed. i). Her poem "Renascence," published as part of a competition in the literary magazine *Lyric Year*, brought her national recognition. When the judges read the poem they considered it to be the work of a mature, accomplished poet and were surprised when they discovered that it had been written by a young poet, a woman of twenty. (Trudeau)

Caroline B. Dow, a school director who heard Millay recite her poetry and play her own compositions for piano, was so moved that she paid for Millay to attend Vassar College (Miller 16).

Written on the eve on World War I, Renascence describes the narrator's spiritual journey to the depths of despair (described as a death and burial) and back to renewal (described as a resurrection). The agent of renewal is the beauty of Nature personified. By way of its two emissaries, the rain, and the grass, the beauty of Nature speaks to the narrator in her grave, awakening in the narrator a keen longing for her life:

> A grave is such a quiet place,
> The rain, I said, is kind to come
> And speak to me in my new home.
> I would I were alive again
> To kiss the fingers of the rain. (116-120)

Next, the grass calls to her:

> A sound as if some joyous elf
> Singing sweet songs to please himself,
> And, through and over everything,
> A sense of glad awakening.
> The grass, a tip-toe at my ear,

Whispering to me I could hear; (121-126)

As she lies in her grave contemplating the sights, sounds, and fragrances of Nature, she is moved to cry out to God: “O God, I cried, give me new birth, / And put me back upon the earth” (141, 142) and God grants her prayer. Once freed from the darkness of the grave, the narrator discovers that the grass which had whispered to her in the grave is now on one hand, the evidence of God’s presence, and on the other hand, something that hides his heart. She says, “Thou canst not move across the grass / But my quick eyes will see Thee pass” (195, 196) and “God, I can push the grass apart / And lay my finger on Thy heart” (201, 202)

Between the blades of grass, the grass the God just move across, in the cool earth, the poet can place her fingers on the heart of God. Between the blades of grass, she can feel the heartbeat and pulse of God. She has gained the understanding that, “...the earth and nature is where God and self-evaluation can come from, and her duty is to make the world a better place by enriching the world around her. The soul of the protagonist has not only been reborn, but it has been reformed and transformed as a result of her journey.” (Forsthofel 43).

“As commentators have observed, Millay conveys profound poetic, even mystical, experiences to the reader through her masterful use of suggestive yet simple language and compelling imagery” (Trudeau).

“.....the poet finds that the world - which she previously felt bound and limited her now calls to her with the “friendly rain” and grass “whispers in her ear” While still interred she discovers the true nature of beauty and longs for it sharply. She emerges with a newfound understanding of beauty and recognizes its wonder in things both big and small. With this recognition, she is granted the return of her soul.” (Forsthofel 41).

Gazing grain - grass as a sentient observer

I would like to consider the grain in Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Because I could not stop for Death” (#712), as a kind of grass. In fact, grain is, botanically speaking, a kind of grass -- grass grown to maturity and gone to seed.

The online version of *Cliff’s Notes* claims that, “Because I could not stop for Death,” (#712) is Emily Dickinson’s most anthologized and most discussed poem. It deserves such attention,

although it is difficult to know how much its problematic nature contributes to this interest." (Marcus)

In his book, *Collected Essays*, U. S. poet, teacher, and novelist Allen Tate wrote: "If the word great means anything in poetry, this poem is one of the greatest in the English language; it is flawless to the last detail. The rhythm charges with movement the pattern of suspended action back of the poem. Every image is precise and, moreover, not merely beautiful, but inextricably fused with the central idea. Every image extends and intensifies every other" (Tate 205).

In the poem, Death, accompanied by Immortality, brings a carriage to the narrator's door. The narrator is obliged to lay aside "My labor, and my leisure too" (7) and join them in the carriage. As they travel to the narrator's new home:

> "...a house that seemed
> A swelling of the ground;
> The roof was scarcely visible,
> The cornice but a mound" (13-16),

the narrator observes,

> "We passed the school, where children strove
> At recess, in the ring;
> We passed the fields of gazing grain,
> We passed the setting sun" (9-12).

She repeats "We passed..." three times as if chanting a magic spell or part of a liturgical text.

There is a general agreement that the children "striving / in the ring" represent the ongoing activities daily rhythms of the living; the "setting sun" represents the fullness of time, the end of the poet's day. However, the phrase "gazing grain" inspires a much wider variety of interpretations, for example:

- Essayist Eunice Glenn writes that "gazing gives the grain something of the fixity of death itself, although the grain is alive. Grain symbolizes life, mortality; gazing suggests death, immortality." (Glenn 585).

- Sharon Cameron, professor of English at Johns Hopkins University, in her book *Lyric Time, Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, writes, The “Children” mark the presence of the world along one stage of the speaker’s journey, the “Gazing Grain” marks the passing of the world (its harkening after the speaker as she rides away from it), and the “Setting Sun” marks its past.” (Cameron 125-126).
- In The Golden Lyre, author Lena d’Souza says that gazing grain “symbolises the labour and productiveness of adulthood.” (d’Souza 31).
- Leading American poetry commentator and Harvard English Professor Helen Vendler writes: “...any reader is brought up short by “gazing grain.” Grain is a symbol of ripening fields but why is the grain gazing and on what does it gaze? It has not much more time to gaze before it is cut down; it is gradually incorporating in itself, in its gaze, all it can see of the world. To gaze is to fix a long look; the grain knows of its coming slaughter by the scythe. Dickinson spent her whole life gazing like the grain intent on registering spaces and details before Death should overtake her” (Vendler 227).

While interesting and intriguing to read what very knowledgeable critics have written about the “gazing grain,” the phrase has a clarity of meaning to me that I haven’t found expressed by anyone else.

My feeling is the “gazing” is meant quite literally - a word choice that is full of meaning as well as serving an alliterative and rhythmic function. In saying that the grain is gazing, Dickinson grants “knowingness” or awareness to the grain.

The children, the only humans other than the narrator in the poem, do not stop from their play to watch her pass, indeed, they may be unaware of her as she has departed the plane in which they exist; she is already in Death’s carriage. She is acknowledged only by the grain (fullness, maturity, harvest) in silent homage. The description of the grain as “gazing” conveys the idea that each stalk of grain is sentient, observant, and *aware* of the significance of the narrator’s final journey.

Dickinson’s words “gazing grain” bring to mind a troop of stately sentinels or a congregation of cloaked and hooded monks, standing in silent, prayerful witness as the soul leaves its body and passes to the next realm.

Dickinson, highly attuned to the natural world as she was, suggests that even a field of grain, perhaps as a stand-in for all of the natural world, is capable of reverently observing the transit of a soul from its earthly physical abode to the next life where perhaps grain and humans will be capable of communion.

Grass as a metaphor for idle - or ideal - female existence

Emily Dickinson's poem "The Grass so Little has to do," (#333, c. 1862) has not attracted nearly the same level of attention from literary critics as "Because I could not stop for Death." Still, it is worth a look, especially in considering its use of grass as a symbol of the feminine. Grass, as the central subject of the poem, is personified as an idle, carefree female -- at least, this is implied.

The narrator envies the life of blissful ease that the grass seems to enjoy. The grass spends its time entertaining butterflies and bees. It stirs all day to pretty tunes, it holds the sunshine in its lap and strings beads of dewdrops as pearls to wear as finery like a Duchess. Even in death, the grass gives off a spicy fragrance and is carefully gathered up "in Sovereign Barns to dwell" (17) as hay. The narrator closes by saying, "The grass so little has to do / I wish I were a hay" (19-20). The grass lives a completely charmed existence from its idle, carefree life, to its sweet death, and internment. The narrator envy's even the grass's afterlife as hay. (Later, I will look more at hay in T. S. Eliot's poem, "We Are the Hollow Men.")

Contemporary British author Howard Marks wrote, that although the narrator says "The grass so little has to do" (1), the grass is actually busy. "It may be that the Grass has so little do to but it does nevertheless have some jobs, they are just all so pleasant, to us and to itself – to "hold the Sunshine in its lap," "And make itself so fine." (Marks)

According to Pennsylvania State University professor of English Elizabeth Phillips, "Dickinson was -- if not a housewife -- a housekeeper, a fact as significant as any in her life for confirming the strategies she used in her poetry. Dickinson not only supposes what it is like to be someone else... but she also appropriates the situation of a woman with too much to do, in the act of imagining an existence different from her own." (Phillips 92).

Most commentary, criticism, or analysis of this poem focuses on the convoluted history of the second-to-last word, "a," where the poet writes, "The grass so little has to do / I wish I were a hay" (19-20). Dickinson's first anthologist and editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, revised

the “a” to “the” feeling that a definite article was much more grammatical and also that the “a” would shock and upset readers. He wrote to fellow editor, Mabel Todd, “It cannot go in so. Everybody would say that *hay* is a collective noun requiring the definite article. Nobody can call it *a hay*!” (Wineapple 282). However, after Dickinson passed away, her sister and executor, had subsequent printings revised to the original “a.”

Why did Dickinson say, “a hay” (singular) - because she opens the poem by saying “the grass” (collective)? If she just wants to be one stalk of hay among the many stalks that are gathered and stored in the barn, saying “a hay” would be the most economical and metrical way of communicating that idea. One little indefinite article, “a” can take the place of three more awkward words (piece of hay / stalk of hay), that, in any case, don’t fit the meter of the poem. I think Dickinson was saying definitely that she did not want to the “the hay” - the collective hay. She wants to be just one piece among the many pieces. If so, it suggests that, in death (“a hay”), the narrator wants to be an individual but in life (“the grass”) she wants to be -- not part of the whole -- but the whole, collective grass.

Grass - the journey-work of the stars

“The question ‘What is the grass?’ introduced in the sixth section of “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman, establishes the central symbol of the poem and the answer to the question that is in many ways the entire poem” (Ullah).

As a poem, “Song of Myself” has three important themes:

- The narrator’s idea of the himself
- The narrator’s identification of himself with others
- The narrator’s relationship with the elements of nature and the universe.

Whitman addresses these three main themes using the symbol of grass.

“Song of Myself” opens with the poet loafing *on* the grass and finishes with him looking forward to his burial *under* the grass. Although the poem opens with the narrator loafing on the grass and observing a “spear of grass,” the idea of grass as the central symbol of the poem is not introduced until Section 6.

At the opening of the sixth section of the poem, a child asks the narrator “What is the grass?” compelling the narrator to consider the significance of the common plant. Initially, he seems as perplexed as the child but tackles the question by a sort of brainstorming session. That is, he makes a number of guess and in the process of making guesses, is able to refine his own ideas until he zeros in on what he thinks the true answer is.

The narrator makes several guesses as to the nature and meaning of grass, for example:

- A symbol of the narrator’s own nature: “...the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven” (101)
- A symbol of the divine creator: “...the handkerchief of the Lord, / A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt” (102-103)
- A symbol of regeneration and new life: “Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.” (105)
- The ultimate symbol of democracy that grows everywhere, i. e. “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.” (106-109)

The process of “brainstorming” about the deeper meaning of the grass seems to help the narrator to clarify his own thoughts. He then reflects, “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (110).

“Song of Myself” was composed just immediately prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, and the narrator presciently says, “It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men” (112). But he also reflects on children who have died, “offspring taken too soon out of their mother’s laps” (114), as well as the elderly who have died after living out their full lifespan.

He comes to feel that the grass is a reminder not only of those who have gone to the grave but also of the whole eternal circle of life - grass is a symbol of regeneration in nature. He is ultimately so inspired by this idea that he concludes Section 6 by saying,

> 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," (126-129)

And this leads him to his final affirmation of the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth: "And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (130). All of this from a meditation on the nature of grass!

At the opening of Section 31, the narrator, rhapsodizing on the exquisite beauties of nature declares, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars" (663). So, ultimately, in the narrator's thoughts, grass has gone from being "the uncut hair of graves" (110) to the handiwork of the stars. So, in addition to all the varied symbolism of grass described in Section 6, the narrator ultimately comes to realize that one blade of grass, if properly seen, is a transcendent statement of cosmic beauty and reality, just as "a tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest" (665) and one small mouse is "miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels" (669).

In our over-busy, over-stimulated culture, which constantly craves novelty and sensation and idolizes extreme sports and reality shows, the idea that everything that's genuinely real and genuinely worth knowing about is embodied in one blade of grass -- seems utterly absurd. Other than among Buddhists or religious mystics, it is an idea with very few advocates in today's world.

Precisely this idea -- the ability to really see the true nature of simple, mundane things and thereby comprehending their mind-blowing amazingness -- was presented in the 1981 film "My Dinner With André" where, Wallace Shawn, a short, stout, balding, middle-aged playwright and actor struggling to make a living in New York, meets for dinner with his old friend André Gregory. André could not be more different: tall, dark, handsome, successful, and celebrated, he has just returned from five years of travel to the world's most exotic locales. After listening to André go on and on about his exotic adventure, Wallace, without Whitman's eloquence, but with all of his earnestness, says to André,

> "Tell me, why do we require a trip to Mount Everest in order to be able to perceive one moment of reality? I mean... I mean, is Mount Everest more "real" than New York? I mean, isn't New York "real"? I mean, you see, I think if you

> could become fully aware of what existed in the cigar store next door to this restaurant, I think it would just blow your brains out! I mean... I mean, isn't there just as much "reality" to be perceived in the cigar store as there is on Mount Everest?

I feel that Walt Whitman, able as he was to see all of reality in a blade of grass, was with Wallace in spirit, nodding vigorously in agreement to Wallace Shawn's question, " isn't there just as much 'reality' to be perceived in the cigar store as there is on Mount Everest?"

Finally, in the last stanza of "Song of Myself", the narrator tells his readers, "I bequeathe myself to the dirt, to grow from the grass I love; / If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles." (1340)

So, ultimately, after finding all of reality in a blade of grass, Whitman looks forward to the grass as his final resting place and its growth as evidence of his love for it.

Between Romanticism and Modernism

Massive social change on a scale never before seen in human history, was about to blow apart the pastoral world of the Romantic writers and poets. As the American Civil War was drawing to a close, the world was being transformed by the industrial revolution, the railroads, the telegraph, telephone, rise of trade unions, and rapid urbanization. Tensions were building in Europe which led to the outbreak of the Great War, World War I, which America was ultimately drawn into. Between the American Civil War and the end of World War I, the world which the Romantics experienced and wrote about was completely transformed and destroyed. The world in which the Modernist poets came of age was a profoundly different place than that of their predecessors, however, the cultural memories of the Romantics' world lingered, haunting the Modernists with a sense of despair.

The Modernist poets came of age before, during, and right after World War I, the most horrific and psychically damaging experience in human history. Faith in received wisdom from academia and religion, and trust in governments had been permanently shattered. The rosy optimism of the Romantics was not in accord with the world of the Modernists. The Modernists contemplated an entirely new and profoundly more unsettled world than had their Romantic predecessors. This is most overt in the poetry of Carl Sandburg, a war correspondent, and T. S. Eliot, who lived in

England. Poets Robert Frost and Edna St. Vincent Millay retain more of the spirit of their Romantic predecessors, yet bring to it a flavoring of despair, bitterness, and irony.

Grass personified as a gravedigger and amnesiac

It was actually Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass," written in 1918, that inspired me to research the topic of grass as a symbol in poetry. I was struck by Sandburg's use of grass as an impatient, irritable, and repetitious narrator who wants only to do its work of "covering all" the piles of corpses left on the world's battlefields. For the grass, it makes no difference where the corpses are: Verdun, Waterloo, Gettysburg...

Like a robot programmed to follow a prime directive, the grass it abrupt, terse sentences. It repeats three times, "Pile them high" (1, 3, 4), and three times the grass commands, "Let me work" (2, 5, 10). Twice the grass commands, "Shovel them under" (2, 5), and three times it orders, "Let me work" (2, 5, 10). Because the poem is only ten lines long, these repetitions feel like having a belligerent bully in your face, shouting and nagging. Sandburg makes the grass seem almost like an obsessively focused, autistic, ADHD kid about to launch into a temper tantrum.

The grass imagines a time "two years, ten years" (6) in the future when a human passenger on a train asks the conductor, "What place is this? / Where are we now?" (7, 8)

This is because the grass knows that its job has been done so well, that no human can recognize that the place the train is passing through was recently a battlefield covered with piles of corpses. Grass has done its work so thoroughly that societal memory has been erased. The dead have been completely erased and forgotten.

The poem concludes: "I am the grass. / Let me work" (10)

"Although the last stanza consists of only two short lines which are repetitions of earlier lines this is probably the most powerful stanza in the entire poem. The last stanza is composed in a way to suggest a blending of the grass' narration and of society's intent. Both the grass and society are resigned to warfare and are equally indifferent to the casualties of war. Like grass, society is seemingly incapable of learning, or even caring, about how damaging war is to people." (Dollhausen)

Iraq war veteran, author, and poet Brian Turner says that Sandburg's poem reminds him of a call-and-response drill he learned in boot camp. The drill sergeant would shout, "What makes the grass grow green?" The recruits would shout back, "Blood. Blood. Bright red blood makes the grass grow green." (Turner)

Sandburg also personified grass in his five-line poem "Summer Grass" written in 1928:

> Summer grass aches and whispers
> It wants something; it calls and sings; it pours
> out wishes to the overhead stars.
>
> The rain hears; the rain answers; the rain is slow
> coming; the rain wets the face of the grass.

This grass has an entirely different disposition and personality than the brusque, grave digging, amnesia-inducing grass in "Grass," written ten years earlier. By now, Sandburg was married and had three daughters. He did not care less about peace and social welfare, but his life had grown more domestic. During this period he wrote a number of poems and stories for his own children.

Sandburg's summer grass is as sentient and Dickinson's "gazing grain." But while Dickinson's grain was silent, this summer grass has much to communicate -- although not to us humans. This grass is addressing itself to "the overhead stars". It whispers. It "calls and sings and pours out wishes" to the stars. It is overflowing with longing and desire. The Summer grass is like one separated from their beloved. Whether the stars hear or not, the narrator doesn't say. It is finally the rain, "slow / coming" (4, 5) that hears and answers the grass by wetting its face.

Grassiness - a break with convention

Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken" (1920) opens with the narrator standing indecisively at a fork in a forest path. He decides against taking the well-trodden path and chooses to follow the grassy path because it has likely seen fewer walkers -- implying that the grassy path was less explored and possibly holds discoveries [more...]

"The drama of the poem is of the persona making a choice between two roads. As evolved creatures, we should be able to make choices, but the poem suggests that our choices are

irrational and aesthetic. Frost is trying to reconcile impulse with a conscience that needs goals and harbors deep regrets." (Faggen 271)

The narrator opens his story by immediately setting the scene for a dilemma: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." We see the narrator poised at the fork in a road, or path, that travels through the woods. We understand from the word "yellow" that the season is fall -- or more likely, the poet is telling us that he is in his late middle-age and has reached a juncture in his life, represented by the road.

This is almost identical with Dante's opening line in "The Inferno," where the narrator, in his middle-age finds himself lost in a dark woods. (*Nel messo del cammin di nosta vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / ché la diritta via era smarrita.* -- In the middle of the road of our life / I found myself in a dark woods, for the straight way was lost.)

The atmosphere in Frost's poem has none of the foreboding of Dante's because Frost's narrator is not lost, just indecisive, and his woods are yellow, not dark. But both men find themselves on a wooded road in midlife without a clear direction.

Frost's narrator, in analyzing his choices, understands that one way is as good as another -- both roads have an equal claim, "And both that morning equally lay" (11). He also realizes that in choosing one road, he will regret not being able to explore the other, "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence" (16, 17).

"The grassy path represents the one less traveled - a break with convention. Grassiness represents an opportunity to explore a novel area of life and self-knowledge." (citation) But the narrator is not advising us to follow his example of choosing the less-traveled path when we reach a junction. In fact, he is telling us how difficult the choice is because even in the act of choosing, he has regrets: "And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler, long I stood" (2, 3).

The narrator's choice is made based on his observation that one fork is grassier than the other: "Then took the other, just as fair / And having perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear" He closes on a note of regret:

> 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. (16-20)

Grass - goats among the sheep

""Rose Pogonias" is about finding sanctuary, a magical preserve in the midst of the woods." (Lewis 314). The poet understands that the sanctuary is a fragile, ephemeral gift of nature, its beauty bound to succumb to "the general mowing" (19). The god of the sanctuary is the Sun and the poet and his companion bow down: "A temple of the heat / There we bowed us in the burning / As the sun's right worship is..." (8-10). "The object of "right worship" is the burning sun, not God, and this conveys a sense of a world materially governed by nature" (Faggen 46).

The poet suggests that the flowers would not be mown down if they weren't growing among the grass: "For though the grass was scattered, / yet every second spear / Seemed tipped with wings of color, / That tinged the atmosphere." In other words, if the meadow was only wild flowers, the landowner would likely not mow the meadow. But because "every second spear" is a stalk of grass, the landowner will mow the meadow - meaning the wild flowers will be wiped out and the "jewel small" (2) space will lose its sanctity.

Knowing this, the poet and his companion say a prayer before leaving:

We raised a simple prayer
Before we left the spot,
That in the general mowing
That place might be forgot;

Or if not all so favored,
Obtain such grace of hours,
That none should mow the grass there
While so confused with flowers.

"As quiet and meaningless as wind in dry grass"

T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men," written in 1925 is a reflection on many of the same themes explored by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his novel, *The Great Gatsby* which was also published

in 1925 -- that is the superficiality, emptiness, futility, and desperation... “the hollowness of living life without purpose and without faith.” (Crawford 137). In fact, one of Gatsby’s party guests is surprised to find that the books in Gatsby’s library are real - rather than hollow props.

Eliot uses grass and straw, the dry stalks of grass as a symbol of the actual hollowness of society in the aftermath of World War I. Men are hollow - yes, but they are stuffed with straw, i. e. dead and dry. Their voices communicate nothing. They “Are quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass.” Eliot used straw and dry grass to represent the despair, meaninglessness, emptiness, and futility permeating peoples’ souls once their faith in traditional values and religion had been shattered by the brutality of World War I.

“Eliot’s poems from the 1920s are often read in a political context as a reaction to the aftermath of World War I. Eliot was preoccupied with the idea of a European literary and ethical tradition, and he saw this tradition fragmenting everywhere around him.” (Shmoop Editorial Team)

The narrator is a spokesmen for a group of men. Including himself in the group, he introduces his cohort by saying,

> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
> Our dried voices, when
> We whisper together
> Are quiet and meaningless
> As wind in dry grass
> Or rats’ feet over broken glass
> In our dry cellar
>
> Shape without form, shade without colour,
> Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

The men are both hollow and stuffed - empty and full - but full of nothing but dried grass. Their voices are quiet and meaningless “as wind in dry grass.” The hollow men are like scarecrows, or effigies. The poem’s epigraph refers to Guy Fawkes, a British political prisoner who was

executed in the 1500s. His straw man effigy is burned each year in the UK, on Guy Fawkes night.

The grass-stuffed men are so insubstantial that they cannot stand on their own feet. They need to lean against one-another. They are shapeless, colorless, and paralyzed, “gesture without motion.”

> Those who have crossed
> With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom
> Remember us -- if at all -- not as lost
> Violent souls, but only
> As the hollow men
> The stuffed men

The narrator explains that the Hollow Men are so contemptible that even the souls who have crossed to death’s kingdom have rejected them and forgotten about them. According the Oxford University lecturer Craig Raine, “The Hollow Men” is set in Dante’s Limbo. “It is spoken in the first person plural by men who are rejected alike by heaven and hell because have neither sinned nor been actively virtuous. They have abstained. They have failed to live. They are depleted, unvital: ‘Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion.” (Raine, 17)

“The title is a combination of “The Hollow Land” by William Morris and “The Broken Men” by Rudyard Kipling. The final stanza may be the most quoted of all of Eliot’s poetry; “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.”” (Shmoop Editorial Team) That is, the world has become so lifeless and artificial, that it will end in the same pathetic way that the Hollow Men’s lives end.

Look for me under the soles of your boots

In e. e. cummings short poem, “when god lets my body be,” the poet joyfully considers all the living things that will grow from his body once he is finished with it. Although a post-World War I Modernist, cummings seems here to be at one with Walt Whitman. For both Whitman and cummings even after death, the body serves as a source of new life for trees, grass, etc. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman looks forward to his corpse providing nourishment for the grass and instructs the reader to look for him under the souls of his shoes, Here, cummings describes in

loving detail, each kind of new life that will grow from his corpse: grass, trees, fruit, flowers, and birds. His sweetheart, walking through this grass grown from his corpse, will kiss the wings of the birds who have found food and shelter in the fruit, trees, and flowers also growing on the poet's grave. Even though the poet is dead and buried, his sweetheart seems to be able to enjoy the companionship he can provide as grass, flowers, trees, and birds.

The narrator makes a strong link between his living body and the vitality of nature all around him: "My strong fingers beneath the snow / Into strenuous birds shall go." He looks forward to participating in the full circle of life as his body provides nourishment for new life. "cummings incorporates a larger vision of nature as the seat of eternity where soul and earth regenerate one another." (Peterson 17)

Grass, framing the beauty of nature

Wallace Stevens wrote his poem "Here the Grass Grows" In an effort to capture the minimalist beauty and serenity of Japanese ukio-e prints. "One such source [of inspiration], at least for Stevens, was Japanese color prints... Stevens aimed at an orchestration of color values, with a vital clarity of description. Framed by the grass and wind at the beginning and end, the vivid description of the fishes suggests perhaps the beauty and depth of life within the flux of nature." (Buttel 68-71).

In May 1909, Wallace Stevens wrote in his journal about having just seen some Japanese color prints at an exhibition in New York: "Pale orange, green and crimson, and white and gold and brown / Deep lapis-lazuli and orange, and opaque green, fawn-color, black and gold -- a concert of fishes..." (Lensing 86)

The gem of a poem --forty-two words in twelve lines with four syllables per line -- captures Stevens interest in creating a poem in the spirit of the Japanese *ukio-e* prints he had seen at an art exhibition. words,

Here the grass grows (1909)

Here the grass grows,
And the wind blows,
And in the stream,
Small fishes gleam,

Blood-red and hue
Of shadowy blue,
And amber sheen,
And water-green,
And yellow flash,
And diamond ash.
And the grass grows,
And the wind blows.

In Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men," the "wind in dry grass" was the image to he used to evoke empty, meaningless conversation. By contrast, in Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, "Journey," she imagines the blissful repose of laying on the grass with a breeze blowing over her: "Ah, could I lay me down in this long grass / And close my eyes, and let the quiet wind / Blow over me—I am so tired, so tired / Of passing pleasant places! All my life." Here, Stevens "grass grows / and the wind blows" conveying quite the opposite: lush vitality and peaceful movement. Steven's simple sentences cast a magic spell that allows the reader to see, hear, and smell the swaying, fragrant grass in a play of light and shadow, the grass shading the stream full of gleaming fish.

Grasses -- Eyelashes

Emily Dickinson and Ezra Pound wrote poems in which small, hidden creatures moved stealthily through the grass. Emily Dickinson's "narrow fellow" moved through the grass parting it like a comb moving through hair. In Ezra Pound's poem, "And the days are not long enough," a field mouse slips through the grass. In Angela Weld Grimké's poem of unrequited love, "Mona Lisa," she pictures herself creeping "Through the long brown grasses / That are your lashes."

"The "long brown lashes" become a stand-in for the whole lover." (Loeffelholz 184). What does the narrator mean by "creep"? Does she see herself as something small and inconsequential like Pound's field mouse, or something menacing and potentially harmful, like Dickinson's "narrow fellow." Does she want to escape the notice of her lover? Whereas Dickinson and Millay found things hidden in the grass, this narrator was to hide in the grass herself. Another hint of Dickinson's narrow fellow - who resembled a whip or lash - here the Grimké use "lashes" in a

way that hints at pain and suffering. Or perhaps, “lashes” hints at Grimké’s past as the grandchild of slaves.

Angelina Weld Grimké was the great-niece of the Grimké sisters, radical abolitionists and women’s rights activists of the Civil War era. Angelina Grimké was active in the Harlem Renaissance and was the first African-American to have a play professionally produced.

Conclusion

This paper looks grass as a symbol in the works of a handful of American Romantic and Modernist poets: Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wallace Stevens, Carl Sandburg, and Angela Weld Grimké. From Dickinson’s “gazing grain,” to grassy meadows, grass-lined streams, the straw stuffing in an effigy, and the common green grass growing between the cracks in the sidewalk, Romantic and Modernist poets have used this ubiquitous, perennial, and sometimes weedy plant as a potent symbol to express a wide range of ideas: the circle of life, the beauty of all Nature, a place that conceals surprises, democracy, God’s handkerchief, fertilizer, a break with convention, emptiness and futility, an amnesiac, a gravedigger, the goats among the sheep, a frame for Nature, the lover who is out of reach.

No doubt, widening the one's view to poets from other traditions and countries would surprise us with even more symbolism and metaphors inspired by grass.

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APPENDIX - Full Text of Poems Discussed

e. e. cummings

when god lets my body be (1916)

when god lets my body be
From each brave eye shall sprout a tree
fruit that dangles therefrom
the purpled world will dance upon
Between my lips which did sing
a rose shall beget the spring
that maidens whom passion wastes
will lay between their little breasts
My strong fingers beneath the snow
Into strenuous birds shall go
my love walking in the grass
their wings will touch with her face
and all the while shall my heart be
With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea

::

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

A narrow fellow in the grass (#1096, 1865)

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him,--did you not,
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen;
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn.
Yet when a child, and barefoot,
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash
Unbraiding in the sun,--
When, stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

Because I could not stop for Death (#712, c.1862)

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
played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 't is centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

The Grass so little has to do (#333, c. 1863)

The Grass so little has to do –
A Sphere of simple Green –
With only Butterflies to brood
And Bees to entertain –

And stir all day to pretty Tunes
The Breezes fetch along –
And hold the Sunshine in its lap
And bow to everything –

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls –
And make itself so fine

A Duchess were too common
For such a noticing –

And even when it dies – to pass
In Odors so divine –
Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep –
Or Spikenards, perishing –

And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell –
And dream the Days away,
The Grass so little has to do
I wish I were a Hay –

.::

T. S. Eliot

The Hollow Men (1925)
A penny for the Old Guy

I.
We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us-if at all-not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men

::

Robert Frost

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 bent 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.

.....

Rose Pogonias

A saturated meadow,
Sun-shaped and jewel-small,
A circle scarcely wider
Than the trees around were tall;
Where winds were quite excluded,
And the air was stifling sweet
With the breath of many flowers, --
A temple of the heat.

There we bowed us in the burning,
As the sun's right worship is,
To pick where none could miss them
A thousand orchises;
For though the grass was scattered,
yet every second spear
Seemed tipped with wings of color,
That tinged the atmosphere.

We raised a simple prayer
Before we left the spot,
That in the general mowing
That place might be forgot;
Or if not all so favored,
Obtain such grace of hours,

that none should mow the grass there
While so confused with flowers.

::

Angelina Weld Grimké

A Mona Lisa (1927)

I should like to creep

Through the long brown grasses
    That are your lashes;
I should like to poise
    On the very brink
Of leaf-brown pools
    That are your shadowed eyes;
I should like to cleave
    Without sound,
Their gleaming waters,
    their unrippled waters,
I should like to sink down
    And down
        And down
            And deeply down.

Would I be more than a bubble breaking?
    Or and ever-widening circle
    Ceasing at the marge?
Would my white bones
    Be the only white bones
Wavering back and forth, back and forth
    In their depths?

::.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Journey

Ah, could I lay me down in this long grass
And close my eyes, and let the quiet wind
Blow over me—I am so tired, so tired
Of passing pleasant places! All my life,
Following Care along the dusty road,
Have I looked back at loveliness and sighed;
Yet at my hand an unrelenting hand
Tugged ever, and I passed. All my life long
Over my shoulder have I looked at peace;
And now I fain would lie in this long grass
And close my eyes.
Yet onward!
Cat birds call
Through the long afternoon, and creeks at dusk
Are guttural. Whip-poor-wills wake and cry,
Drawing the twilight close about their throats.
Only my heart makes answer. Eager vines
Go up the rocks and wait; flushed apple-trees
Pause in their dance and break the ring for me;
And bayberry, that through sweet bevies thread
Of round-faced roses, pink and petulant,
Look back and beckon ere they disappear.
Only my heart, only my heart responds.
Yet, ah, my path is sweet on either side
All through the dragging day,—sharp underfoot
And hot, and like dead mist the dry dust hangs—
But far, oh, far as passionate eye can reach,
And long, ah, long as rapturous eye can cling,
The world is mine: blue hill, still silver lake,
Broad field, bright flower, and the long white road
A gateless garden, and an open path:
My feet to follow, and my heart to hold.
.....

Renascence (1918)

ALL I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked the other way,
And saw three islands in a bay.
So with my eyes I traced the line
Of the horizon, thin and fine,
Straight around till I was come
Back to where I'd started from;
And all I saw from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood.
Over these things I could not see:
These were the things that bounded me;

And I could touch them with my hand,
Almost, I thought, from where I stand.
And all at once things seemed so small
My breath came short, and scarce at all.
But, sure, the sky is big, I said;
Miles and miles above my head;
So here upon my back I'll lie
And look my fill into the sky.
And so I looked, and, after all,
The sky was not so very tall.
The sky, I said, must somewhere stop,
And—sure enough!—I see the top!
The sky, I thought, is not so grand;
I 'most could touch it with my hand!
And reaching up my hand to try,
I screamed to feel it touch the sky.
I screamed, and—lo!—Infinity
Came down and settled over me;
Forced back my scream into my chest,
Bent back my arm upon my breast,
And, pressing of the Undefined
The definition on my mind,
Held up before my eyes a glass
Through which my shrinking sight did pass
Until it seemed I must behold
Immensity made manifold;
Whispered to me a word whose sound
Deafened the air for worlds around,
And brought unmuffled to my ears
The gossiping of friendly spheres,
The creaking of the tented sky,
The ticking of Eternity.
I saw and heard and knew at last
The How and Why of all things, past,
And present, and forevermore.
The Universe, cleft to the core,
Lay open to my probing sense
That, sick'ning, I would fain pluck thence
But could not,—nay! But needs must suck
At the great wound, and could not pluck
My lips away till I had drawn
All venom out.—Ah, fearful pawn!
For my omniscience paid I toll
In infinite remorse of soul.
All sin was of my sinning, all
Atoning mine, and mine the gall
Of all regret. Mine was the weight
Of every brooded wrong, the hate
That stood behind each envious thrust,
Mine every greed, mine every lust.
And all the while for every grief,
Each suffering, I craved relief
With individual desire,—
Craved all in vain! And felt fierce fire
About a thousand people crawl;
Perished with each,—then mourned for all!
A man was starving in Capri;
He moved his eyes and looked at me;
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,
And knew his hunger as my own.
I saw at sea a great fog bank
Between two ships that struck and sank;
A thousand screams the heavens smote;
And every scream tore through my throat.
No hurt I did not feel, no death
That was not mine; mine each last breath
That, crying, met an answering cry
From the compassion that was I.
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;
Mine, pity like the pity of God.
Ah, awful weight! Infinity
Pressed down upon the finite Me!
My anguished spirit, like a bird,
Beating against my lips I heard;
Yet lay the weight so close about
There was no room for it without.
And so beneath the weight lay I
And suffered death, but could not die.

Long had I lain thus, craving death,
When quietly the earth beneath
Gave way, and inch by inch, so great
At last had grown the crushing weight,
Into the earth I sank till I
Full six feet under ground did lie,
And sank no more,—there is no weight
Can follow here, however great.
From off my breast I felt it roll,
And as it went my tortured soul
Burst forth and fled in such a gust
That all about me swirled the dust.

Deep in the earth I rested now;
Cool is its hand upon the brow
And soft its breast beneath the head
Of one who is so gladly dead.
And all at once, and over all
The pitying rain began to fall;
I lay and heard each pattering hoof
Upon my lowly, thatchèd roof,
And seemed to love the sound far more
Than ever I had done before.
For rain it hath a friendly sound
To one who's six feet under ground;
And scarce the friendly voice or face:
A grave is such a quiet place.

The rain, I said, is kind to come
And speak to me in my new home.
I would I were alive again
To kiss the fingers of the rain,
To drink into my eyes the shine
Of every slanting silver line,
To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze
From drenched and dripping apple-trees.
For soon the shower will be done,
And then the broad face of the sun
Will laugh above the rain-soaked earth
Until the world with answering mirth
Shakes joyously, and each round drop
Rolls, twinkling, from its grass-blade top.
How can I bear it; buried here,
While overhead the sky grows clear
And blue again after the storm?
O, multi-colored, multiform,
Beloved beauty over me,
That I shall never, never see
Again! Spring-silver, autumn-gold,
That I shall never more behold!
Sleeping your myriad magics through,
Close-sepulchered away from you!
O God, I cried, give me new birth,
And put me back upon the earth!
Upset each cloud's gigantic gourd
And let the heavy rain, down-poured
In one big torrent, set me free,
Washing my grave away from me!

I ceased; and through the breathless hush
That answered me, the far-off rush
Of herald wings came whispering
Like music down the vibrant string
Of my ascending prayer, and—crash!
Before the wild wind's whistling lash
The startled storm-clouds reared on high
And plunged in terror down the sky,
And the big rain in one black wave
Fell from the sky and struck my grave.
I know not how such things can be;
I only know there came to me
A fragrance such as never clings
To aught save happy living things;
A sound as of some joyous elf
Singing sweet songs to please himself,
And, through and over everything,
A sense of glad awakening.
The grass, a-tiptoe at my ear,
Whispering to me I could hear;
I felt the rain's cool finger-tips
Brushed tenderly across my lips,
Laid gently on my sealèd sight,
And all at once the heavy night
Fell from my eyes and I could see,—
A drenched and dripping apple-tree,
A last long line of silver rain,
A sky grown clear and blue again.
And as I looked a quickening gust
Of wind blew up to me and thrust
Into my face a miracle
Of orchard-breath, and with the smell,—
I know not how such things can be!—
I breathed my soul back into me.
Ah! Up then from the ground sprang I
And hailed the earth with such a cry
As is not heard save from a man
Who has been dead, and lives again.
About the trees my arms I wound;
Like one gone mad I hugged the ground;
I raised my quivering arms on high;
I laughed and laughed into the sky,
Till at my throat a strangling sob
Caught fiercely, and a great heart-throb
Sent instant tears into my eyes;
O God, I cried, no dark disguise

Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!
Thou canst not move across the grass
But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,
Nor speak, however silently,
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day;
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,—
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That can not keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat—the sky
Will cave in on him by and by
::

Carl Sandburg

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and
Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work--
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and the passengers ask
the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

.....

Summer Grass (1928)

Summer grass aches and whispers
It wants something; it calls and sings; it
pours
Out wishes to the overhead stars.

The rain hears; the rain answers; the rain is
slow
Coming; the rain wets the face of the grass.
::

Wallace Stevens

Here the grass grows (1909)

Here the grass grows,
And the wind blows,
And in the stream,
Small fishes gleam,
Blood-red and hue
Of shadowy blue,
And amber sheen,
And water-green,
And yellow flash,
And diamond ash.
And the grass grows,
And the wind blows.

::

Walt Whitman

Song of Myself, Section 6. (1855)

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.

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