Much can be said about the lives of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, two of the most influential poets in American history. Though a great amount of focus is placed on aspects of their personal lives like love interests and family relationships, not much can be said for the tragedy each poet experienced in his and her life. Walt Whitman, after publication of his book *Leaves of Grass*, traveled to countless field hospitals to nurse the sick and injured during the Civil War. Emily Dickinson’s life tragedy proves to be more of a mystery to her readers, staying true to her reserved nature. However, evidence does suggest that a serious illness caused Dickinson to essentially self-implode. The effect of these personal tragedies in the lives of Whitman and Dickinson can be seen in both their poetry and, in Whitman’s case, prose. From Dickinson’s sudden burst of ingenuity to Whitman’s *Memoranda during the War*, readers can see a gradual transformation of each poet. Tragedy is an inevitable characteristic of life, one that can transform and morph an individual’s identity without the faintest sign of mercy. In this essay I will explore this tragic transformation of both Whitman and Dickinson through their poetry and life’s story.

Just after the publication of the third edition (1861) of his book *Leaves of Grass*, the Civil War broke out and Whitman’s brother George had enlisted in the Union army. Previous to the Civil War, Whitman had made a habit of visiting friends and acquaintances at Broadway Hospital in New York. Once the war broke out, injured soldiers were among the patients Whitman visited at the New York hospital. During his time spent at Broadway Hospital, Whitman developed his own style of nursing, comforting the sick and writing letters to families of the dead and dying. As the brutality of the war heightened, Whitman traveled to Virginia in search of his brother George after receiving news that he was injured and possibly dead. His time spent in Fredericksburg and eventually in Washington D.C. affected him greatly as he cared for the wounded on the battlefield and in makeshift hospitals. According to Kenneth M. Price and Ed Folsom, authors of the biographical essay “About Walt Whitman,” the poet wrote in one of the many journals he kept during the war, that upon finding George alive in a camp in Fredericksburg, Whitman stumbled upon a sight that permanently affected him. Whitman wrote that he saw a pile of amputated limbs outside of the camp, blotted and bloody, rotting in a heap for all to see. This single tragic event in the midst of America’s greatest tragedy undeniably affected Whitman psychologically. Price and Folsom comment on this occurrence saying, “The sight would continue to haunt this poet who had so confidently celebrated the physical body, who had claimed that the soul existed only in the body, that the arms and legs were extensions of the soul, the legs moving the soul through the world and the hands allowing the soul to express itself. Now a generation of young American males, the very males on which he had staked the future of democracy, were literally being disarmed, amputated, killed. It was this amputation, this fragmenting of the Union—in both a literal and figurative sense—that Whitman would address for the next few years, as he devoted himself to becoming the arms and legs of the wounded and maimed soldiers in the Civil War hospitals” (16).

This description, I feel, evokes precisely the mindset of Whitman at the time. This event led him to dedicate years and countless notebooks to the soldiers of the Civil War and the experience he had in caring for them. The horrifying circumstances Whitman placed himself in now became his muse and “it was only now, encountering the horrifying aftereffects of a real battle, that the powerful Civil War poems began to emerge” (16). Because of the war, Whitman was forced to grow and mature into the great poet we celebrate today. In an essay by Mark Maslan, a quote from Whitman himself is incorporated, talking about his book *Leaves of Grass* and in particular, “Song of Myself.” Whitman describes his earliest work as “an attempt...of a naïve, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person, to cast into literature not only his own grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form” (937). Whitman’s view of himself and his poetry transforms into a new identity, a new Whitman, as his involvement in the Civil War deepened.

Whitman’s “Drum Taps” poems perfectly depict his transformation from the “naïve” and “arrogant” man he was in “Song of Myself” to the wise and worldly man he became in “Drum Taps.” The beginning lines of “Song of Myself” capture the essence of Whitman’s youthful arrogance perfectly. “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (26). Whitman’s unmistakable self-importance shines through in this extended poem, setting a standard for his poetry and a stereotype for himself. But as we travel through *Leaves of Grass* and stop at the “Drum Taps” poems, “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” in particular, Whitman’s transformation is evident.

My comrade I wrap in his blanket, envelop'd well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and
Carefully under feet,
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in
His grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited. (19-21)

This tragic and heartfelt vigil for a fallen soldier is a stark comparison to the poem “Song of Myself.” Price and Folsom, in response to the “Drum Taps” poems, mention in their article that “the poems were so different from any that had appeared in *Leaves*, in fact, that Whitman originally assumed they could not be joined in the same book with those earlier poems” (20). The main difference between Whitman’s earlier poetry and his Civil War poetry is primarily the tone. “Song of Myself” carries a heavy tone of self-righteousness and an omnipresent attitude where as “Drum Taps” proves to be lamenting and very solemn. Not only does Whitman’s poetry show his shift in identity due to the war, but his prose reflects this change as well.

It is a well-known fact that Whitman, during his time serving as a nurse in the war, kept several journals and notebooks with him at all times. The notebooks were primarily composed of "germinal ideas, the condensed outline of incidents which could later, when the mood seized him, be amplified and used in a literary way" (Glicksberg 265). And this he did indeed, but far before he began writing his “Drum Taps” poems, Whitman kept his daily reflections and experiences in notebooks and eventually incorporated these into a book *Memoranda during the War*. Whitman writes in the introduction of his book that, The present Memoranda may furnish a few stray glimpses into that life [nursing in the war], and into those lurid interiors of the period,
never to be fully convey’d to the future. For that purpose, and for what goes along with it, the Hospital part of the drama from ’61 to ’65, deserves indeed to be recorded—(I but suggest it.) (Whitman 6)

Whitman obviously found it important to communicate the significance of the Civil War to future generations. Writing this book and his “Drum Taps” poems served that purpose. Understandably, the entries in Memoranda are very disjointed and some don’t even contain full sentences. This book, which contains journal entries from his time spent aiding soldiers during the Civil War, allows readers crucial insight not only into this important life event of Whitman, but into this tragic time in American history as well. Each entry in the book is weighed down by sorrow, shock, and grief. It is evident, though it may not be explicitly stated, that Whitman is suffering just as much as the soldiers he is caring for. This event in his life, though a chosen route, took a heavy toll on the poet and his writings. Mark Maslan, in his essay “Strange Hand: Body as Text in Drum-Taps,” explains how and why Whitman becomes so emotionally involved in his writing, both poetry and prose. “For by placing the speaker’s body at once in the position of the writer and of the corpse, the poem simultaneously identifies the speaker with the writer, and associates the activity of writing with putting one’s own body in the position of another” (949). With this being said, it is now easy to see how Whitman managed to transform and shift identities so easily in his writing. By identifying himself as the subject of the poem (a corpse or dying man), his ailed body, or “representation of a body,” becomes the poem. In a sense, his style of writing has not changed very drastically from “Song of Myself” where Whitman creates a poem about his body and soul.

Whitman’s experiences undoubtedly changed him and the person he identified with. His experiences in the Civil War taught him the true meaning of life and the soul, challenging his beliefs and shaking the foundation of his poem “Song of Myself.” Crisis and tragedy took its toll on Whitman, but it was a small price to pay for the journals and poetry we now have the privilege of reading. Like Whitman, Emily Dickinson used personal tragedy as a catalyst for her poetry. Though her writing thrived during this time, her health, both mental and physical, suffered greatly.

During the years of 1858 to 1864, Dickinson’s poetic production increased exponentially. Paul Crumbley, in his essay “Emily Dickinson’s Life,” states that “her output is estimated to have accelerated from 52 poems in 1858 to 366 poems in 1862, and then declined to 53 poems in 1864” (2). This increased production of poetry surely reflects the turbulence Dickinson was experiencing in her life at the time. Most notably, a tragedy that affected Dickinson from 1863 until her death in 1886 was a painful eye condition, now called iritis. In Norbert Hirschhorn and Polly Longsworth’s essay “Medicine Posthumous: A New Look at Emily Dickinson’s Medical Conditions,” they define iritis as “an inflammation of the eye layer carrying the fine muscle that controls pupil size, blood vessels, and nerves” (303). Dickinson consulted Dr. Henry W. Williams for this condition from 1864-65 in Boston, Massachusetts. As recorded by Williams in his medical journals, he was treating several patients with the same condition during that time. According to Hirschhorn and Longsworth, Williams attempted several different treatments for his iritis patients, some of which included an atropine solution dropped into the eyes and the puncturing of the cornea to relieve pressure from within the eye. It is very likely that Dickinson would have undergone one, if not both of these treatments for her eyes. The fact that she describes her condition and her doctor’s visits as “painful” clearly suggests that this was a traumatic event (302). Williams’ long term treatment for Dickinson’s condition was for her to avoid bright light (the outdoors altogether) and to avoid anything which might strain the eyes. For Dickinson, this meant restrictions on reading, writing and sewing, all activities that she lived for.

It has been documented that the height of Dickinson’s poetic production occurred in 1862, before her official diagnosis. The spontaneous output of poems suggests that Dickinson was in a great deal of pain at the time and feared that her time having decent sight, or even sight at all, was coming to an end. With her rational fear of the possibility of going blind, Dickinson felt compelled to write as much as she could while she had the chance. And so, in 1862, she wrote approximately 366 poems, some of which expressed her fear of sightlessness and the pain she was experiencing due to her disorder. Her poem, “Before I got my eye put out—” conveys her greatest fear in the very first stanza.

Before I got my eye put out—
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes—
And know no other way— (1-4)

The poem is full of nature imagery and could almost be considered a pastoral poem, placing much of the focus on the speaker’s environmental surroundings. But of course, being a Dickinson poem, “Before I got my eye put out—” is running with undercurrents of hidden meanings. I believe that the poem is undoubtedly a direct address to her eye condition. The speaker alludes to the fact that if she was given perfect eyesight and was able to see all of the beautiful things the world and nature had to offer, she would be positively rejoicing and almost unbelieving.

The Motions of the Dipping Birds—
The Morning’s Amber Road—
For mine—to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead— (14-17)

The death in this stanza is meant to be taken figuratively, but in the last stanza of the poem, the speaker takes it literally. The speaker, who I assume to be Dickinson, attempts to pacify her fear of going blind by simply stating that, logically, it would be safer for her to stay inside pressed against the windowpane than to die of the wondrous shock of being able to see the natural world. The last two lines of the fifth stanza also carry a very bitter and almost hateful tone. “Where other creatures put their eyes—/Incautious—of the Sun—” (20-21). In these lines, Dickinson is almost cursing the animals outside of her window, despising them for their beauty and the fact that they are allowed to enjoy the sunlight. Meanwhile, she is forced to remain in the dark of her house, for fear of figurative death or literal blindness.

“Before I got my eye put out—” reflects Dickinson’s attitude toward her disorder in a very raw and emotional manner, something that is uncharacteristic of her and seldom seen in her earlier poems. Hirschhorn and Longsworth add in their essay that “according to one system of thought, Dickinson’s eye condition was entirely psychosomatic” (306). Despite the fact that she frantically wrote as much as she could as her eyes progressively grew worse, it is possible that her condition (which already forced her into seclusion from the outside world) led to a deep depression. In one of Williams' published medical journals, he “described a condition affecting young people of ‘hysterical temperament,’ lasting months to years, recurrent, and amenable to nonspecific treatments...he designated the
condition as ‘hysterical hyperaesthesia’” (306). This condition could have very well affected Dickinson. Though her temperament was not explicitly recorded, I can only assume that being confined to one room would have triggered some sort of depression in Dickinson, which in turn would shift her sense of identity. Not only this, but the fact that she could barely read or write without pain must have led her to hysterics. By this time, according to Crumbley, Dickinson’s poetic output declined to only 53 poems by 1864. Hirschhorn and Longsworth state that, “Dickinson’s mental state in the period from 1861 to 1863 may be judged by both the tenor of her verse and her prodigious literary output to have been intense and agitated” (308). Seeing that the treatment for her condition began in 1864, it is safe to say that her eye condition affected the subject matter and the quantity of her poetry immensely. Though it is primarily suspected that Dickinson’s heighten literary output during the years of 1858 to 1864 is due to a failed love interest, I strongly believe otherwise. The fact that a man could spur so much emotion and creativity from such a stoic poet is hard to believe. Dickinson, as stated by Crumbley, lived somewhat of an oppressed life, expressing interest in politics and government, but was “den[ied] that life because of her sex” (1). Her primary refuge from her mundane life was her poetry and experiencing the possibility of having that taken away from her due to health issues would prove to be much more traumatic than unrequited love. I believe that to assume Dickinson’s greatest poetic production was spurred by a man is a disservice to the legacy that Dickinson has left behind. She was a woman well ahead of her time, and only a threat to her poetry seems to be a viable option for her increased writing. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson have proven themselves to be two of the most influential poets of their time, inspiring others and provoking the insightful thinking of future generations. They each experienced tragic life events, one influenced by war and the other influenced by personal health. These tragedies shaped their personal lives which in turn influenced the way they thought, their identities, and ultimately their writing. I believe Whitman and Dickinson’s response to their personal tragedies is what makes them such distinguished and celebrated poets. Their shift in identity and writing style reflect the fact that they responded in a very human-like manner. By grounding and humanizing such idolized poets, they become significantly more relevant and they now become tangible beings in the literary world.

I pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized help on this paper.

Works Cited

American Civil War & Whitman. With the onset of the American Civil War, Whitman's wrote his poem Beat! Beat! Drums, that appeared as a call for the country. In Washington, Whitman took up a part time job in the army paymaster's office and became a nurse to those injured in the war. He would recall the experience in The Great Army of the Sick, published in 1863. In 1864, Whitman's brother George was taken into custody by the Confederates in Virginia and another brother Andrew Jackson succumbed to death from Tuberculosis. Whitman received a government job in the Bureau of the Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior. 1865- : George was released. 1866- : O'Connor published a biographical study of Whitman called The Good Gray Poet. 1868