

The Possibility of Happiness in Emily Dickinson's Writings

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Abstract

This study investigates how Emily Dickinson's writings challenged major representations of happiness in nineteenth-century America, such as theological, sentimental, and transcendental. Although the pursuit of happiness, or a life worth living, has been a global concern for millennia, with roots in numerous cultural and religious traditions, its definition remains – and may always remain – elusive. Happiness, however, was declared a right to be pursued by all citizens in the Declaration of Independence. In the nineteenth century, the classical concept of *eudaimonia* had transformed and evolved into a sentimental concept in which happiness was reified either as a reward in the future or as a positive emotion in the present. Likewise, this idea was grounded in the literary tradition of the trial narrative which, simultaneously, was influenced by, or rooted in, theological interpretations of the notion. Despite the fact that these conceptions of happiness have largely shaped interpretations and judgements of Dickinson's work, I argue that the poet's views on a life worth living were more akin to pre-Socratic tragic interpretations of the idea, since the poet's writings valued the contingency of life, the gift of mortality, and the possibility of happiness in this life. By placing the poet's writings in conversation with her nineteenth-century broader context, this study aims to identify some of the strategies that Dickinson used to dismiss nineteenth-century's reified representations of happiness. This study is thus rooted in the belief that Dickinson's ways of writing, thinking, and living may provide a new perspective on the path to a better understanding of what it means to live a life worth living.

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Introduction

“Accept my timid happiness. No Joy can be in vain, but adds to some bright total,
whose Dwelling is unknown –.”¹

Emily Dickinson

Judging someone's happiness should wait until the individual's last breath, and the question of happiness should remain unanswered until then. Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to Sarah Tuckerman in 1877 that happiness cannot be considered a partial experience since each joy “adds to some bright total” and, for this reason, happiness must remain “unknown,” or indeterminate, until death.² In other words, everything matters; every incident or happening in a person's life, regardless of how commonplace or remarkable, is significant. With this in mind, what gives happiness power is the stimulus or possibility contained within the totality of experience, provided that its realisation would diminish its potentiality. Nonetheless, for millennia, the need to reify and determine happiness in advance – on the assumption that this procedure is required to gain a better understanding of the concept itself as well as the ways in which its complete determination can be experienced – has been a worldwide concern. In contrast, this study investigates the ways in which Dickinson's work, thought, and life, challenged major reifications of the idea in historical, literary, and philosophical accounts in the nineteenth century – namely, theological, sentimental, and transcendental notions. Likewise, her poems and letters approached happiness as an all-encompassing concept delimited by both the phenomenon of death and the boundaries of life's circumference.

Dickinson's writings suggest that happiness must remain indeterminate and incomplete throughout an individual's life due to the contingency and fragility

¹ L528 (1877). All of Dickinson's letters are referenced using the abbreviation (L), number, and date, according to Thomas H. Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vol. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958).

² In several poems, Dickinson's speakers suggest that “Judgment is justest” after death. For instance, in “F1707A - Judgment is justest,” “F1045A - We learn in the retreating” (1865), “F1239C - To disappear enhances” (1871), “F1530A - Facts by our side are never sudden” (1880), and “F1695A - I see thee clearer for the grave.” All of Dickinson's poems are referenced using the abbreviation (F), number, first line, and date, according to Ralph W. Franklin, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vol. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

of existence. Besides, the poet's concern for the question of happiness, or a life worth living, reclaims the privilege accorded to the idea in pre- and post-Socratic accounts – prior to its Christianisation – and stresses the need for a tragic approach to it, viewing chance (or what is outside individuals' sphere of influence) as both inherently valuable and deplorable. This study is grounded in the notion that Dickinson's perception of happiness as a possibility provides an alternative viewpoint to major nineteenth-century interpretations and reifications of the concept in the United States,³ as shown in the following poem:

Such is the Force of
Happiness -
The Least - can lift a
ton
Assisted by its stimulus -

Who Misery - sustain -
No Sinew can afford -
The Cargo of Themselves -
Too infinite for
Consciousness'
Slow capabilities -⁴

The possibility of happiness is the strongest force for Dickinson's speaker. The poem's powerful aphorism suggests that the thrust of happiness and its stimulus, which is happiness itself, can lift any imaginable weight. This primary analogy in the present tense adds a revelatory condition to the statement and implies that this is the speaker's continuous and permanent perception.

The force of happiness is alive, powerful, and energetic in the first verse. In contrast to this effect, the second stanza emphasises and attributes weakness to those who are supported by "Misery," as these individuals cannot even sustain themselves. Furthermore, the metaphor "the Cargo of Themselves" could be interpreted as the abstract burden of each person's life. Dickinson's speaker

³ Although the context of this research is the United States, the term "America" will be used frequently to refer to this specific area.

⁴ "F889A - Such is the force of happiness" (1864). In the last verse, Dickinson offers an alternative reading, or variation, "benumbed abilities –" instead of "Slow capabilities –." Dickinson's poems' transcriptions are copied here from the open-access website *Emily Dickinson Archive* (<https://www.edickinson.org/>).

highlights the importance of the words “cargo” and “themselves” by juxtaposing them. Certainly, this cargo may be too large for “Consciousness’ Slow capabilities,” and, as a result, it cannot be properly evaluated. Dickinson does not finish the poem by ending it with the polysyllabic word “Capabilities” and a dash. Actually, it appears to be a pending note in which the poem and the notions it expresses continue to exist. This could imply that its significance and possibilities have not faded because the ideas stated in this poem will live on as long as its verses are read. Finally, the structural repetition in “can lift” and “can afford” underscores the capacity for action; thus, it implies that the conception of happiness is an active one. This idea resonates well with the Solonian interpretation of happiness, which is rooted in Solon’s proverb “call no one happy until death.”⁵ Therefore, this research argues that Dickinson’s ideas about happiness – or a life worth living – echo pre-Socratic tragic readings, according to which happiness and the potential for it involve the entirety and diversity of experiences that occur over the course of a lifetime.⁶

The frequency with which the word “happiness” – and related words – appears in Dickinson’s lexicon may serve as a starting point for establishing a link between the term and the poet’s views on the subject. According to Stanford P. Rosembaum’s *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*, the word happiness appears 3 times, felicity 5 times, and happy 27 times. Other words associated to happiness as a positive experience (or cognate terms) are: bliss 41 times, delight 48 times, joy 43 times, extasy (ecstasy) 27 times, and pleasure 15 times. Regarding happiness as a negative affect: the word pain appears 57 times, anguish 32 times, despair 29 times, misery 14 times, sorrow 5 times, and woe (or wo) 25 times. Given that this study aligns Dickinson’s views with pre-Socratic tragic interpretations in which happiness, or a life worth living, is understood as an all-encompassing concept, it is no surprise that words like life (179 times) and death (155 times) appear so frequently in the poet’s lexicon, considering that

⁵ Solon was a Greek lawmaker and poet who lived in the sixth century BC.

⁶ In this research, the term “happiness” stands as a synonym for “a life worth living,” “a life well lived,” and “a flourishing life” (or meaningful, truthful life).

every single circumstance, internal or external, will have an impact on the totality of experience, or by the time an individual faces death.⁷

To examine Dickinson's poetic approach to the concept of happiness, it is necessary to situate this research within previous studies and to establish its theoretical and critical grounds, which could be introduced by this brief stanza depicting Dickinson's brilliancy in her youth:

She is ever fair and never proud,
Hath tongue at will and yet is never loud.⁸

This insightful short excerpt, written by Sarah Tuthill in the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary catalogue in 1847, is one of the earliest accolades for Dickinson's intellectual brilliance. This item, discovered less than two decades ago, along with other rarely seen personal objects and writings of the poet, was included in a major exhibition co-organised by Amherst College in 2017 at The Morgan Library and Museum in New York. In addition to this exhibition, Amherst College Press published *The Networked Recluse: Emily Dickinson's Connected World* in the same year as a major collaboration between several institutions holding the poet's collections as well as leading academics in Dickinson's studies such as Susan Howe, Marta Werner, and Carolyn Vega.

The fragment's emphasis on Dickinson's brilliance occurs alongside a remark on her quietness. Similarly, the poet's reclusiveness and insularity have all been part of her poetic "brand," and even recent scholarly attempts to emphasise Dickinson's "networks" and connections still refer to her as a "recluse." Although Dickinson's first editors underpinned her seclusion and isolation, the aforementioned publication contextualises the poet within her cultural, literary, and personal network, which included long-lived friendships and relationships with editors as well as prominent New England figures. This connectivity opens up new avenues for interpreting Dickinson's work. As Mike Kelly points out in the introduction, this book aims "to remind everyone that the story of Dickinson's

⁷ Stanford P. Rosenbaum. *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964).

⁸ Sarah Tuthill on Emily Dickinson (1847). Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

manuscripts, her life, and her work is still unfolding.”⁹ As a result, it will be possible to understand Dickinson beyond what has already been understood by deconstructing the mystification in which she has been cloaked. For over a century, a wide range of stories have circulated, confirming the enigmatic nature of Dickinson's work and personae. Her multifaceted story continues to unfold and shift as new materials and access to those materials emerge.

In terms of Dickinson's materials' modes of analysis, this study considers her poems, letters, letter-poems, and prose fragments to be mutually dependent components of her poetic project.¹⁰ *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, edited by Jane D. Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie, is the first collection of critical essays that focuses on the poet's epistolary work, and it acknowledges the poet's artistic integrity as central to understanding Dickinson's work. This book demonstrates how her letters provide essential insight into her personality, family ties, and daily habits.¹¹ When inspecting Dickinson's oeuvre, the aim is to provide a context for these materials, by linking it to specific moments in the poet's narrative.¹² In other words, Dickinson's work will be examined in light of the events that may have prompted its creation. This study will make use of Jay Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* for this purpose. These volumes, published in the 1960s, represent a massive record connecting Dickinson's writings with the specifics of her life in Amherst, as well as the circumstances that may have had an influence on them.¹³ Despite the fact that the poet's writings attempted to consider the conditions of a life worth living and communicate existential issues throughout her lifetime, three major narratives have separated her work from philosophical debates by devaluating her modes

⁹ Colin B. Bailey, T. Michael Kelly, Carolyn Vega, Marta L. Werner, Susan Howe, and Richard Wilbur, *The Networked Recluse: The Connected World of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Amherst College Press, 2017), 2.

¹⁰ Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), ix. This research draws on the assumption that Dickinson's poems and letters are, as expressed in Eberwein's words, “two manifestations of the same artistic project.”

¹¹ Dickinson's correspondence was her primary form of public artistic expression, and her letters are an integral part of her literary work.

¹² Although this process of contextualisation will not always be possible, this research will intend to point at the facts or circumstances that might have had an impact on any specific writing material.

¹³ In related terms, other sources that will be looked at are *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, and Martha Dickinson Bianchi's *Face to Face*, which is an account of the poet's niece's recollections of their moments together.

of inquiry: her elusive way of thinking, her incomprehensible way of writing, and her reclusive way of living.

Dickinson's Exclusion from Philosophical Debates

Although critics have frequently lowered the value of Dickinson's thought processes due to their ambiguity, scholars such as Paula Bennet and James McIntosh highlight the perks of Dickinson's poetic indeterminacy. The new introduction to Paula Bennett's *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, published in 2018, traces the evolution of, and causes for, Dickinson's current academic output, which places her "in the same league as Whitman and Melville," by becoming "America's first canonical woman writer."¹⁴ Bennett suggests that, in considering Dickinson's indeterminacy as the most salient feature of her poetics, one of the factors that has recast Dickinson's criticism is the increasing complexity attributed to this indeterminacy and its subsequent consequences in scholarly studies.¹⁵ Besides, it is Dickinson's speakers' indeterminacy that allows them to cope with the inherent qualities of a world in which nothing is certain except death. Taking this into consideration, the poet's ambivalence stands out as a key characteristic in her approach to the possibility of happiness in this life. Although a strong reading of Dickinson's poetry is frequently advocated, the reader should remember that what I offer in this dissertation is one interpretation of her poems that is also influenced by my own views, or, to use Emerson's phrase, my "angle of vision." There is no proper or ultimate interpretation of Dickinson's poems, and this is merely one approach to the topic of happiness in her writings. It is neither absolute nor complete, and further reading may introduce new variables to Dickinson's riddle. Her poetic strategies enlarge indeterminacy and ambiguity, allowing readers to participate in the process of meaning-making in her poems,

¹⁴ Paula Bennett, "Introduction," in *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, second edition (Brighton, UK: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2018), xvii. In her book, Bennett examines Dickinson's work in views of the women's literary tradition of her period. For Bennett, one of the reasons for the increase of Dickinson's academic output was due to "the influx of gender-oriented research on Dickinson by women scholars in the 1970s and 80s."

¹⁵ Ibid., xviii. According to Bennett, Dickinson's poetic status has risen thanks to, on the one hand, the publication of R. W. Franklin's *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* in 1981 and, on the other hand, "a recasting of Dickinson's project and the pervasive indeterminacy that characterizes it in post-structuralist and postmodernist terms."

and the readings and interpretations that this research suggests are part of this open-ended process.

In opposition to major reifications of the notion, Dickinson's writings place happiness in an unknown location that cannot be predicted in advance. In his approach to the poet's indeterminacy, James McIntosh's *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (2000) provides a detailed account of the complex relationship between Dickinson's work and "the unknown as needed and dreadful."¹⁶ In terms of mental fluidity, McIntosh notes that the poet's experience of "nimble believing," which she revealed to Otis P. Lord in a letter in 1882, is a crucial element for understanding the changing and transient nature of her own consciousness, given that "one's mental life is continually in flux."¹⁷ In related terms, Solonian tragic notion suggests that happiness should be perceived as constantly in flux and, as such, Dickinson's approach to the fickleness of thought and existence can be regarded as convenient and suitable for this purpose.

While Dickinson's oeuvre has commonly been defined as exceedingly complex and, as a result, dismissed as unintelligible, Cristanne Miller offers methods for facilitating its comprehension. In *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (1987), Miller analyses Dickinson's poses and poetic strategies. This work examines her poetic language from three angles: emphasising its extraordinary power, contrasting it as a response to other forms of language, and analysing its impact on Dickinson's identity as a woman poet. While Dickinson's poems are widely regarded as ambiguous, Miller contends that they are easier to understand when read in context and through "linguistic, structural, historical, and biographical analysis."¹⁸ Readers may be able to grasp some of Dickinson's literary strategies and language usage by doing so. "Although the poet's language is not transparent," Miller says, "we do see her in it."¹⁹ Miller's account investigates how Dickinson's poems achieve a multiple and ambiguous effect through her metaphorical use of language, which results in a language that is

¹⁶ James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 123. "The Unknown as Needed and Dreadful" is the title of McIntosh's fourth chapter. Throughout this research, I will apply this notion of "needed and dreadful" to several themes when examining Dickinson's work.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. L750 (1882).

¹⁸ Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1987), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

both meaningful and devoid of definite meaning. According to Miller, other factors contributing to Dickinson's language's multiplicity include the compressed nature of her verses, the ambiguity of her analogies, and the nonreferentiality of her message. In the context of happiness, Dickinson's radical openness provides a suitable ground for exploring a notion that, by definition, should remain open to possibility as well as indeterminate.

This study assumes that, in light of the narrative about Dickinson's seclusion, and despite living a somewhat isolated life, the meaning historically applied to that isolation deserves to be interrogated. During the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, American poets Adrienne Rich and Susan Howe, among others, brought a new focus on feminist criticism of Dickinson's work and life by questioning some of the poet's long-standing interpretations. Rich's influential essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" claims that Dickinson "chose" her seclusion because she knew what she "needed." In fact, it was "no hermetic retreat, but a seclusion which included a wide range of people, of reading and correspondence."²⁰ Rich's Dickinson reveals herself as a determined, practical, and powerful woman who deliberately chose her own society and organised her time and life on *her own terms* in order to exercise her vocation and fulfilment – poetry.

Like Rich, Howe believes that Dickinson's self-imposed exile was essential in liberating her from the constraints of Victorian conventions and granting her the opportunity to become a poet. In *My Emily Dickinson*, the image of Dickinson as an erudite poet, acutely aware of the larger context of her time, emerges. This study expands on Howe's investigation of several concepts, themes, and strategies intimately related to Dickinson's context and work, such as the influence of Jonathan Edwards and Calvinist doctrine in shaping the idea of happiness, the attraction and merging of opposites, and the use of irony in Dickinson's tragic view of the world. However, it is critical to remember that, as Howe asserts in reference to Dickinson's work, "there can be no final

²⁰ Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton & Company, 1993), 179.

interpretation of the poem.”²¹ Similarly, this research contends that there can be no final interpretation of happiness.

By emphasising the larger historical, cultural, and social contexts in which she wrote, this study aims to reunite Dickinson’s work with philosophical debates. Given the futility of ascertaining a unique meaning in Dickinson’s poems as well as pre-establishing happiness in pre-Socratic tragic accounts, the poet’s indeterminacy is a key element within her own philosophical and poetic corpus, and brings her ideas closer to classical accounts of happiness. Dickinson’s poetic philosophy is not founded on ideals or absolutes; rather, she bases her concept of happiness on her own daily practices and experiences, and she leads by example by incorporating her ideas about how to live a meaningful life into her poetry, and vice versa. With this in mind, it is important to include Dickinson’s work within philosophical discussions since that allows her to join the ranks of canonical American writers, such as Ralph W. Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. Recent studies by Wendy Martin, Eliza Richards, Barton Levi St Armand, Jack Capps, and Páraic Finnerty, among others, have chosen a variety of lenses through which to approach the work of (re)contextualising Dickinson. Additionally, the book *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* (1993), edited by Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith, was the first to challenge the focus on Dickinson’s pain, renunciation, and suffering. For this project, the most important among these studies are those that attempt to use the discipline of philosophy to read Dickinson’s work such as *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (2013), edited by Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Stonum.²² Besides, Deppman’s *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (2009) was the first book-length study to focus on Dickinson as a thinker. Understanding Dickinson’s poetic practices is as important as appreciating the variety of discourses ingrained within them, which allowed her to reflect on how to experience life to the fullest and to perceive it from multiple viewpoints.

²¹ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 133.

²² This collection of essays will be summarised in the section “Dickinson’s Engagement with Philosophy.”

The Relevance of Dickinson's Context

Dickinson's context emerges historically as a complex, exceptional, and revolutionary phenomenon. The poet was exposed to numerous voices and experiences that greatly influenced her way of thinking at the dawn of the mass consumption era, including a Calvinist religious revival, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and the American Civil War. In recent years, scholars and critics have become more aware of the importance of the poet's writings in nineteenth-century American culture. In order to understand Dickinson's development as an artist as well as an individual within the larger context of American women poets, Wendy Martin's *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich* (1984) offers a full portrait of three American poets by placing them in their historical, cultural, and social context. From Puritan doctrine and Transcendental thought to modern Feminism, this book takes readers on a journey through American history and culture. Martin's goal is to investigate the relationship between Puritan values and contemporary American feminist thought. Similarly, all of these writers adapted and transformed their society's traditional values to create, as Martin puts it, "an alternative vision grounded in the reality of their daily lives" in order to resist their earthly and heavenly "fathers."²³ These three poets shared nationality, gender, and aesthetic tradition, and their poetry is a celebration of earthly life.

Several Dickinson's poems emphasise the intrinsic value of existence itself. Certainly, the poet's imagination allowed her to transcend the spatial limitations of her home in order to perceive "the greatest of truths through the simplest of beauties," as Jack Capps puts it, "and in her finest poems she saw life steadily and she saw it whole."²⁴ Dickinson illustrated this in one of her letters to the editor T. W. Higginson, in which the poet declared, "My business is circumference,"²⁵ with no beginnings or endings. The sections that follow provide a brief glimpse into Dickinson's illuminating surroundings and her connection to the world through her social, literary, religious, and philosophical context.

²³ Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich* (the University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 3.

²⁴ Jack Capps, "Preface," in *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), vii.

²⁵ L268 (1862).

Dickinson's work reflects on a wide range of discourses and encompasses the breadth of her life experiences.

Dickinson's work challenged and was influenced by her cultural values and practices. The essays in Eliza Richards' edited collection *Emily Dickinson in Context* (2013) are essential for situating the poet within her educational, religious, literary, and philosophical context. According to Richards, contextualising Dickinson's work provides "a great reservoir of unexplored engagements with the events, ideas, social movements, politics, arts, education, religion, everyday practices, environments, entertainments, and writings of her time."²⁶ Some of these engagements are also discussed in Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz's *A Companion to Emily Dickinson* (2007). In the process of deconstructing Dickinson's isolation, this collection of essays reveals new perspectives. Likewise, these essays shed light on aspects of Dickinson's biography and cultural context by emphasising the poet's immersion in nineteenth-century literary and religious culture through books, periodicals, and magazines, as well as connections with editors (such as T.W. Higginson, Samuel Bowles, and the Hollands), published writers (such as Helen Hunt Jackson), and religious figures (such as Charles Wadsworth).

Dickinson was actively involved in her cultural surroundings, despite the fact that her way of life and thought defied convention. In *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (2012), Miller reiterates that the poet's writings shared the cultural roots of her contemporaries while responding to traditional genres and idioms in a unique and original way. Miller's account distinguishes two writing periods in Dickinson's life – before and after 1865 – since her writing "change remarkably after 1865."²⁷ However, Dickinson's poetic practices also include recurring traits, such as "compressed syntax, disruptive use of dashes, wide-ranging registers of diction, and use of radically disorienting

²⁶ Eliza Richards, ed., *Emily Dickinson in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

²⁷ Cristanne Miller, *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 1. After 1865, as Miller observes, Dickinson shared a greater proportion of her poems without keeping a copy. The first three chapters of this research examine Dickinson's writings as a whole, while the fourth chapter focuses on the poet's late work, which was mostly written and exchanged during her final ten years of life.

metonymy and metaphor.”²⁸ In her approach to happiness, Dickinson's poetic philosophy is rooted in the act of thinking as well as confronting truths.

Dickinson's oeuvre conveyed philosophical and scientific ideas. Richard E. Brantley's *Dickinson's Rich Conversation* (2013) demonstrates how her poetry communicates about philosophy and science. One of the book's central questions is: can Dickinson's poetry aspire to be philosophical? Dickinson's dialogical exchange between philosophy, science, and literature is central to her work. Besides, Dickinson's art incorporates and interacts with a diverse range of voices, and the impact that those voices had on her imagination will be investigated further in this study. Particularly, when considering Dickinson's approach to existential issues and modes of living a flourishing life. Barton Levi St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture* (1984), a major work on Dickinson's cultural environment, is also useful for this research. Dickinson's poetry, according to St. Armand, is a complete formulation of “her rich American Victorian Culture.”²⁹ Some of the themes covered in this publication include the use of Dickinson's sentimentality to deal with Calvinist doctrine and the interaction between her sensibility, her views on happiness, and popular culture.³⁰ Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to consider the specifics of Dickinson's context through her literary influences.

Literary Influences on Dickinson's Thinking

As many scholars have noted Dickinson was a voracious reader throughout her life. *Emily Dickinson's Reading 1836-1886* (1966) by Jack Capps is a seminal work on the subject. This book explores the impact of Dickinson's literary context, as well as how it influenced her development as a person and poet. According to Capps, Dickinson's reading and correspondence exposed her to the world's great literature, major events in nineteenth-century America and Europe, and daily life in Amherst. Regarding Dickinson's Anglo-American literary context, some of the voices that will be examined in this study are William Shakespeare's, Jonathan

²⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁹ Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and her Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 276.

³⁰ The terms sentimentality and sensibility will be used interchangeably throughout this study, as well as affective or sentimental interpretations of happiness.

Edwards', Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, Emily Brontë's, George Eliot's, Thomas Carlyle's, and Ralph W. Emerson's.

Dickinson looked up to Shakespeare as a literary model, assimilating and adapting his ideas into her living and writings. Such ideas enabled her to consider various possibilities and alternatives to her cultural moral code and standards, which were heavily influenced by Protestant Calvinism. *Dickinson's Shakespeare* (2008) by Páraic Finnerty reflects on Emerson's essay on the Bard, one of the most influential at the time, published in *Representative Men* (1850), a work Dickinson described as "a little Granite Book you can lean on."³¹ The following excerpt summarises Emerson's explanations of Shakespeare's enormous influence on nineteenth-century American literature and philosophy:

[Shakespeare] wrote the text of modern life; the text of manners: he drew the man of England and Europe; the father of the man in America: he drew the man, and described the day, and what is done in it: he read the hearts of men and women, their probity, and their second thought and wiles, the wiles of innocence, and the transitions by which virtues and vices slide into their contraries.³²

Taking this into account, this dissertation looks at how Shakespeare's tendency to learn by opposites and recognise the intertwining of rational and emotional responses, as well as his tragic view of the world, influenced Dickinson's thinking.

It is important to consider how several Dickinson's speakers approached life and the phenomenon of happiness from a tragic perspective, as well as how tragic interpretations, with their emphasis on chance, may be deemed to be the most appropriate with regard to mortal beings. Clark Griffith explores this complex relationship in *Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* (2015), emphasising Dickinson's tragic insight and sensibility, with the goal of claiming that tragic tradition is fundamental when examining her poems. Griffith's book delves into Dickinson's tragic awareness and the coping strategies she employed in dealing with people's mortal existence. Some of Dickinson's best poems, according to Griffith, deal with "man's lot in a world that is tragically 'other' than

³¹ L481 (1876).

³² Richards, *Emily Dickinson in Context*, 78.

himself.”³³ This “other” world, among other things, refers to the circumstances that are bestowed upon any human by chance – rather than choice – prior to birth. On the one hand, Dickinson’s privileged socioeconomic status freed her from the need to make a living from her poetry. Because she did not publish during her lifetime – only ten of her poems appeared anonymously in periodicals at the time – and did not have to adhere to the typographic conventions of printing practices, Dickinson was able to fully experiment with her poetry. On the other hand, while her work confronts and defies gendered stereotypes, the fact that she was a woman limited her prospects to become a poet. Dickinson never failed to recognise that she saw “New Englandly,”³⁴ and how her cultural context influenced the ways in which she perceived reality. And yet, Dickinson created the world in which she willed to live by consuming all impediments and making occasions out of misfortunes.³⁵ Although the connection between happiness and tragedy will be discussed further below, it is necessary to first summarise Dickinson’s complex relationship with theology, as well as the influence of religion on her poetic practices and ways of thinking.

Dickinson and Religion

Dickinson’s writings were heavily influenced by Calvinist doctrine during the Second Great Awakening. Linda Freedman’s *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (2011) establishes a fantastic model for connecting and analysing poetry and theology side by side. One of its goals is to demonstrate Dickinson’s appreciation of religion and the influence that Puritan and Liberal thought had on her writings, as well as her poetic approach to life’s mysteries. Freedman examines how Dickinson’s Puritan heritage, combined with liberal Christianity and classical mythology, was “a source of poetic enrichment” rather than a barrier.³⁶ By combining literature and theology in her poetry, she was able to think about theological issues and faith narrative structures. Furthermore, Freedman

³³ Clark Griffith, *Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson’s Tragic Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

³⁴ “F256A - The robin’s my criterion for tune” (1861).

³⁵ This idea is well-depicted in a letter Dickinson send to her cousin Frances Norcross in 1873, after she had been sick: “it only kept me awake one night, and the birds insisted on sitting up, so it became an occasion instead of a misfortune.” L390 (1873).

³⁶ Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

assures that Dickinson tested “the reach of human experience and knowledge, exposing the uncertainties and gaps at the heart of her poetic endeavour through their engagement with religious themes” through poetry.³⁷

This research then investigates the effects of Dickinson's religious tradition in her poetry, and the uses she made of religious myths, symbols, and narrative structures, as well as the influence of the Christianisation of happiness on the development of the concept. Clark W. Gilpin's *Religion Around Emily Dickinson* (2014), on the other hand, examines the impact of religious ideas in the poet's context. This book investigates how Dickinson's imaginative and intellectual capacity reshaped and adapted theological ideas. Readers will better understand and appreciate Dickinson's poetry if those religious influences are revealed, as well as how her poems shed light on religious practices of her time. Gilpin believes Dickinson's blending of Christian and Transcendental ideas influenced her “meditative and artistic solitude.”³⁸ Considering the significance of religion in her environment, what kind of faith does Dickinson's poetry express? This dissertation assumes that Dickinson's faith was more secular than religious.

Despite the fact that religious faith was prevalent in her context, most Dickinson's poems can be interpreted as expressions of secular faith. According to Martin Hägglund's latest book, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* (2019), any life well lived must be finite and necessitates secular faith, provided that this faith views life as an end in itself. The author emphasises that only through secular faith can a life worth living be attained, and that this is the path to spiritual freedom. For Hägglund, religious faith expresses a devaluation of individuals' finite lives, because finitude is understood as a limitation on the path to eternal life. As a result, while secular faith is concerned with the intrinsic worth of any finite life, religious faith sees it as a period of trial on the way to heaven. This structure of Christian trial narrative and its focus on testing will be investigated further in relation to, on the one hand, its influence in the transformation of the notion of happiness and, on the other, its usage in Dickinson's poetry and the ways in which she made this notion her own in her reflections on life as a journey rather than a trial. Although this research focuses on Dickinson's nineteenth-

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³⁸ Clark W. Gilpin, *Religion Around Emily Dickinson* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2014), 14.

century context, it is important to consider how that context has influenced our current understanding of happiness. As a result, Hägglund's work provides a solid understanding of our present milieu in order to demonstrate the relevance of Dickinson's ideas today. Hägglund contends that religious or theological interpretations are deeply embedded in today's mindsets and state of affairs, and that happiness is still very much associated with, or anticipates, a prospective reward, or granted goal, that establishes the validity and value of the living process itself. Like Hägglund, some Dickinson's speakers argue that the living process, or existence in and of itself, is intrinsically valuable regardless of outcomes. Considering this, it is necessary to outline Dickinson's broader philosophical understanding and engagement, as well as the ways in which her work may reflect various philosophical trends.

Dickinson's Engagement with Philosophy

Dickinson's education in both poetry and philosophy was extensive, and her way of thinking can be described as a synthesis of philosophy, religion, and creative writing. The collection of essays in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* is a critical source for laying the groundwork for discussing Dickinson's work in light of Western philosophical traditions. Given the complexity of Dickinson's mental processes, and despite the poet's general omission from philosophical inquiry, this volume presents Dickinson's aesthetic practices as inextricably linked with her philosophical explorations. Deppman emphasises her strength as a serious thinker who used poetry to contemplate existential issues.

Dickinson was frequently exposed to philosophical ideas during her academic formation at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and poetry and philosophy were "often presented as making common cause."³⁹ "Reflecting heterogeneous resources," Deppman points out in another essay (included in Richards' volume) that "Dickinson's poems continue to respond to many kinds of philosophy."⁴⁰ The teachings of mental philosophy in Dickinson's education, for example, can be distinguished, as can the influence of Romantics and German Idealists, as well as the impact of transcendentalist

³⁹ Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble and Gary L. Stonum, eds., *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

⁴⁰ Deppman, "Say Some Philosopher!," in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, 264.

thinking. In Deppman's view, "similarities in concern and even idiom" exist "between her poetry and the writings of contemporary philosophers."⁴¹ However, while Dickinson's work engaged with philosophical debates of the time, her reflections have largely gone unnoticed. Why has this occurred? According to Deppman, the answer can be traced back to Dickinson's first editors and their emphasis on the poet's portrayal as an enigmatical being – a version of the poet that has prevailed for over a century. Scholars and critics alike have long characterised Dickinson as a mystic poet, emphasising her intuitional capacity rather than her intellectual ability. As a result, "the scholarly community has never seriously embraced Dickinson as a thinker or studied her relationship to philosophy."⁴² Otherwise, her life and writings has been regarded as incomprehensible. This research, like Deppman's, is based on the premise that, while extremely complex, Dickinson's thought may be comprehensible from a philosophical standpoint.

Drawing on Deppman's call for incorporating Dickinson's meditations on existential issues into current philosophical debates, the poet's views on the most fundamental philosophical question – how to live a happy (or worthwhile) life – is deemed central for this study, provided that the implications and benefits of the poet's reflections on this question throughout her life have not yet received the attention they deserve. It is important to note Dickinson's connection with Transcendentalist and Existentialist thought in order to understand the broader philosophical context of this research. Shira Wolosky's "Truth and Lie in Emily Dickinson and Friedrich Nietzsche" delves deeply into the relationship between Dickinson, Emerson, and Nietzsche. Her essay focuses on the many commonalities between Nietzsche's and Dickinson's ideas about the finiteness, indeterminacy, and multiplicity of life's experiences, the possibility of tragedy within an unsettling universe, and the emphasis on "earthly experience as the site of judgement."⁴³ As a matter of fact, the parallels between Dickinson's and Nietzsche's tragic perspectives in light of pre-Socratic interpretations of happiness will be investigated further. Besides, Dickinson's rendering of happiness as both tragic and absurd is similar to Albert Camus's. Aside from their

⁴¹ Deppman, *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ Shira Wolosky, "Truth and Lie in ED and Friedrich Nietzsche," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 135.

alignment with Greek tragic philosophy, Dickinson and Camus have no other connection than Nietzsche, who may serve to bridge the gap between them. Nonetheless, it is relevant for the purposes of this study to examine some of Dickinson's speakers' absurdist and existential approach to happiness in light of Camus's absurdism, provided that his views on the topic, and the relevance they may have in our context, may aid in bringing Dickinson's views closer to us as well.

So far, I have considered Dickinson's intellectual brilliance, her connection to the world, her thought-provoking surroundings, and her ability to see life as a whole through the lens of tragedy. To assess Dickinson's views on a life worth living, which echo tragic pre-Socratic accounts of the concept, the next section summarises some conceptualisations of happiness to show how the significance of happiness in classical accounts contrasts sharply with nineteenth-century interpretations of the idea and the privilege accorded to negative emotions.

Conceptualisations of Happiness

In conversation with Dickinson's writings and context, this study focuses on the differences between classical accounts of happiness and major interpretations of the concept in nineteenth-century America.⁴⁴ More specifically, it examines how a tragic conception of happiness – as opposed to religious, sentimental, and transcendental notions – reveals new ways of accessing Dickinson's writings' multiple interpretations. During the course of this research, the discussion will consider various argumentative methods. First, a general philosophical history of happiness is presented, beginning with the Solonian tragic perspective to the Socratic virtue account. Then, from Aristotle's *eudaimonia* to Roman *felicitas* and its influence in Judeo-Christian *blessedness*; and, finally, from this religious concept to the Enlightenment's right to pursue *happiness* and its subsequent consequences in nineteenth-century major representations of the idea.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Throughout this research, the term “classical accounts” will refer to both pre- and post-Socratic traditions, as opposed to “religious or theological accounts” – the ones related to the Christianisation of happiness – and “modern accounts” – from the age of the Enlightenment onwards.

⁴⁵ McMahon, *Happiness*, 13. Furthermore, it is the idea of a “happy few” that classical philosophical accounts have often underlined on the assumption that, as McMahon asserts, “for much of Western history, happiness served as a marker of human perfection, an imagined ideal of a creature complete, without further wants, desires, or needs.” However, it is during the Enlightenment that this long-standing

Second, the intellectual history of the concept that influenced Dickinson's own formation, whether through reading it herself or receiving it second-hand, and informed her historical context – for example, the representation of happiness in theological, sentimental, and transcendental approaches to the idea. Third, there are accounts of interest primarily because they are from the same time period as Dickinson's and represent turning points in the general understanding of happiness, such as Darwin's, Emerson's, and Nietzsche's views.

To understand Dickinson's concept of happiness, one must first trace its evolution from tragic interpretations in the sixth century BC to theological, sentimental, and transcendental notions in the nineteenth century in the United States. Darrin McMahon's *Happiness: A History* (2006) traces a Western historiography of the concept in this regard and provides an excellent reference framework for approximating the concept of happiness in context. McMahon's account focuses on the concept's representations over time by charting its evolution, changes, and continuities. In short, happiness and its pursuit originated in ancient Greece. Following that, Judeo-Christian tradition reshaped the classical idea, and during the Enlightenment, the notion gained new force and meaning influencing our modern understanding of it. Although, as McMahon points out, the search for happiness is “as old as history itself,” and it has been a global concern with roots in numerous cultural and religious traditions; it may be difficult, if not impossible, to define.⁴⁶ Happiness resists definition because its possibilities reside in its indeterminacy. Similarly, Dickinson's poems avoid being reduced to a single interpretation by emphasising the ambiguous and fluid components of language and existence. In other words, because her poetry was not constrained by printing standards, it was able to remain fluid and avoid a final or finished form. Dickinson's numerous versions of poems, the addition of alternative words, the absence of direct references, and the reader's participation in the formation of meaning enabled her work to thrive within the creative process itself, freeing it from a fixed interpretation. As a result, Dickinson's

conception was modified, by presenting happiness as something attainable by all within this life. For instance, in the Declaration of Independence, happiness is declared a right to be pursued by all citizens.

⁴⁶ Darrin McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 1.

poetic experimentalism is able to accommodate a concept of happiness that also defies final definition, interpretation, and reification.

This study also builds on Vivasvan Soni's *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (2010), which is the first systematic literary approach to the relationship between happiness and narrative. Soni illustrates how genres and literary texts have provided the narrative logic for various forms of political, ethical, and religious thought. For example, in the eighteenth century, the trial narrative form – projected back into Christian tradition – can be seen as the central mechanism in the radical transformation from the classical idea of *eudaimonia* to its modern counterpart.⁴⁷ The classical concept, as expressed by Solon, is particularly relevant in analysing Dickinson's perception of a well-lived life. For centuries, writers and philosophers, including Shakespeare, have quoted and paraphrased Solon's proverb "call no one happy until death," which was expanded in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* – a book that had a significant impact on Dickinson's life. In brief, Solon's concept encompasses the multiplicity and indeterminacy of life's experiences, and its judgement cannot be made until death. Happiness, according to Solon, "cannot be an uncontaminated positive experience, because it must take account of human finitude;" happiness is a tragic concept, inextricably linked to "the experience of mourning."⁴⁸

In accordance with Solon's proverb, and in the mist of the possibility of tragedy, happiness is what befalls us. Similarly, some Dickinson's poems may express this idea. However, by relocating happiness into the realm of affection, Soni's account demonstrates how the nineteenth century experienced both a devaluation and animosity toward the concept itself. Similarly, Soni examines the transformation of the classical concept of *eudaimonia* into a concept rooted in sentimentalism – where happiness is reified as a reward after a period of trial or as a positive, private, and determinate emotion – as well as the literary tradition of the trial narrative, which emphasises negative psychological states.⁴⁹ Despite

⁴⁷ Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 8. Prior to eighteenth century, *eudaimonia* was deemed as "the highest good for an individual" and "a guide for all ethical and political action."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ With regards to Dickinson's views, the sentimental or affective interpretation of happiness will be explored in chapter two in the context of prose and lyric sentimentalism in nineteenth-century American literature.

the groundbreaking work seeking to recontextualise Dickinson, more critical attention has been paid to the poet's pain, renunciation, and suffering, than the reverse: Dickinson's happiness.

Critical approaches to Dickinson's work and life, for the most part, have emphasised a narrative of suffering and renunciation.⁵⁰ *Writing Life: Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson* (2011), a publication by Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta, supported by Kristeva's theory of literary criticism, focuses on how Dickinson used suffering and pain as her main poetic strategy, and shows the ways in which personal anguish "moulded the three major components of the poet's work: the theme, the language, and the form."⁵¹ This book provides useful insights into Dickinson's reactions to suffering, death, and mourning. Nonetheless, although Dickinson has frequently been portrayed as a poet of pain, lack, and despair, Magdalena Zapedowska's "Dickinson's Delight" (2012) contends that the poet views delight as the primary affect, providing the foundation for all other emotions. Drawing on the definition of the words joy, delight, bliss, and happiness in the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (in the *Emily Dickinson archive*), which is based on Dickinson's own dictionary – the Webster's 1844 American Dictionary of the English Language – it seems that whereas "joy," "delight," and "bliss" are understood in more temporary terms, related to happiness as a positive experience; the term "happiness" is more permanent and connected to classical accounts, provided that it refers to the idea of a life worth living.

In terms of context, Zapedowska examines scholars' analyses of nineteenth-century sentimentalism in relation to suffering, as well as how this affect provided a culturally acceptable pathway for women writers. Both Smith/Kapusta's and Zapedowska's works, which are predicated on Dickinson's poems, demonstrate the problematic duality and ambivalence of human emotions, as well as how delight and pain frequently collide. In her analysis of affective states, Suzanne Juhasz's chapter in *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily*

⁵⁰ For instance, Dickinson's first editors' introductions to the publications of her poems and letters, Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, and John Cody's *After Great Pain*.

⁵¹ Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta, *Writing Life: Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson* (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2011), 10.

Dickinson and the Space of the Mind (1983) suggests that in several Dickinson poems “pleasure must be defined with pain within its boundaries” since “delight is surrounded by a perspective of pain.”⁵² For instance, drawing on “The Heart asks Pleasure - first - / And then - excuse from pain,”⁵³ Juhasz declares that the speaker places pleasure within the perimeter of pain and, from this point of view, requests an excuse from it. As Dickinson wrote in a letter to her cousin Emily Fowler in 1853, “into each life some ‘flakes’ must fall, some days must be dark and dreary.”⁵⁴ This emotional interdependence is central to Dickinson's ideas and essential to living a mortal life.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between Dickinson's tendency to learn by opposites and Solon's views on happiness. In other words, Dickinson's writings imply that emotional states are interconnected and non-exclusive, and that they do not occur in isolation. Consequently, Dickinson's subversion of the exclusive binarity between pain and pleasure that has traditionally existed in Western culture is both a necessary condition for approaching the concept of happiness and an inherent component of her poetic resistance to happiness's reification. Most Dickinson's speakers do not follow the nineteenth-century trend of prioritizing negative emotions in sentimental interpretations of happiness. In fact, they reflect on the need to consider the specifics of each experience and the significance of each occurrence in order to assess the impact of emotional responses within the totality of experience.

This study takes seriously the question within Zapedowska's essay: “what happens when, instead of obsessively focusing on figures of negativity, we place happiness at the core of Dickinson's oeuvre?”⁵⁵ One of the main differences between her account and this research is the fact that Zapedowska focuses on the experience of delight as a positive emotion instead of considering the question and judgement of happiness within the totality of life's experiences. As Dickinson wrote to Sarah Tuckerman, every joy (and sorrow) contribute to a

⁵² Suzanne Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 89, 92.

⁵³ “F588A - The heart asks pleasure first” (1863).

⁵⁴ L98 (1853). It is interesting to note that this is also a riff on a quotation from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular poem “The Rainy Day” (collected in *Ballads and Other Poems*, 1842) where Dickinson changes the word “rain” for “flakes.”

⁵⁵ Magdalena Zapedowska, “Dickinson's Delight,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 21, no. 1 (2012): 4.

“bright total” in which happiness or unhappiness will be, at last, contained. Given the poet’s symbol of circumference, her speakers regard existence as an all-encompassing experience – similar to the Solonian concept of happiness. As a result, this study considers Dickinson’s approach to happiness as the more appropriate for finite beings, provided that it takes into account the value of chance and the fragility of existence in this life.

The Research Questions Guiding this Study

Regarding the poet’s dedication to contemplating the significance of a true and valuable life on earth, what are Dickinson’s views on happiness, and how do they differ from major interpretations of the concept in the nineteenth century in the United States? Using a comparative approach, I argue that Dickinson’s poetic philosophy questions dominant representations of happiness in nineteenth-century America, which reify the concept while attempting to identify its causes and rewards. Conversely, some of Dickinson’s speakers believe that such reification is both a disadvantage and an illusion because predicting the nature and causes of happiness is futile. Individuals could avoid devaluing their current mortal existence – both theology and sentimentality devalue it – if they could embrace happiness as a possibility while also acknowledging how fragile their situation is.

This study seeks to recognise the range and multiplicity of Dickinson’s voices by avoiding generalisation and focusing on the particularities of each speaker in specific poems and letters. Furthermore, Dickinson’s nimble believing – or her proclivity to believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour – will be understood as an inherent feature of her poetic practices and mental processes. Having said that, and given the large number of poems and prose fragments included here (as well as other scholars’ voices), this study contends that Dickinson’s views on happiness as an all-encompassing concept that emphasise the indeterminacy of life’s ongoing processes until death, the contingency of existence, the inability to predict future events, the mortality of human beings, and the significance of the present moment, can be traced throughout most of her life and artistic career. In light of Dickinson’s “project,” or lack thereof (an idea that will be discussed in chapter three), this research argues for Dickinson’s investment in the act and process of writing poetry as intrinsically valuable. Dickinson, in other words,

prioritises creating poems and thinking in verse. Because these actions are already beneficial, they do not require a further incentive. Dickinson's poetic practices are "rewarded work" in and of themselves, which contrasts dramatically with the requirement in theological, sentimental, and modern interpretations of happiness to ascribe an actual reward. As a result, the lack of a definite aim in Dickinson's poetics is due to the fact that its goal is incorporated into the process itself.

This research endorses Soni's call for narrative-based approaches to the study of happiness. Over the last few decades, the model of subjective well-being exemplified by contemporary psychology has served as Academia's primary approach to happiness. By denarrativising happiness, "it no longer appears coincidental," Soni affirms, "that the most active areas of research into happiness in the academy occur in the disciplines of psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and economics."⁵⁶ From a literary standpoint, this research provides the first systematic examination of the concept of happiness through the eyes of Dickinson's speakers. By refusing to accept major determinations of happiness in the nineteenth century, it argues for Dickinson's ability to see the wholeness of existence from a tragic perspective, which is well-grounded in the experience of mortality, the contingency of life, and the intrinsic value of being alive. According to Michel Haar's definition, a tragic interpretation of happiness refers to "the state in which, thanks to an affirmation of the highest degree, we are able to include within ourselves, and to vindicate, even the deepest suffering," which "ceases to be an argument against life."⁵⁷ Therefore, the term "tragic" relates to the awareness of one's own frailty in a contingent world, as well as the realisation that many circumstances and events in life are beyond one's control. As a result, individuals should be able to accept what befalls them.⁵⁸ This research is thus based on the belief that Dickinson's ways of writing, thinking, and

⁵⁶ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 14.

⁵⁷ Michel Haar, "Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David Allison (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985.), 28.

⁵⁸ Dickinson's tragic understanding of happiness – exemplified in her notion of life as an abyss and her concept of the Eternal Now – will be explored in light of Nietzsche's notion of the Eternal Return as "the tragic pathos" in chapter four.

living may provide a new perspective on the path to a better understanding of a life worth living.

Given the elusiveness of the concept of happiness and the many theories that will have to be excluded from this analysis (focusing on those that better inform and relate to Dickinson's narrative), this study does not aim to solve life's mysteries, nor to declare whether or not the poet led a happy life, as this declaration would undoubtedly fall outside this research's scope. This interdisciplinary study identifies some of Dickinson's strategies for challenging and dismissing nineteenth-century reified conceptions of happiness by placing the poet's writings in conversation with her broader context. Similarly, it examines the extent to which Dickinson's broad intellectual formation, as Brantley asserts, enabled her to think and write "globally and for all times, as well as locally and in her time."⁵⁹ The purpose of this research is to make visible Dickinson's insightful reflections on the possibility of happiness in this life in light of tragic interpretations of the notion, due to the potential impact that these reflections might offer to the judgement of happiness.

Summary of the Chapters

By placing Dickinson's work in dialogue with happiness historiography, chapter one aims to provide a theoretical foundation for comparing and contrasting the poet's views on happiness with religious, sentimental, and transcendental representations of the concept in subsequent chapters. Although the concept of happiness in Western culture has undergone numerous changes over the past two millennia, several transformations stand out at the heart of its development. First, in the tragic (pre-Socratic) tradition, one of the most determining factors in the possibility of happiness was chance; in the post-Socratic tradition, it was reason (or virtue). Second, in religious and modern accounts, happiness was regarded as episodic and displaced into the domain of affection, as opposed to being regarded as an all-encompassing concept comprising the totality of experience in classical accounts. Third, there was a shift in happiness's temporality from the present in classical accounts to the future in religious and

⁵⁹ Richard E. Brantley, *Emily Dickinson's Rich Conversation: Poetry, Philosophy, Science* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2013), 6.

modern accounts. Finally, in classical and religious accounts, happiness was perceived as a nearly miraculous endeavour attainable only by a "happy few." On the contrary, modern accounts assumed that happiness should be a right for all. In light of this evolution and in the face of the Christianisation of happiness, Dickinson's work consistently challenged this religious interpretation – claims that were reinforced by Darwin's discoveries – by suggesting that the phenomenon of death is the only warranty in this life and, as such, individuals' present and mortal existence must be valued without further purpose.⁶⁰

In contrast to the need for a reified happiness in nineteenth-century American sentimental literary tradition, as well as the concern to ascertain the causes and rewards of happiness in it, chapter two argues that Dickinson's work depicting how most reifications are, in fact, illusory in light of the futility of determining happiness in advance. For some of Dickinson's speakers, embracing the stimulus or possibility of a life worth living in this life – by appreciating individuals' frailty – avoids the devaluation of their mortal (present) existence, which is characteristic of both theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness. Moving away from the tragic narrative form and considering the impact that sentimental representations have had on modern conceptions of happiness, Soni's *Mourning Happiness* describes how the trial narrative form enabled eighteenth-century authors to stop questioning the meaning of happiness. Consequently, happiness was relegated to an emotional and private realm when nineteenth-century authors used it. The workings of the trial narrative form in nineteenth-century America, for example, are well-exemplified in best-selling novels of the period, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*,

⁶⁰ As previously stated, McMahon's account will be used to trace the historical development of the idea of happiness. Moreover, when examining the role of chance in Greek tragic tradition, Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* is essential. Jonathan Lear's *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* examines Aristotle's notion of the "good" from a psychological standpoint in his approach to Aristotle's virtue theory. In terms of the Christianisation of happiness, Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* depicts the significant ramifications of a future happiness in heaven in Western tradition. Other sources used in this historical account, in addition to those mentioned throughout this introduction, are: Howard Mumford Jones' *The Pursuit of Happiness*, St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *De Beata Vita*, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Heiko A. Oberman's "The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin between Humanism and Reformation," *A History of the Work of Redemption* by Jonathan Edwards, Charles Darwin's *Autobiography*, and Jane Donahue Eberwein's "'Outgrowing Genesis?': Dickinson, Darwin, and the Higher Criticism," as well as Elizabeth Willis' "Dickinson's Narrative Species."

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Elizabeth Phelps' *The Gates Ajar*, as well as the main characteristics of women's lyric sentimentalism. Dickinson criticised sentimental literature for reifying happiness and viewing it as a reward for suffering. Her writings, influenced by William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot, among others, consistently challenged this sentimental interpretation.⁶¹

Drawing on Dickinson's notion of the abyss of existence within the limits of her circumference, chapter three addresses these key concepts in the poet's cosmology in view of romantic and transcendental interpretations of happiness in general and Emerson in particular. In response to both the apparent impossibility of achieving complete happiness on earth - due to religious dogma - and the Enlightenment maxim that granted the right to pursue happiness to all individuals in this life, British romantics faced a dilemma triggered, on the one hand, by their need to follow this maxim and, on the other, by their inability to figure out how to do so. As a result, American transcendentalists inherited both this predicament and the need to readapt Protestant teachings to the cultural and economic demands of their time. Although these traditions had an impact on Dickinson's writings, it was the process by which the poet resisted finding reassurance, for example, in Emerson's transcendental God, that allowed her speakers to experience an Eternal Now, or eternity in time. Besides, by shifting from God's solace to nature's consolation – as well as its strangeness – Dickinson's poetic

⁶¹ Considering how sentimentalism in Britain influenced its American counterpart, James Chandler's *An Archaeology of Sympathy* traces the origins of British sentimentalism in the eighteenth century. Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* examines this tradition through the eyes of women poets in the nineteenth century. Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture*, which refers to the blending of theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness, situates American modern views on the subject in relation to the Victorian period. This chapter also looks at Jerome McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Literary Style Revolution*, Shira Wolosky's *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* by Cheryl Walker, Elizabeth Petrino's "Nineteenth Century American Women's Poetry," Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Albert Gelpi's *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*, Jane Donahue Eberwein's *Strategies of Limitation*, Karl Keller's *The Only Kangaroo Among Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America*, Sarah Knott's *Sensibility and the American Revolution*, Jane P. Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint*, Marianne Noble's *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson*, and Kevin Pelletier's *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature*.

philosophy will be rooted in the presentness of experience as well as the contingency of existence over a lifetime.⁶²

In chapter four, Dickinson's late writings are discussed in order to demonstrate how her holistic and integral approach to a life worth living from a tragic perspective – grounded in mortality, indeterminacy, and possibility – was strengthened in her final years of life. As suggested in chapter one, the phenomenon of death, rather than the promise of an afterlife, gives meaning to people's lives, and it is through direct and honest confrontation with this event that most Dickinson's speakers gain knowledge about the possibility of happiness on Earth. By endorsing the absurdity of existence in a world where things happen by accident rather than design, Dickinson's speakers will be placed in conversation with Camus's absurdism in order to establish some similarities between these two thinkers. Regarding Emerson's work and its influence on some of his contemporaries, Dickinson's views on happiness – or the affirmation of life – will be examined in light of Nietzsche's tragic perspective; specifically, Dickinson's concept of the Eternal Now and Nietzsche's concept of Eternal Recurrence. Finally, this chapter argues that Dickinson's writings' openness to possibility and indeterminacy – both in form and content – provide the most suitable ground for accommodating a notion of (tragic) happiness appropriate to mortal individuals' natural disposition in a contingent world.

⁶² M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* reflects on some of the common characteristics shared by Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, among others, in terms of the concept of happiness. Furthermore, Abrams' research uncovers intriguing parallels between the concerns shared by these poets and their American counterparts, such as Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson. Despite the fact that most of these poets shared the imperative demand to accommodate religious faith on the path to happiness, Dickinson's writings suggest that there may be alternatives to this hypothesis. One could argue that by reconstructing Dickinson's reading context, authors like Donald Grant Mitchell (aka Ik Marvel) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow enabled her to think beyond theological convention. Besides, Emerson's writings proved to be a source of both inspiration and disagreement. Some of the sources used in this chapter are: Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, Susan Manning's *Poetics of Character: Transatlantic Encounters 1700-1900*, Stuart Curran's *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, Myron Simon's and Thornton H. Parsons' *Transcendentalism and its Legacy*, David S. Reynolds' *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Thoreau's *Walden*, William James' writings, Joanne Feit Diehl's *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, David Porter's *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom*, William R. Sherwood's *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson*, Christopher Benfey's *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*, Martha Nell Smith's *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*, George Whicher's *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson*, and Gudrun M. Grabher's " 'Forever – is composed of Nows –': Emily Dickinson's Conception of Time."

This research seeks to demonstrate the importance of incorporating Dickinson's reflections on happiness into current philosophical debates, given that her work, thought, and life as a whole may be regarded as a theoretical and practical example of how to live a life worth living here and now, neither perfect nor complete.⁶³

⁶³ In the context of existential approaches to life, some of the works examined in this chapter are: Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the collection of essays *The New Nietzsche*, Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Walter Kaufmann's introduction to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Fred D. White's "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas." Other relevant sources are: Susan Howe's *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, Roland Hagenbüchle's "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," Shira Wolosky's "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body," Robert McClure Smith's *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson*, Margaret Dickie's "Reperiodization: The Example of Emily Dickinson," and Nancy Mayer's "God's Place in Dickinson's Ecology."

Chapter 1: Dickinson's Work Challenging the Christianisation of Happiness

How many schemes may die
In one short Afternoon
Entirely unknown
To those they most concern -
The man that was not lost
Because by accident
He varied by a Ribbon's width
From his accustomed route -
The Love that would not try
Because beside the Door
Some unsuspecting Horse was tied
Surveying his Despair¹

Dated in 1874, this poem exemplifies Emily Dickinson's tragic outlook on the world and its circumstances, as well as the lives of individuals. The speaker depicts the uncertainty that humans must constantly face when living in a chance-governed universe. In one case, a person avoids death by accident; in another, a person chooses not to take risks and pursue love. To some extent, the first scenario represents an opening to new experiences, whereas the second represents a closure to them. While most of these schemes will remain "entirely unknown to those they most concern" because they are contained within the infinite number of possibilities that are both created and vanished each moment, the speaker emphasises the ways in which multiple outcomes derive from ordinary, quotidian, and everyday choices. In terms of happiness understood as the possibility for individuals to live a life worth living that includes the entirety of their experiences, this poem shows a great concern within Dickinson's poetry regarding the value of the contingency of one's existence that, on the one hand, may improve individuals' understanding of a happiness suitable for mortal beings

¹ "F1326A - How many schemes may die" (1874). In verse five, Dickinson proposes three alternatives for the word "lost:" "robbed," "killed," and "wrecked." And in verse ten, "before" instead of "beside."

and, on the other hand, represents an alternative viewpoint to major representations in nineteenth-century America.²

Some of Dickinson's personae regard each day as a surprising unknown that will be revealed in its due time by endorsing the fickleness of existence as both potentially creative and destructive. The following poem, written a year after "how many schemes may die," shows Dickinson's speaker cherishing the potentiality of each instant:

Had this one Day not been,
Or could it cease to be
How smitten, how superfluous,
Were every other Day!

Lest Love should value less
What loss would value more
Had it the stricken privilege,
It cherishes before.³

The speaker emphasises the value of each moment – each day within a finite existence – by assuming the inherent privilege granted to individuals by the mere fact of being alive. In a changing world, people are unsure what each day will bring, and it would be a tragedy for the speaker to acknowledge that a day could "cease to be," or be erased, without being noticed. It is only by being aware that a particular situation may come to an end due to the possibility of death that its value increases. Similarly, it is chance that increases the estimated worth of each moment. According to Renee Tursi's interpretation of this poem in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, "one's existence can change in a moment, and it is the randomness that comes with such infinite possibility that enriches our sense of life;" thus, "to Dickinson, one extraordinary day gives meaning to all other days in this economy of imagination."⁴

Dickinson's views in this poem parallel the Solonian interpretation of happiness (exemplified by his proverb "call no one happy until death") since, in a

² Such as theological, sentimental, and transcendental interpretations of the idea.

³ "F1281A - Had this one day not been" (1873).

⁴ Renee Tursi, "Emily Dickinson, Pragmatism, and the Conquests of the Mind," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 157.

world governed by uncertainty – where specific given circumstances and situations are far beyond any individual's control – the conditions of each day remain indefinite, for better or worse. By embracing this openness to possibility, “happy endings” may be seen as illusory, because there is no ending while the course of people's lives continues. Regarding this tragic viewpoint, it is implicit that there will always be gains and losses in every decision, choice, and resolution, and for these reasons, Dickinson's persona regards each day as an event that brings a new opportunity regardless of what shape it will take. Similarly, Solon calculates that if an individual lives seventy years on average – approximately 26,250 days – no one of those days “brings to him anything exactly the same as another.”⁵ As a result, in order to determine whether or not a life has been well lived, it is critical to consider the whole picture. According to Patrick J. Keane, the word “day is by far the most frequently employed noun in Dickinson's poetry, appearing 232 times.”⁶ This demonstrates how significant each day was in Dickinson's life. Likewise, every day – every present moment – is relevant for the judgement of happiness at the end of a lifetime.⁷

Based on the preceding, this chapter seeks to engage Dickinson's speakers in dialogue with the historiography of happiness in order to examine the poet's views in light of theological, sentimental, and transcendental interpretations of the concept. By outlining happiness's major transformations, this chapter moves from the Solonian (tragic) notion of happiness to the Christianisation of the concept, which will eventually lead to, on the one hand, its sentimentalised understanding during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, on the other hand, its outstanding influence in modern interpretations of happiness. Dickinson's intellectual and poetic lifetime project thus questions the Christianisation of happiness, particularly through her investigation of religious representations of happiness in heaven. Happiness, according to Heiko A. Oberman, forces us to “retrace our tracks to that beginning of history where mythology, religion, science, and philosophy are almost inseparably intertwined – at once the matrix and the mirror of human

⁵ McMahon, *Happiness*, 4.

⁶ Patrick J. Keane, *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 26.

⁷ Dickinson's momentousness of the present will be further explored in chapter three.

aspirations.”⁸ Dickinson's writings frequently remind her readers that death is the only certainty, and that it is only through its direct confrontation that individuals can regard and value their mortal life as a present gift, without the hope of a better life in an unknown future – or, in Dickinson's words, in the “uncertain certainty” of heaven.⁹

Dickinson's own happiness has become a major question in her biography, and clues can be found in her obituary. After Dickinson's death in 1886, Susan Dickinson's obituary is the most reliable assessment of the poet's happiness.¹⁰ Paul Crumbley writes in *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (1997) that Susan's obituary “wonderfully captures the poet as she was known by her primary correspondent.”¹¹ According to Susan, sitting “in the light of ‘her own fire’,” Dickinson was:

Not disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the past two years, not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient of any mental work or social career – her endowments being so exceptional – but the “mesh of her soul,” as Browning calls the body, was too rare, and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work.... Her talk and her writings were like no one's else.... To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality.¹²

It is worth noting Susan's remarks about Dickinson's intellectual exceptionalism as well as her belief in the sacredness of existence. Susan adds: “with no creed, no formulated faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer.”¹³ Given Susan's assertions, it appears contradictory that

⁸ Heiko A. Oberman, “The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin between Humanism and Reformation,” in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, ed. John W. O'Malley, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (Leiden; New York; Köln: EJ. Brill, 1993), 251.

⁹ “F1421A - Of Paradise' existence” (1877).

¹⁰ Dickinson, Susan H, “Obituary of Emily Dickinson,” *Digital Amherst*, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.digitalamherst.org/items/show/904>. Her sister-in-law Susan was Dickinson's most esteemed person to whom most of her poems were addressed.

¹¹ Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 65.

¹² Dickinson, Susan H, “Obituary of Emily Dickinson.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

Dickinson could be “aglow with God and immortality” while having “no creed” and “no formulated faith.”

This study is less concerned with the complex relationship between Dickinson's work, and God and immortality (which has been extensively discussed elsewhere), and more concerned with how the poet's approach to a life worth living is shaped by the necessarily unknown elements of that relationship. “I suppose there are depths in every Consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves – to which none can go with us – which represent to us Mortally – the Adventure of Death –,” Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland in 1878.¹⁴ Although everyone takes part in this adventure, the experience of confronting death is unique and internal to each person; it can be trained but not taught. Similarly, those depths are related to Dickinson speakers' proclivity to perceive both the abysmal qualities of mortal lives and the limits of human cognition.¹⁵ As with the poet's radical thinking and the ways she lived her life, Susan's obituary demonstrated awareness and audacity through the extraordinary coupling of, as Judith Farr puts it, “Dickinson's ‘worth’ with her ‘work,’ her personal integrity, and her art.”¹⁶

The relationship between most Dickinson's speakers and their world is governed, to some extent, by the ability to create conditions in which individuals are less determined by pre-established ideals and more open to discovering any notions by their own means. “In a Life that stopped guessing, you and I should not feel at home,” the poet wrote in a letter to Susan in the late 1870s.¹⁷ Therefore, in Dickinson's worldview, to venture is to be at home. According to Paula Bennett's *Woman Poet*, Dickinson's principles were founded on the belief that “faith is doubt,” as expressed in a letter-poem to Susan:¹⁸

Morning
might come

¹⁴ L555 (1878). Elizabeth Holland was a long-lived friend of Dickinson as well as co-editor of the *Scribner's Monthly*.

¹⁵ Dickinson's writings relation to the abyss will be further explored in chapters three and four.

¹⁶ Judith Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

¹⁷ H B55. In *Dickinson Electronic Archives* (<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/>).

¹⁸ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 40. According to Bennett, “isolated by her confrontation with the abyss, Dickinson was also freed by it.” To some extent, this isolation could be seen as an essential restraint of mortality when coping with those abysses “to which none can go alone.”

by Accident -
Sister -
Night comes
by Event -
To believe the
final line of
the Card would
foreclose Faith -
Faith is Doubt.¹⁹

The uncertainty that surrounds the poet's speaker in this instance, which is based on chance and doubt, accompanied Dickinson throughout her enquiries about life and death, and served as the source of her poetic exploration.

In their approach to death as the boundary of their lives' circumference – rather than death as the passage to eternal happiness in heaven – some of Dickinson's speakers persistently challenge both religious representations of mortality and interpretations of a life worth living. For instance, she wrote:

I think To Live - may be a
Bliss
To those who dare to try -
Beyond my limit - to conceive -
My lip - to testify -²⁰ (first stanza)

While certain prospects and notions will remain unknown to individuals *a priori* – such as whether life will be a happy one here on earth or whether there will be an afterlife in heaven – Dickinson's speaker's testimony emphasises the fact that “trying” to think that life may be experience as a bliss is the first step towards this unfathomable possibility. According to Jed Deppman's reading of this poem, “to make the new life potentially viable, she omits the organizing concepts of conversion – repentance, forgiveness, atonement, sin, salvation, election, good works – and instead develops an imaginative approach.”²¹ Dickinson's method is

¹⁹ L912 (1884).

²⁰ “F757A - I think to live may be a bliss” (1863). There is a variant in the third verse, “allowed” instead of “who dare.”

²¹ Jed Deppman, “Living and Dying with Emily Dickinson,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Cristanne Miller (Oxford Handbooks, 2022, online edition), 594.

based on poetic practices, cultural guidance, and personal experience. As a result, understanding Dickinson's later thought (which will be discussed in chapter four) demands, in Deppman's words, "the shift in perspective from the next world to this one," as well as the need to "integrate uncertainties about death into a viable attitude toward it."²² Some of Dickinson's speakers' endeavours was to devise strategies for coping with death and its consequences.

Death, by all accounts, holds a privileged place in Dickinson's cosmology, and her writings frequently attempt to confront its veracity. For Barton Levi St. Armand in *Dickinson and Her Culture*, "Dickinson's concept of the afterlife bordered on blasphemy. Death became a literal all-or-nothing proposition." Furthermore, he writes, death could simply lead Dickinson to "an oblivion that invalidated all faith as well as all reason."²³ Death may then be perceived as the boundary between existing and non-existing because:

Of Paradise' existence
All we know
Is the uncertain
certainty -²⁴ (first stanza)

Most Dickinson's speakers are not comforted by the uncertainty of an afterlife. Instead, they find both comfort and distress in the unpredictability of life. In other words, death as a gateway to the afterlife is neither comforting nor distressing since, as Dickinson wrote in a letter to her cousin Perez Cowan in 1869, "dying is a wild Night and a new Road."²⁵ Death is unavoidable; however, what happens afterwards will never be revealed to those who are still alive, provided that:

Unproved is much
we know -
Unknown the
worst we fear -
Of Strangers is

²² Ibid., 596.

²³ Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and her Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 55-6. For instance, in "F591A - I heard a fly buzz when I died," Armand suggests that Dickinson appropriates "the clichés of nineteenth-century popular culture and turned them in upon themselves."

²⁴ "F1421A - Of Paradise' existence" (1877).

²⁵ L332 (1869). This idea is also expressed in "F1662A - The going from a world we know" (1884).

the Earth the
Inn
Of Secrets is
the Air -²⁶ (fourth stanza)

Dickinson's persona emphasises here that certain notions and propositions that are assumed to be true (or known), such as heaven or life after death, are, in fact, "unproved." In contrast, what is certain is the mystery that the phenomenon of death presents to individuals. Therefore, in a world where much is uncertain, little is known or can be known. For some of Dickinson's speakers, the best approach to these unknowns and fundamental concerns is a never-ending guessing game. Clark Griffith notes in *Long Shadow* that Dickinson's attitude toward death depends on "where she stood when she thought of death;" sometimes "she could see it as the greatest of human perils – or as a positive virtue."²⁷ More substantively, this study argues for the simultaneity of experience, in which Dickinson's writings perceived death as both dangerous and virtuous. For Dickinson this is not an "either...or" formulation, but a "both...and." Alongside the possibility of happiness on Earth, she insists in a letter to Richard Mather in 1877 that "to have lived is a Bliss so powerful – we must die – to adjust it –."²⁸ Therefore, death is seen as an essential condition in order to estimate bliss, and vice versa.

The entwining of life and death is an irreversible feature of mortality, and some of Dickinson's speakers constantly swing amidst this contingency. "Death and ignorance faced each other in the voided center of her consciousness," David Porter writes, especially after the death of her nephew Gilbert at the age of 8 in 1883.²⁹ Recalling this event to Elizabeth Holland, Dickinson wrote that same year:

'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me,' was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know - ... All this and more, though is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me its name!³⁰

²⁶ "F1190A - The frost was never seen" (1870).

²⁷ Griffith, *Long Shadow*, 146.

²⁸ L523 (1877).

²⁹ David Porter, *The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 149.

³⁰ L873 (1883).

As in "Unproved is much we know," the inability to identify "who were waiting for him," and thus the ignorance that the unknown generates, could be the foundation of a life rooted in love and death. Dickinson's writings regarded the true fact of death without a further horizon as the power force limiting life's circumference in all its potential.³¹ All is life until death; or, in the context of the aforementioned letter to Elizabeth Holland, where love is an inherent quality of life, "Till Death – is narrow Loving –."³²

Another example of Dickinson's approach to the arduous journey of life until death is found in the following poem dated in 1860:

'Tis so much joy! 'Tis so much joy!
If I should fail, what poverty!
And yet, as poor as I,
Have ventured all upon a throw!
Have gained! Yes! Hesitated so -
This side the Victory!

Life is but Life! And Death, but Death!
Bliss is but Bliss, and Breath but Breath!
And if indeed I fail,
At least, to know the worst, is sweet!
Defeat means nothing but Defeat,
No drearier, can befall!

And if I gain! Oh Gun at sea,
Oh Bells, that in the steeples be!
At first, repeat it slow!
For Heaven is a different thing,
Conjectured, and waked sudden in -
And might extinguish me!³³

³¹ Eberwein, *Strategies*, 198-9. Further explored in chapter three and four, death as the limit of Dickinson's circumference resonates well with the Solonian conception of happiness comprising the totality of experience. According to Eberwein, it is death as the limit of Dickinson's circumference that "dominated her thoughts." Besides, Dickinson's speakers regarded the contingency of death as "life's most fascinating feature," "source of all adventure," and "a perpetual incentive to wonder."

³² "F831A - Till death is narrow loving" (1864). This poem will be further examined in chapter three.

³³ "F170A - 'Tis so much joy! 'Tis so much joy!" (1860).

The abundance of exclamation marks in this poem, regardless of circumstance, denotes the speaker's state of exhilaration and triumph. In the first stanza, she muses on what it means to fail in life. For her, venturing and taking risks in life is a gain in and of itself, and failure appears to be excluded from the equation. However, in the second stanza, the speaker appears to admit that even if she fails in life (or if there is failure in life), defeat, or "the worst," can also be "sweet," or an experience from which to learn. In the final stanza, she returns to the thrilling possibility of success in this life – or of happiness on Earth – because the "conjectured" heaven requires, first, death; and second, if it exists, it may not be as appealing as life in this world. In any case, the possibility of living in itself – with all of its gains and losses – represents "so much joy" for the speaker. Dickinson's joy, according to Eberwein, stems from "the thought of completing life's perilous journey," provided that "death somehow clarified the meaning of lives and assisted the survivors in the circuit world in their evaluative efforts."³⁴ The themes of peril and risk also emerge in Alicia Ostriker's evaluation of Dickinson's mind; what makes it remarkable is "its courage, its delight in risk, its willingness to face and examine the most outrageously impossible possibilities, and its entire subversion of all convention."³⁵ Through this subversiveness, most Dickinson's speakers were allowed to spend their poetic lives wondering and reconfiguring some absolute truths – which turned out to be relative – in the perimeters of their circumference.

Another biographical moment that has been read, like Susan's obituary, to assess Dickinson's personal happiness is her funeral. The poet's self-designed funeral proved to be as subversive and one-of-a-kind as her life itself.³⁶ In Jay Leyda's account:

When Edward Dickinson was buried, the town had closed in his honor, but his daughter's plan was quieter: she asked to be carried out the back door [by six Irishmen known to her], around through the garden, through the opened barn

³⁴ Eberwein, *Strategies*, 221. Furthermore, as examined in the following chapter, there is a connection between the notion of "failing in life" and Aurora Leigh's fragment "Should I fail?" in life's journey before paraphrasing Solon's proverb.

³⁵ Alicia Ostriker, "Re-Playing the Bible: My Emily Dickinson," in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008), 463.

³⁶ On Dickinson's instructions for her funeral, see St. Armand's *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, Farr's *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, and Jay Leyda's "Miss Emily's Maggie" among others.

from front to back, and then through the grassy fields to the family plot, always in sight of the house.³⁷

According to St. Armand, “the majority of the mourners found the funeral to be ‘poetical’ and ‘unlike any other’...”³⁸ At the funeral, T.W. Higginson – Dickinson's long-time correspondent and frequent writer for *The Atlantic Monthly* – read one poem by Emily Brontë, “No coward soul is mine,” and stated that although Dickinson “had put on immortality,” she “really never seemed to have put it off.”³⁹ Following on from Higginson's claim, the next sections sketch out a general historiography of happiness in Western thought in order to show how Dickinson developed a notion of eternity in time rooted in chance throughout her writings.

Dickinson's Work in light of the Historiography of Happiness

The “Happiness” without a cause, is the best Happiness, for Glee intuitive and lasting is the gift of God.

I fear we have all sorrow, though of different forms - but Life so very sweet at the Crisp, what must it be unfrozen!⁴⁰

Dickinson's thoughts on the impossibility of predicting the cause(s) of happiness, like the Solonian interpretation of a life worth living, are central to her poetic philosophy. Unlike major representations of happiness in nineteenth-century America, Dickinson's claim – in a letter to Mary Higginson in 1876 – that “the gift of God” is “a happiness without a cause,” or a happiness whose vitality is grounded in the value of being alive per se, differs from previous narratives that have historically placed “other causes” – such as reason, virtue, and pleasure – at the centre of this endeavour.⁴¹ Jackson Lears describes opposing attitudes toward luck in *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (2003). “An American creed,” he says, is “the faith that we can master chance through force of will, and that rewards will match merits in this world as well as the next.”⁴² Far from being

³⁷ Jay Leyda, “Miss Emily's Maggie,” in *New World Writing 3* (New American Library, 1953), 267.

³⁸ St Armand, *Her Culture*, 71.

³⁹ Cited in Leyda, *Years and Hours*, vol. 2, 475.

⁴⁰ L472 (1876).

⁴¹ This idea of the de-causation of happiness is also well depicted in “F1762A - The joy that has no stem nor core.” See full analyses of this poem in Tursi's “Emily Dickinson, Pragmatism, and the Conquests of the Mind,” 165.

⁴² Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003), 2-3. For Jackson, “it was the pervasiveness of social uncertainty that made the insistence on moral certainty so necessary.”

unique to the United States, this faith has its roots in Socratic times. In addition to the attempt to control chance, one of the major undertakings in Western thought has traditionally been the search for the causes of happiness. Dickinson, however, proposes the opposite. James McIntosh states in *Nimble Believing* that for Dickinson “the ignorance that time engenders is to her way of thinking the basis for happiness, ‘Delight without a Cause,’ a delight that can stay with one if it is nurtured intelligently.”⁴³ In terms of happiness’s history, this section contends that Dickinson’s writings highlight the futility of attempting to define an idea that must remain ambiguous. As a result, Dickinson’s work portrays the possibility of happiness without hope – or the hopelessness of happiness – as the most suitable for mortals in a contingent world.

In order to contextualise Dickinson’s views within Western tradition, it is critical to trace back the origins of the concept of happiness and the mechanisms that influenced its transformation, adaptation, and assimilation to the needs of individuals in specific moments in time. In *Happiness: A History*, the American historian Darrin McMahon acknowledges the infinite histories of happiness that could be produced depending on regional, religious, or social variations and interpretations of the concept itself. According to McMahon, while happiness is difficult to define, its enormous weight should not be overlooked, because “happiness has occupied a particularly prominent place in the Western intellectual tradition, exerting its influence on many aspects of Western culture and thought.”⁴⁴ The concept of happiness, or “the quest for happiness,” can be traced back to Herodotus’s history.⁴⁵ According to Walter Blanco’s introduction to *Herodotus the Histories*, Herodotus’s account suggested that “there is a balance in the universe, enforced at times by nature, at times by mortals, at times by the gods, and at times by all forces working together.”⁴⁶ As a result, those active forces did not exclude one another, but rather acted concurrently. In Book I, Herodotus’s primary moral concerns are exemplified and epitomised in the story

⁴³ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 159.

⁴⁴ McMahon, “Preface,” in *Happiness*, xiii.

⁴⁵ Walter Blanco, “Introduction,” in *Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Walter Blanco and Jennifer T. Roberts, second edition (New York: Norton & Company, 2013), xi. Herodotus’ history is considered to be “the first continuous prose narrative extant in Western literature.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

of Croesus, King of Lydia.⁴⁷ Croesus brought disaster upon himself by failing to think clearly and ignoring the fragility of human happiness. This is prompted by Croesus's meeting with Solon the Athenian, and his desire to know whether Solon's travels in search of knowledge had led him to meet a "more fortunate" person than Croesus.⁴⁸ In Solon's words:

Now, you seem to me to be very rich and to be the monarch of many people, but I couldn't say anything about this question you keep asking me until I find out that you have ended your life well, because the rich man isn't any better off than the man who has enough for his everyday needs unless his luck stays with him and he keeps on having the best of everything until he dies happily.... The man who deserves to be called happy. Until he dies, though, you must hold off and not call him happy – just lucky.⁴⁹

Given chance's proceedings, this fragment emphasises how important it is to consider the totality of experience before labelling someone "happy." Hence, happiness – or unhappiness – is not ultimately secured until death. This is the tragic view of happiness emphasised in Herodotus's histories and Greek pre-Socratic thought in general.⁵⁰ Nobody should be called happy until death, only lucky, because no one can predict how life's circumstances will eventually turn out.

The Greek word used by Herodotus that we translate into English as "happiness" is *eudaimonia*, a word whose etymological roots contain a combination of chance, agency, and divinity. Herodotus's *eudaimonia* (happiness), derived from the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (god, spirit) – a flourishing and worthwhile life – was seen as a synthesis of fortune and divinity. This was a suitable predicament in the fifth century BC, given that "this is the wisdom of a world in which inscrutable forces constantly threaten to subvert human aims, a world ruled by fate or by gods, in which suffering is all pervasive and uncertainty is woven into the fabric of daily existence," as McMahon puts it.⁵¹ This viewpoint emphasises individuals' vulnerability, where life is endured rather

⁴⁷ Lydia was located in the centre of Western Asia Minor.

⁴⁸ Although Blanco suggests that this encounter is unlikely to occur chronologically, its symbolism should not be diminished in view of it.

⁴⁹ Herodotus, "Book I," in *The Histories*, 14.

⁵⁰ This idea will be further explored in light of Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*.

⁵¹ McMahon, *Happiness*, 5.

than lived, and where only a few, the fortunate, will be judged as happy upon death. For Solon, “humans are creatures of pure chance.”⁵² Happiness, according to Herodotus and his contemporaries, was an indeterminate representation of a valuable life based on the totality of experience, rather than a purely positive emotion.

The idea that happiness requires a combination of chance and faith applies not only to ancient Greece but also to the United States, where Lears has traced clashes between “cultures of chance” and “cultures of control,” two ideals that merge and overlap. On the one hand, “cultures of chance” tend to recognise the complementarity of accident and design in both the individual and the larger cosmos, and treat chance “as a source of knowledge and a portal of possibility.”⁵³ Conversely, “cultures of control,” such as Protestantism, regard chance as a problem to be minimised or a demon to be denied.⁵⁴ According to McMahon and in light of the possibility of tragedy, “happiness at the dawn of Western history was largely a matter of chance,”⁵⁵ and akin to a miracle. Nevertheless, the Solonian tragic concept differs from modern conceptions of happiness, as well as from post-Socratic philosophy and Judeo-Christian tradition, which have traditionally contested this understanding of happiness.

Dickinson's tragic insight into happiness aligns with Solon's and thus opposes the predominant conceptions of happiness during her own time. As one of her speakers points out:

In this short Life
that only lasts an hour
How much - how
little - is
within our
power⁵⁶

Dated in 1873, Dickinson's speaker's dilemma in this brief poem is like that of the tragic poets in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. As in “how many schemes may

⁵² Herodotus, “Book I,” 14.

⁵³ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ McMahon, *Happiness*, 7.

⁵⁶ “F1292A - In this short life that only lasts an hour” (1873).

die,” the speaker considers the relationship between the effect of human agency (or the consequences of people’s choices on future events) and the inference of fortune (or circumstances beyond people’s control and knowledge) over the course of a lifetime. Although it is impossible to fully determine how these two conditions interact with one another, this critical undertaking is constantly at stake, on the assumption that, as expressed in the following poem, possibilities remain open until death:

All but Death, Can be
adjusted
Dynasties repaired -
Systems - settled in their
Sockets -
Citadels - dissolved -

Wastes of Lives - resown
with Colors
By Succeeding Springs -
Death - unto itself - Exception -
Is exempt from Change -⁵⁷

Either in respect of grand events, or with regards to small incidents, Dickinson’s speaker argues that the only exception to the whims of change – and possibilities in life – is death.⁵⁸ Additionally, “wastes of lives” may be (re-)planted since the soil continues to be productive and may replenish its vitality each Spring as long as there is still life to be lived. Through the image of a plant that could be “resown” indefinitely, humans were given the opportunity to (daily) renew themselves until the moment of death.

Dickinson’s “All but Death, Can be adjusted” resonates well with Solon’s statement “call no one happy until death” in the context of happiness. Another reformulation of this proverb can be found in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, who declares “‘After life’s fitful fever’ they sleep,” or in Bennett’s words, “the dead...

⁵⁷ “F789A - All but death can be adjusted” (1863).

⁵⁸ As an example, this idea was well depicted by Aeschylus’ play *Agamemnon* in the fifth century BC.

are happy.” However, “we, who are alive, wander through existence.”⁵⁹ In Bennett's reading, this wandering, as expressed in Dickinson's poem “Where every bird is bold to go,” reinforces the fact that “we will always be ‘foreigners’ in whatever land we travel, divided by our awareness of death from complete absorption into the world in which we live, yearning for another life whose existence we can never prove.”⁶⁰ While Bennett argues for the poet's desire to overcome this dual state, I believe some of Dickinson's speakers attempt to transform the yearning for an afterlife into the appreciation of an earthly life and, at the same time, recast the tragedy of death into the openness of life, with the latter idea echoing the perspective of Greek tragic poets on a life worth living.

Dickinson's work, in other words, resurrects a two-thousand-year-old dichotomy that seemed to have been neglected for long periods of time by acknowledging the gap – and the futility of completely estimating its dimensions – between what is up to individuals and what befalls them. Given the impossibility of achieving any kind of completion and perfection while living, and in order to demonstrate how possibility stands out at the heart of human ventures, Dickinson's poems – just like individual humans – are always caught within the living process. Additionally, some of Dickinson's personae do not prioritise reason over emotion (or vice versa), because they recognise the importance of combining both elements. However, one of the consequences of post-Socratic thought's emphasis on virtue – in which the idea of happiness as a marker of perfection and completion would greatly influence subsequent Western tradition – was the assumption that through reason, individuals could dominate their instincts and emotions, establish a balanced midpoint between excess and deficiency, re-direct contingency, and exert total control over their lives.

Despite this belief in reason, chance has always played a role in human happiness, as Martha Nussbaum's investigations of the role of chance in Greek tragedy, Plato, and Aristotle have revealed. Nussbaum's reading of Pindar's poem “Vine Tree” is useful here for the intriguing parallels it makes between this

⁵⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act III, ii, 23. Cited in Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 80. Besides, for Bennett, “to Dickinson, it was precisely this situation (this divided consciousness, this awareness of two possible kinds of ‘life’) that made us human, investing our lives – and deaths – with a peculiar and inimitable tragedy no other creature shared.” For instance, in “F1179A - Where every bird is bold to go” (1870).

⁶⁰ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 80.

tragic tradition and Dickinson's poetic views. Pindar's dilemma, according to Nussbaum, demonstrates:

The thorough intermingling of what is ours and what belongs to the world, of ambition and vulnerability, of making and being made, that are present in this and in any human life... The peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability... Human excellence is seen, in Pindar's poem and pervasively in Greek poetic tradition, as something whose very nature it is to be in need, a growing thing in the world that could not be made invulnerable and keep its own peculiar fineness.⁶¹

Comparing Nussbaum's analyses to Dickinson's "in this short life," "what is ours" – or "within our power" – and what is not represents an eternal predicament precisely because its potentiality lies in the futility of its resolution. Indeed, life's excellent qualities may sprout from the boundaries, terrors, and fragilities of mortality. In Dickinson's words: "Life - is what we make it - / Death - We do not know -."⁶²

Given this context, the blending of agency and possibility, of knowable and unknowable, of life and death, is an inherent component of the process of living a mortal life. Returning to Lears, he claims that it is "better to live" on "the razor's edge of luck," as Sophocles put it, "than to succumb to the hubris of demanding certain outcomes."⁶³ To some extent, "the razor edge of luck" resembles Dickinson's view of life as an abyss, which will be discussed in chapter three. This edge, or abyss, represents the limit that separates what is known – or can be known – from what is not, and it cannot be obliterated. "For centuries, human beings have tried to bring chance to heel, by instituting a reign of religious or scientific certainty," according to Lears. Reality, on the contrary, "stubbornly resists intellectual regimes of control."⁶⁴ Nussbaum's account, like Lears's, implies that this "tragic material" should be understood as "everyday facts of lived practical reason," provided that:

⁶¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

⁶² "F727A - Life is what we make it" (1863).

⁶³ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 15. Cited from Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 996. Translated and cited in Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 81, 89.

⁶⁴ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 16.

I am an agent, but also a plant; that much that I did not make goes towards making me whatever I shall be praised or blamed for being; that I must constantly choose among competing and apparently incommensurable goods and that circumstances may force me to a position in which I cannot help being false to something or doing some wrong; that an event that simply happens to me may, without my consent, alter my life.⁶⁵

In people's lifetimes, certain things are within their control and others will be predetermined for them. Every option contains a number of non-options; every gain contains a loss, and vice versa. Contradiction and opposition, as well as the ability to learn from them, are inherent values of the mortal condition. What happens to people may be as important as what does not happen at all.

According to Dickinson's speaker, "To be a Flower, is profound / Responsibility –."⁶⁶ As a matter of fact, this is not tragic; it is simply life, as expressed in the following stanza:

Drama's Vitallest Expression
is the Common Day
That arise and set
about Us -
Other Tragedy -
Perish in the Recitation -⁶⁷ (First stanza)

It is the "Common Day," defined as any day that begins with the sun rising and ends with the sun setting, that provides the setting for the drama or tragedy of life to be fully lived. Within this day, incidents and events from people's lives will occur, and such circumstances – both shaping and being shaped – will have an impact on people's lives that cannot be predicted or determined *a priori*. These are some of the values that several Dickinson's speakers used to perceive the world around them, as well as the ones that allowed them to imagine the possibility of happiness on Earth. Dickinson was "rooted like a plant in water," Genevieve Taggard points out, but "she swayed."⁶⁸ This contradiction lies at the heart of

⁶⁵ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 5.

⁶⁶ "F1038 - Bloom - is Result - to meet a Flower" (1865).

⁶⁷ "F776A - Drama's vitallest expression is the common day" (1863).

⁶⁸ Genevieve Taggard, *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (Place of publication not identified: Cooper Square, 1967), xiv. According to Taggard, given that "the absolute statement in poetry cannot describe relative fact in daily life," Dickinson's vision "saw a double reality."

tragic interpretations of happiness: the need to be both rooted and fluctuating, to be both strong and fragile, right and wrong, rational and emotional. In Nussbaum's account, "the tragic poets maintained, and in their choice of literary forms displayed, the belief that powerful emotions, particularly pity and fear, were sources of insight about the good human life;" however, "Plato denied this, developing a view of ethical understanding that separates intellect as much as possible from the disturbing influences of sense and emotion."⁶⁹ Post-Socratic philosophy in general, and religious doctrine in particular, will play a significant role in its demand for greater control over the contingency of existence, which Dickinson's work consistently contested. However, before delving into this topic, it is necessary to investigate the dissemination of classical philosophy in general and its ideas about the happy life in particular in Dickinson's milieu, as well as the influence of Greek and Roman interpretations of happiness in Judeo-Christian tradition, and how this tradition used these former models to create new interpretations of a life worth living.

Dickinson wrote to her friend Abiah Root in 1845, "we'll finish an education sometime, wont we? You may then be Plato, and I will be Socrates, provided you wont be wiser than I am."⁷⁰ This remark contributes to demonstrating how these philosophers' influence, as well as the legacy of their ideas, were still valued in Dickinson's nineteenth-century context. Plato's Academy, for instance, founded in Athens in the fourth century BC, was "the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all Western universities."⁷¹ Post-Socratic philosophy, meanwhile, enabled individuals to experience greater authority over their lives through reason, rational behaviour, and virtue. According to McMahon, Socrates was both a pivotal figure in the history of philosophy and the history of happiness; he also represented a watershed moment in Greek thought by endorsing the possibility of happiness in this life and within people's power.⁷² Socrates's happiness is a devotion to wisdom, which is the highest good for the philosopher, rather than a devotion to

⁶⁹ Nussbaum, "Preface to the Revised Edition," *Fragility*, xv.

⁷⁰ L5 (1845).

⁷¹ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 0.

⁷² McMahon, *Happiness*, 36.

pleasure.⁷³ In this view, virtue is knowledge, and what is required to achieve happiness is “for knowledge to guide our actions.”⁷⁴

Given my assertions concerning Dickinson's intellectual alignment with certain Greek thinkers on the concept of happiness, it is natural to wonder if she read them. Considering Dickinson's status as a culturally networked poet, it is critical to investigate how ideas from Greek tradition entered Dickinson's context via US print culture, particularly in relation to her academic background, contemporary journals, and literary figures such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Henry David Thoreau. Therefore, I will examine the role of classicism and Greek philosophy in nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, especially in the lives of women. As Caroline Winterer assures, “the middle decades of the nineteenth century marked the high tide of American women’s distinctive engagement with classicism.”⁷⁵ The ancient cultures of Greece and Rome represented the “avant-garde in science, art, and literature” in the United States.⁷⁶ Before the late nineteenth century, classicism was America's most important intellectual endeavour after Christianity, and “reverence for ancient models helped to structure ethical, political, oratorical, artistic, and educational ideals.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, Mary Kelly demonstrates that “young women were already pursuing an ambitious educational agenda at the female seminaries during the first half of the nineteenth century.”⁷⁸ For instance, shortly after mentioning Socrates and Plato and while attending Amherst Academy, Dickinson wrote to Abiah Root in 1845: “we have a very fine school. There are 63 scholars. I have four studies. They are Mental Philosophy, Geology, Latin, and Botany. How large they sound, don't they?”⁷⁹ Thereafter, while attending Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847, Dickinson told her brother Austin in a letter: “I finished my examination in Euclid [Greek mathematician] last

⁷³ Similarly, Plato and Aristotle both considered wisdom to be the highest good.

⁷⁴ Plato, “Preface,” in *Last Days*, xxxi.

⁷⁵ Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750 – 1900* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁷ Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780 – 1910* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1-2.

⁷⁸ Cited in Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton Scholarship Online, 2017), 25.

⁷⁹ L6 (1845).

eve & without a failure at any time.”⁸⁰ Dickinson's familiarity with the classics was thus prevalent in both her school and female seminary.

Regarding contemporary publications, periodicals had a major effect on Dickinson's work and ideas, and references to Greek culture were common. Through these periodicals, as Mary Loeffelholz assures, “she was participating in a very American enterprise; she was reading, interacting, and dialoguing with the best minds of her day.”⁸¹ Dickinson frequently read *The Springfield Republican*, *Harper's Weekly*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Scribner's* among others.⁸² T.W. Higginson, a regular contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, was the first editor of Dickinson's poems (along with Mabel Loomis Todd) in 1890, and his "Letter to a Young Contributor" published in the journal prompted Dickinson to enquire about her verses in 1862. There were numerous articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* at the time Dickinson read it that made references to Greek culture and philosophers. As an example, “The New World and the New Man,” published in 1858, made explicit references to Socrates and the extent of his legacy in American thought and culture:

Socrates felt a sacred impulse to test his neighbors, what they knew and were.... At twenty-three centuries' distance we see in him the source of a river of spiritual influence, that yet streams on, more than a Missouri, in the minds of men.⁸³

Socrates “impulse to test his neighbors” resonates well with one of Dickinson's speaker, who assures, “Experiment to me / is every one I meet.”⁸⁴ Dickinson's poetic experimentalism may have expanded beyond poetry to connect with, and learn from, human interactions. Another example is “Woman's Rights in Ancient Athens,” published in 1871. This article mentioned Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Protagoras, Zeno, Anaxagoras, and Sophocles, among other Greek leading figures. Despite the fact that the Athens of the fourth and fifth centuries BC had been an extinct civilisation for over two millennia, the article suggested that modern scholars were extremely familiar with all of its political, social, religious,

⁸⁰ L19 (1847)

⁸¹ Mary Loeffelholz, “US Literary Contemporaries: Dickinson's Moderns,” in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, 142.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸³ “The New World and the New Man,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 2, no. 12 (1858): 513.

⁸⁴ “F1081A - Experiment to me” (1865).

artistic, and literary features.⁸⁵ Regarding women's rights in ancient Greece, it assured that "if the women of earth were not properly appreciated, the divine women of Olympus were worshipped with a devotion which was equal to the subsequent Christian adoration of the Mater Dolorosa."⁸⁶ Unfortunately, the extent to which women were "not properly appreciated" was still an ongoing issue in the nineteenth century.

Solon's proverb was mentioned and refuted in an article published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in the same volume as Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor," which Dickinson undoubtedly read. In "Individuality," the author claimed:

And wait you not for death, according to the counsel of Solon, to be named happy, if you are permitted fellowship with a man of rich mind.... The happiness is all the greater, if the fellowship be accorded by a mind eminently superior to one's own.... And going forward to the supreme point of this felicity, we may note that the worshipper, in the ecstasy of his adoration, feels the Highest to be also Nearest.⁸⁷

This fragment suggests that supreme happiness can be attained before death by companionship with, and devotion for, a man of superior mind, where the "Highest" will feel as "Nearest." Unlike Dickinson's "happiness without a cause," the author provides a concrete reason for an individual to experience happiness. Furthermore, the reason or cause is not merely externally motivated, but the higher impulse has divine undertones, according to the language used in this excerpt.

Solon's aphorism, on the contrary, was endorsed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a work Dickinson admired, when Aurora claims:

The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
'Let no one be called happy till his death.'⁸⁸

⁸⁵ "Woman's Rights in Ancient Athens," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 27, no. 161 (1871): 273.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁸⁷ "Individuality," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 9, no. 54 (1862): 428.

⁸⁸ This passage will be expanded and further explored in chapter two. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Context, Criticism* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1996), Fifth book, lines 74-5.

Further explored in chapter two, Barrett Browning in general and *Aurora Leigh* in particular were sources of inspiration for Dickinson's poetic persona. What Prins asserts is that Barrett Browning was "spell-bound by ancient Greek for many years," and she was hardly the only woman who linked her creative character to ancient Greek culture.⁸⁹ On both sides of the Atlantic, Barrett Browning's public persona was "one of the myths of authorship invoked by and for Victorian women writers" who found in her "the very personification of a Woman of Greek Letters."⁹⁰ In *Aurora Leigh*, for instance, Aurora is aware of how the classics may influence her literary persona:

Oft, the ancient forms
Will thrill, indeed, in carrying the young blood.⁹¹

Like Barrett Browning, nineteenth-century women writers frequently referred to tragic heroines for "sympathetic identification and moral reflection," and Greek tragedy became much more accessible thanks to the proliferation of editions and translations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides at the time.⁹² Besides, several scholars have remarked that George Eliot – a thinker who Dickinson highly praised – also blended her extensive readings of Aristotle and Greek tragedy into her work.⁹³ In the United States, as Prins points out, Margaret Fuller's "vision of Greek tragic heroines was a self-conscious reflection of, and on, the popular reception of Greek tragedy in Anglo-American literary culture."⁹⁴

Henry David Thoreau was another figure who introduced classical culture and thinking into Dickinson's milieu. Ethel Seybold's *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (1951) examines Thoreau's many roles and suggests that although all of them were an integral part of his quest for knowledge "the classics were to him the most pertinent and valuable source of past revelation."⁹⁵ Thoreau claimed in *Walden*:

⁸⁹ Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, 3-5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹¹ Cited in Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, 6.

⁹² Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, 26. For instance, Barrett Browning was "the first woman to translate *Prometheus Bound* [by Aeschylus] into English (in 1833 and again in 1850)." *Ibid.*, 31-2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹⁵ Ethel Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 15.

For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave.⁹⁶

For Seybold, Thoreau “was not a classicist for the sake of classicism. He was a classicist, just as he was a naturalist or a hermit or a writer, only because and as far as his classicism furthered his search for reality.”⁹⁷ Like Seybold, Robert Klevay assures that “Thoreau was willing to distort his classical sources to confirm his own evolving thoughts on the proper relationship between humanity and nature.”⁹⁸ For instance, in Seybold’s views, Horace’s *Carpe Diem*, generally understood as “Life is short; let us be happy;” it meant for Thoreau “Life is short; let us not waste it.”⁹⁹ For Klevay, Thoreau’s happiness does not depend on meeting other people’s expectations, whether of a patron or a lover – the two main subjects of Horace’s poetry – should not be the highest aspiration in life. Instead, one should focus on achieving one’s own objectives, whatever they may be.¹⁰⁰ Thoreau’s interest in transcendentalism, as well as his love of the classics, are both evidenced by the fact that he reads Horace’s words in accordance with his own understanding, and follows “Emerson’s call in ‘Nature’ to see the world ‘with new eyes’.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, Thoreau’s use of classics in *Walden* is more complex than is commonly assumed, and he encourages the reader “to question the inherent value of any literary authority – Greek, Roman, or Transcendental.”¹⁰²

Thoreau’s ideas permeated the air that Dickinson breathed. As Dickinson’s niece suggested in *Face to Face*, “the experiments of Brook Farm and Thoreau’s hut were infections Aunt Emily could not have escaped.”¹⁰³ Dickinson mentioned Thoreau in two letters. First, in a letter to Susan while she was on vacation in 1866: “was the sea cordial? Kiss him for Thoreau.”¹⁰⁴ Besides,

⁹⁶ Cited in Seybold, *Thoreau*, 10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁸ Robert Klevay, “The Reader and the Classics in Thoreau’s *Walden*,” in *The Concord Saunterer* 19-20 (2011-2012): 192.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁰⁰ Thoreau’s views will be further explored in chapter three in conversation with Emerson and Dickinson, as well as with some of their contemporaries.

¹⁰¹ Klevay, “The Reader and the Classics in Thoreau’s *Walden*,” 193.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰³ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ H B59, L320 (1866)

the publication note following this letter suggests that Dickinson and Susan may have talked about Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, which was published in 1865. In another letter to the Norcross sisters talking about a neighbouring fire in 1881, Dickinson wrote: "the fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would wonder which did the most harm."¹⁰⁵ Like Thoreau, Dickinson distorted classical myths and figures to suit her own poetic purposes. Some of her letters and poems made specific references to Greek cities, such as Athens; philosophers, such as Epicure, Socrates, and Plato, and mythological characters, such as Prometheus, Orpheus, Midas, Jason, Memnon, and Amphitrite.¹⁰⁶ In the poems that make references to Greek mythology, Dickinson reinterprets the roles of mythical characters, and appropriates them in order to suit her own poetic world. For Jeong U Jang, "Dickinson's journey to Greek myth is destined to come back to her New England."¹⁰⁷ Dickinson's and Thoreau's efforts to gain knowledge via personal experience are based on the recognition that there is no authority outside of their own reality.

It is not surprising, regarding Socrates' wisdom and the influence it has had on Western thought, that a young Dickinson aspired to be as wise as the Greek philosopher rather than aligning herself with his student Plato. In his introduction to *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, Deppman implies that "the Dickinson we see in this book tends to be an anti-Platonist, a poet of consciousness, a curious, open-minded interpreter both of how human beings make sense of the world and of what happens when they do."¹⁰⁸ In contrast to Plato's dualism, Michael Kearns claims that "Dickinson locates mind in body rather than ignoring or attempting to transcend the physiological basis of

¹⁰⁵ L691 (1881)

¹⁰⁶ Athens is referred to in "F1606 - Lad of Athens, faithful be" (1883), which was also included in a letter to Samuel Bowles that will be analysed at the end of this chapter. As previously stated, Dickinson mentioned Socrates and Plato in L5 to Abiah Root (1845), and Epicure in "F191A - 'Morning' means 'milking' to the farmer" (1861). Amphitrite (Poseidon's wife) is referred to in "F255 - The drop that wrestles in the sea" (1861). Dickinson mentions Memnon (king of the Ethiopians) in "F324A - Put up my lute!" (1862). The myth of Prometheus appears in "F1143A - The smouldering embers blush" (1868). She referred to Midas and Jason in "F1488C - One of the ones that Midas touched" (1879), and mentioned Jason again in "F910A - Finding is the first act" (1865). Finally, Dickinson referred to Orpheus in "F1577B - The Bible is an antique volume" (1882). For a full analyses of these poems, see Jeong U Jang, "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Reading of Greek Mythology," in *Studies in Modern British and American Poetry*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2016): 207 – 228.

¹⁰⁷ Jeong U Jang, "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Reading of Greek Mythology," 224.

¹⁰⁸ Deppman, "Introduction," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 5.

sensations, emotions, and thoughts.”¹⁰⁹ By depolarising experience, as revealed in “The Heart Is the Capital of the Mind,” most Dickinson’s speakers’ stand in stark contrast to the dualistic worldview in which both Western culture and, consequently, happiness were rooted.¹¹⁰

Despite the absence of direct references to Aristotle’s work in Dickinson’s writings, the philosopher’s thorough examination of the concept of *eudaimonia* – and the subsequent Christianisation of his account – has commonly been regarded as the prototypical conceptual model for happiness. Aristotle, unlike Socrates and Plato, believed that while virtue was important in achieving happiness, “virtue on its own” was not “enough to secure our highest end,”¹¹¹ which is to live a flourishing and contemplative life. Aristotle was the one who brought earthly happiness to the forefront by making happiness the “goal of all human activity.”¹¹² Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the most influential philosophical works devoted to the search for life’s ultimate goal that has stood “the test of time.”¹¹³ *Eudaimonia* (happiness) is the highest good, according to the philosopher, because it is complete, or “intrinsically worth pursuing,” and self-sufficient.¹¹⁴ More specifically, it is complete because it is worth pursuing for its own sake – we do not pursue happiness for the sake of something else – and self-sufficient because it is worthy of choice on its own. In addition to completeness and self-sufficiency, happiness is the noblest and most pleasant good, and it can be obtained through “a complete life of virtue.”¹¹⁵ According to Aristotle’s virtue-based ethics, “who is happy both lives well and does well.”¹¹⁶ Virtuous people will act well for the sake of acting well; their actions will not be

¹⁰⁹ Michael Kearns, “Emily Dickinson: Anatomist of the Mind,” in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 24.

¹¹⁰ F1381A – The heart is the capital of the mind. This poem will be further analysed in chapter two in view of the privilege attributed to negative emotions by sentimental interpretations of happiness.

¹¹¹ McMahon, *Happiness*, 47.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 42-3.

¹¹³ Ronald Polansky, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Ronald Polansky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

¹¹⁴ Aristotle, “Book I,” in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

motivated by anything else because acting in accordance with virtue is complete, self-sufficient, noble, and pleasant in and of itself.¹¹⁷

As a result, doing well brings individuals pleasure and adds intrinsic value to life itself. According to Aristotle, a virtuous person's life "has no need of a pleasure that is superadded to it, like some sort of appendage, but has its pleasure within itself."¹¹⁸ Furthermore, because happiness is constant, stable, and consistent, it is difficult to achieve as well as difficult to reverse, and as a result, happiness is not associated with chance. A virtuous person will handle what fortune brings in an appropriate manner as long as this person has a sufficient amount of external goods. "Small strokes of good luck or similarly of the opposite clearly will not have a strong influence on his [individual's] way of living," he says, "whereas great and repeated ones, when good, will make his life more blessed."¹¹⁹ Thus, a sort of completeness appears to be possible in this life through the exercise of virtue.

In a letter to her cousin Louise Norcross in 1865, Dickinson argued that "happiness is haleness," sharing Aristotle's belief that happiness may be difficult to reverse.¹²⁰ Lears asserts that Aristotle and other classical thinkers advocated for an "ethic of autonomy," or the emphasis on creating one's own luck, which would later serve as the cornerstone of "modern liberal individualism;" this idea was also carried forward in the writings of Cicero.¹²¹ "[T]he man of great intellect anticipates the future," Cicero said, "calculates the chances,... [and] decides how to meet every contingency."¹²² The following Dickinson poem dated in 1875 appears to agree with Aristotle's and Cicero's assertions:

Luck is not
chance -

¹¹⁷ At this point, it is worth noting the distinction between Aristotle's virtue and religious' virtue. On the one hand, Aristotle's virtue is intrinsically valuable, which means that there is no need for a reward in exchange for virtuous activity because the activity is rewarding in and of itself. Religious virtue, on the other hand, is not intrinsically valuable since it is performed for the sake of retribution or external reward.

¹¹⁸ Aristotle, "Book I," 12.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 16. In this regard, McMahon's essay "From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness" explains how post-Socratic thought transformed chance into reason.

¹²⁰ L304 (1865).

¹²¹ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 29.

¹²² Cited in Maurice S. Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 72.

It's Toil -
Fortune's expensive
smile
Is earned -
The Father of
the Mine
Is that old -
fashioned Coin
We spurned -¹²³

At first glance, the speaker seems to suggest that luck is earned through hard work since "Fortune's expensive smile is earned," or reliant on one's own actions. The poem highlights how perseverance and skill enable individuals to exert control over chance. Nonetheless, according to Maurice S. Lee's interpretation, while the poem appears to reject the relevance of chance at first, it later alludes to chance's overwhelming force. For example, "Father" could refer to providence or religious dogma, and for Lee, this could imply that the "Father of 'Luck is not chance' is 'spurned'," and thus rejected; additionally, the pairing of "Father" and "Coin" could allude to economy as a governing principle.¹²⁴ When read in the context of Dickinson's poem "The most triumphant bird," which ends "To what delicious accident / Does finest Glory fit -," Lee describes Dickinson's "robust version of chance" as "one that probabilistic toil cannot master."¹²⁵ In line with Lee, this study embraces Dickinson's belief in both the futility of mastering chance and achieving completion while still alive.

In contrast to Dickinson's commitment to depicting both the impossibility of closure in this life and the ongoing nature of processes within it, Aristotle's views on achieving happiness through "a complete life of virtue" – assuming that life has not yet been completed – may appear suspicious.¹²⁶ Although Aristotle's

¹²³ "F1360A - Luck is not chance" (1875). Dickinson proposes an alternative word in the last verse, "Disowned –" instead of "We spurned –."

¹²⁴ Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, 192. Besides, Lee suggests that "scholars have not regarded chance as a crucial concept or word for Dickinson, though it appears over twenty times in her verse."

¹²⁵ Ibid., 193. For instance, as expressed in "F1285A - The most triumphant bird" (1873).

¹²⁶ Daniel Fineman, "Against Mastery: Dickinson contra Hegel and Schlegel," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 92. Fineman claims that Dickinson's poems' "work-in-progress" condition – or their attempt to show the continuity of processes – stands in stark contrast to "Western aesthetics since Aristotle's *Poetics* underlying assumptions about literary completion."

Nicomachean Ethics acknowledges some degree of chance in people's circumstances, *virtue* guiding our actions and deliberate choices will primarily define the concept of happiness. As McMahon suggests, it is worth noting Aristotle's efforts to ensure "the inviolability of a flourishing life in the face of external contingency and chance."¹²⁷ As previously stated, Nussbaum's *Fragility* reveals how Aristotle's concern was shared by fourth and fifth century BC Greek culture, who were "obsessed with precisely this dilemma: how to ensure happiness despite what may happen to us, despite the unpredictability of luck."¹²⁸ This may sound problematic, and it certainly is, according to Jonathan Lear, a contemporary American philosopher, in *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (2000). In his book, Lear presents a psychological approach to the concept of happiness, or what is "good," based on Aristotle's ethics. In Lear's account, as it is impossible to know how to act given a particular "set of circumstances", what is essential to Aristotle is "how to build good character" through virtuous activity.

Moving from Socrates's fundamental question "how shall we live?" to Aristotle's "what is the good of all our actions?," what Lear finds problematic is, on the one hand, Aristotle's determination of what "the good" is and, on the other, how to establish the length of "a complete life (of virtue)." Despite Aristotle's dismissal of Solon's proverb at the start of *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is difficult to imagine a "complete life" that does not end with death. According to Lear's argument, considering this concept is impossible because "we have somehow to take our lives as a whole into account, to do so while we are still in the midst of living and somehow to answer what to do next on the basis of that consideration."¹²⁹ As a result of this elusive beginning in Aristotle's theory, as well as the fact that Aristotle's contemplative life – which has a higher value than virtuous life – is located in a god-like place of perfection, this happiness may be unattainable for anyone who is not "complete" and perfectly virtuous. According to McMahon, this post-Socratic view of happiness will shape Western thinking "for centuries to come."¹³⁰ However, while post-Socratic emphasis on virtue

¹²⁷ McMahon, "From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness: 400 B.C.-A.D. 1780," in *Daedalus* 133, no. 2 (2004): 8.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁹ Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 24.

¹³⁰ McMahon, *Happiness*, 51.

differs from pre-Socratic emphasis on chance, a life worth living will still be a rare phenomenon, only attainable by “a happy few” and nearly a miracle in both cases.

To sum up, by considering happiness to be virtue, the major post-Socratic philosophical schools of Athens shared some fundamental assumptions about happiness. For example, it was regarded as an objective state associated with reason, rather than a subjective state associated with emotion. For McMahon, achieving happiness was an enormously arduous job in ancient Greece, yet one that was considered as the inherent “*telos* of human life.”¹³¹ Aristotelian happiness, then, had a huge impact on future generations. According to Soni's *Mourning Happiness*, “for later tradition, it becomes the archetype of the classical idea of happiness, and it still remains one of the most lucid and compelling accounts of that idea, unsurpassed in the rigor and sophistication of its analyses.”¹³² Aristotle's emphasis on virtue as a means of gaining greater control over one's actions and performances also played a significant role in theological and sentimental approaches to happiness, which greatly influenced Dickinson's Protestant and literary context. Although this study focuses on Dickinson's tragic approach to happiness, which emphasises the ability to envision the unpredictability of life as part of its intrinsic value, the poet also insisted on perceiving life as a whole from her experience of mortality, a belief that brought her closer to pre-Socratic approaches to the idea.

The Romans, like the Greeks, were also preoccupied with the idea of ensuring happiness in the face of chance. In order to assess the conditions of the theological idea of happiness within Dickinson's context, it is interesting to note the influence of Greek thought on Christian philosophers via the Romans. McMahon claims that Cicero actively embraced this “new faith in human agency” by assuming that “happiness sometimes required suffering.”¹³³ Given that virtue – or virtuous action – is frequently the most difficult thing to do, often requiring sacrifice and even suffering; the virtuous person will be able to “adjust” when necessary, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Cicero believed that happiness and suffering were not mutually exclusive.

¹³¹ Ibid., 64-5.

¹³² Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 123.

¹³³ McMahon, “From the Happiness of Virtue,” 8.

By connecting happiness and suffering, and suffering with the figure of Christ, Roman's *felicitas temporarum* served as a model to the Christian ideal. This is exemplified by the story of Felicitas and Perpetua, the first martyrs in Christian history. According to McMahon's account of events, Felicitas and Perpetua were sentenced to death for upholding Christ's moral values. This "call to martyrdom," deemed as "the ultimate mark of divine favor," was viewed as both a privilege and a test, "the ultimate test of one's worthiness before God."¹³⁴ As a result, Judeo-Christian ideas will divert Roman's *felicitas temporarum* "with a perpetual felicity for all time, the body of Christ was the one true manna of those who would live like gods" in the afterlife.¹³⁵ Shifting from the idea of temporal happiness in this life – or by the end of it – to the idea of eternal blessedness upon death (and the release from suffering), the promise of happiness as a reward in heaven becomes utopian. In McMahon's words, "whether in heaven or the New Jerusalem, the happiness of paradise would be entire, endless, and complete;"¹³⁶ in addition to being postponed indefinitely. Individuals' lives will thus be divided into two parts: a time of trial – and probably suffering – during their mortal existence, and a time of reward after death that will be eternal in heaven.¹³⁷

Due to the influence that the Christianisation of happiness had on Dickinson's life and context, Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (1986) is essential reading for understanding the significance and consequences that the idea of eternal happiness in heaven has cast in Western philosophy over centuries.¹³⁸ Walzer's book examines the origins of "the idea of deliverance from suffering and oppression" through God's redemption, as well as the ways in which the Exodus story has been used to support it.¹³⁹ The appeal of the Exodus story, according to Walzer, lies in its linearity and progression. In this biblical story, for

¹³⁴ McMahon, *Happiness*, 88.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹³⁶ McMahon, "From the Happiness of Virtue," 10.

¹³⁷ This notion is one of the main mechanisms in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of happiness as episodic, as well as modern and current interpretations of the idea. In chapter two, this research will pay special attention to the relationship between happiness and narrative and the mechanisms of the trial narrative form in shaping this partial perspective of life and its influence in sentimental discourses that informed the reception of Dickinson's writings.

¹³⁸ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 5-6. As we will see later, the uses of the Exodus' story are fundamental in the understanding of the development of the American Puritan doctrine, as well as during the American Revolution. Moreover, by referencing the Exodus, figures such as John Calvin supported his most extreme arguments.

¹³⁹ Walzer, "Preface," in *Exodus and Revolution*, ix.

example, there is a beginning, middle, and end. Unlike Dickinson, Solon, and Nietzsche, who all believed in time's circularity, the Exodus' linear timeline calls into question notions of time's cyclic nature.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Aristotle's *Poetics* defines narrative coherence in terms of causal relationships:

A *beginning* is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else.... Conversely, an *end* is that which does itself naturally follow from something else.... A *middle* is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing after it. Well constructed plots, therefore, cannot either begin at a *chance* point or end at a *chance* point.¹⁴¹

According to Walzer, this linearity would be accountable for both “the seeds of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries idea of progress” as well as “the resurrection of millenarian thought in the late medieval and early modern periods (as against the revival of cyclical thought in the Renaissance).”¹⁴² Furthermore, this linearity dramatically transformed the classical (pre- and post-Socratic) account of a life worth living, by making happiness the ultimate reward at the end of the trial of earthly existence, when reaching the promised blessedness in heaven.¹⁴³ Therefore, the promise of happiness – as the promise of heaven – appears to be relentlessly suspended:

Happy/Blessed [*makarios*] are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.
Happy are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Happy are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
Happy are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven...¹⁴⁴

In this way, the Judeo-Christian concept of blessedness reshapes the classical account of happiness. According to McMahon's study, this new

¹⁴⁰ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 12. According to Walzer, the Exodus represents “the crucial alternative to all mythic notions of eternal recurrence – and hence to those cyclical understandings of political change from which our word ‘revolution’ derives.”

¹⁴¹ Cited in Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, 88-9. Besides, Aristotle’s “emphasis on causal continuity was a widely accepted aesthetic standard for eighteenth and nineteenth century critics.”

¹⁴² Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 15.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 106. In more detail, Walzer asserts that the word happiness “is used, not only in the Declaration of Independence but also in the Exodus sermons of the 1770s and 1780s, to describe the goal of the American Revolution.”

¹⁴⁴ McMahon, *Happiness*, 82. Luke 6:20 – 23.

happiness represents, or is translated into, a reward in heaven, by shifting from “the avoidance of suffering” in Greek tradition to “suffering’s active embrace” through the figure of Christ, on the condition that “those who endure pain now will be granted pleasure in a time to come.”¹⁴⁵ When happiness is viewed as a result of suffering and grief, and martyrdom as a necessary trial on the way to it, it is not surprising that Biblical narratives raise the possibility of seeking “happiness in sadness, pleasure in pain, joy in sorrow, ecstasy in death,” as McMahon argues.¹⁴⁶ The Christian account of blessedness, then, required renunciation and suffering, and everlasting happiness was the reward for enduring such a trial.¹⁴⁷ According to classical accounts, death completes existence – whether lived happily or unhappily. In the Christian account, happiness, on the other hand, can be found only after death; thus, happiness corresponds to death itself. In the fifth century, St. Augustine referred to this as “the happiness of hope.” Furthermore, his *Confessions*, as a biographical trial narrative of conversion, served as an unintentional model for the development of the trial narrative form in the eighteenth century. Dickinson’s Calvinist upbringing embraced this happiness of hope and its promise in heaven. This happiness of hope, however, represented a conflict for Dickinson’s speakers’ personal enterprise in their attempt to value existence in the absence of a greater or higher purpose.

This chapter has thus far argued that Dickinson’s views of happiness as a possibility or stimulus – contained within the totality and contingency of existence – shared intriguing parallels with the tragic pre-Socratic tradition. Moving from the possibility of happiness to the happiness of virtue, post-Socratic thought disregarded chance in favour of reason, assuming that the latter could reduce individuals’ exposure to the former. On this grounds, Roman tradition conjectured that virtuous activity entailed suffering. Directly influencing Christian belief, it was suffering in this life – during the time of trial – that justified the hope for greater happiness in heaven.¹⁴⁸ Christians endorsed a supreme Providence, given that what once was thought to be arbitrary now became part of God’s design. “The

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴⁷ In chapter two, I will develop this idea further and its impact in literature and the trial narrative form.

¹⁴⁸ Besides, chapter two discusses how suffering will justify an “ethics of sacrifice.” This notion will be further developed and integrated within the discourse of sentimentalism in nineteenth-century American literature.

capaciousness of the Puritan notion of Providence left only one conclusion possible regarding the existence of chance,” writes Lear, “‘there is no such thing as fortune or chance,’ John Calvin had announced in 1561,” and numerous devotees accepted such perspective.¹⁴⁹

From the Possibility of Happiness to the Happiness of Hope and the Right to Pursue Happiness

The way
Hope builds his
House
It is not with a sill -
Nor Rafter - has that
Edifice
But only Pinnacle -

Abode in as supreme
This superficialities
As if it were of
Ledges smit
Or mortised with the
Laws -¹⁵⁰

Dickinson's speaker questions the foundation of “the house of hope” in this poem dated in 1879, claiming that its grounds are as shaky as those holding a “pinnacle.” More significantly, several of her poems emphasise how fictitious hope can be.¹⁵¹ For example, in “Could hope inspect her basis,” hope is defined as having “a fictitious charter.”¹⁵² Similarly, in “Hope is a Strange Invention,” while the idea may “Embellish all we / own -,” its foundation is still dubious.¹⁵³ In fact, Dickinson

¹⁴⁹ Lear, *Something for Nothing*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ “F1512A - The way hope builds his house” (1879).

¹⁵¹ In other poems, though, as in “F314B – ‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” or “F493A - When I hoped, I recollect” (both dated in 1862), hope is seen either as a bird steadily singing no matter the circumstances without asking anything in return or as a sensation that keeps the speaker “warm.” In addition to the ones mentioned here, other Dickinson’s poems attempting to describe hope are: “F1284A - This is the place they hoped before” (1873), “F1493A - Hope is a subtle glutton” (1879), and “F880A - The service without hope” (1864). The latter poem will be analysed in chapter three.

¹⁵² “F1282A - Could hope inspect her basis” (1873).

¹⁵³ “F1424A - Hope is a strange invention” (1877).

enclosed a variation of the second stanza of the latter poem in a letter to Mary Higginson in 1877 between the following prose fragments:

I give you half my Birds - upon the sweet condition that you will bring them back
- yourself, and dwell a Day with me, and Bliss without a price, I earned myself of
Nature -

Of whose electric Adjunct
Not anything is known -
Though its unique Momentum
Inebriate our own.

Forgive me if I come too much - the time to live is frugal - and good as is a better
earth, it will not quite be this.¹⁵⁴

Nature, rather than hope, provides a solid foundation in this fragment, as well as
“Bliss without a price.”¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, what bestows this bliss is not the promise
of, or hope for, “a better earth,” but the frugality of life on this earth, as
demonstrated in this other poem:

The Truth, is Bald - and Cold -
But that will hold -
If any are not sure -
We show them - prayer -
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now -¹⁵⁶ (third stanza)

Truth, as opposed to hope, “holds” and can provide a viable grounding for belief.
While those who are unsure – or do not see it that way – pray; the others, “stop
hoping.” Reminiscent of Emerson’s “man hopes: genius creates,” Dickinson’s
persona gradually discovers and experiences the effects of creating one’s own
truth, rather than hoping for an absolute and external one.¹⁵⁷ Several Dickinson’s
speakers do not consider religious hope to be a realistic and strong foundation
for the concept of happiness, as discussed further in the following sections.

¹⁵⁴ L498 (1877).

¹⁵⁵ As previously stated, the happiness of hope has a cost, which is the renunciation of earthly existence, since that existence is regarded as a time of trial that must be endured.

¹⁵⁶ “F341A - 'Tis so appalling it exhilarates” (1862).

¹⁵⁷ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 2001), 59.

However, the “happiness of hope,” beginning with St. Augustine, will have a significant impact on the concept's evolution and transformation.

In Dickinson's Calvinist context, St. Augustine's “happiness of hope” served as the basis for theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness in the nineteenth century. St. Augustine's first philosophical and religious work after his conversion to Christianity in 386 was *De Beata Vita*, which translates as “the Blessed or Happy life.” St. Augustine admits in its pages that true (complete) happiness, as opposed to Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, is impossible on this earth due to original sin. Individuals should therefore hope for eternal happiness in heaven, which will redeem them from their original sin and free them from the contingency of mortal existence. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine acknowledged “the nothingness of humanity and the totality of human dependence on God for the achievement of the good life.”¹⁵⁸ He was primarily influenced by Cicero's *Hortensius*, in which the Roman philosopher suggests that the majority of people seek happiness in the wrong place, because happiness manifests as the result of a life that strives for knowledge and “the discovery of truth,” rather than as the direct reward of fulfilled desire or pleasurable feeling.¹⁵⁹ St. Augustine believed that God was truth and that only God could preserve a person's capacity for reason while confronting dangers like those posed by, for example, sexual desire in the pursuit of a happy life.¹⁶⁰ In Henry Chadwich's introduction to the *Confessions*, he claims that “Augustine came to think it [sexual desire] an ingredient in the misery of the human condition that the sexual impulse is so frequently disobedient to the mind's higher intentions and instructions,” by being instinctual and disruptive.¹⁶¹ St. Augustine's mission, influenced by Neoplatonist dualism of body and mind, good and evil, turned out to be “the union of the soul with God in a beatific vision.”¹⁶²

In contrast to Dickinson's views on the momentousness of possibility, St. Augustine contested the inevitability of chance by seeking a steadfast way of

¹⁵⁸ McMahon, “From the Happiness of Virtue,” 10.

¹⁵⁹ Henry Chadwich, “Introduction,” in *St. Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xiv.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii. Likewise, other philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans emphasised the risks of “the capacity of sexual desire.”

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, xxi.

living, which could only be accomplished by uncovering the hidden messages contained in the Holy Scriptures.¹⁶³ In St. Augustine's words: "when I seek for you, my God, my quest is for the happy life.... How then shall I seek for the happy life?.... Is not the happy life that which all desire, which indeed no one fails to desire?." ¹⁶⁴ He makes it clear in the following passage that "fake" happiness on earth should not be compared to "real" happiness in heaven, because true happiness is "the gift of God." However, imperfect happiness on Earth is preferable to no happiness at all:

Certainly we have to desire for it, but how I do not know. There is also another sense in which a person who has it is happy at a particular time, and there are some who are happy in hope of becoming so. The kind of happiness they have is inferior to that of those who have the real thing. But they are better than those who are happy neither in actuality nor in hope.¹⁶⁵

While Dickinson's personae transform "the gift of God" into "the gift of mortality," St. Augustine's real happy life was "joy grounded in you, O God, who are the truth."¹⁶⁶ The pursuit of knowledge, which is ingrained in classical thought, is now transformed into the goal of St. Augustine's Christian quest. The separation between different types of happiness, as discussed further in the following sections, will create two dominant readings in the centuries to come.

St. Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle's virtue ethics, will further develop this distinction in the thirteenth century. According to McMahon, Aquinas and Christian Aristotelians "carved out a space for cultivating and improving earthly life" by diminishing "the total vitiating effects of original sin and emphasizing the place of virtue as man's *telos*."¹⁶⁷ This study, then, will look at how the Protestant Reformation embraced St. Augustine's theology of sin and its consequences. Although Calvinist doctrine emphasises the importance of concepts such as original sin, redemption through grace, and predestination, Richard Wilbur's "Sumptuous Destitution" asserts that Dickinson's active rejection

¹⁶³ Chadwich, *Confessions*, 40. In Dickinson's context, Calvinism also sought to reinterpret the Holy Scriptures.

¹⁶⁴ St Augustine, "Book X," in *Confessions*, 196.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁶⁷ McMahon, "From the Happiness of Virtue," 12.

of them made it “impossible for herself,” as George Whicher observed, “to share the religious life of her generation,” and instead “she became an unsteady congregation of one.”¹⁶⁸ Most Dickinson's speakers, referring back to Susan's obituary, “with no creed, no formulated faith,” self-devised their own path to a life worth living. The absence of “a formulated faith” in Aristotelian happiness, however, posed a serious challenge to religious scholars.

Aristotle's virtue theory represented a significant obstacle to Christian thought in the early thirteenth century. Aristotle's works, according to McMahon, depict “an entire intellectual system, forceful, coherent, and self-contained, that made no mention whatsoever of the Christian God;” because of this, Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar, was the one who converted “Aristotle to Christ,” incorporating his works into religious teachings.¹⁶⁹ One of Aquinas's major concerns, influenced by Aristotle's writings, was happiness, and, like St. Augustine, he came to realise that real (or perfect) happiness was not possible in this life. However, on the way to this perfect happiness in heaven, an “imperfect happiness” on earth could be accommodated. According to Howard Mumford Jones, the philosophers' happiness “was fused with the blessedness promised to the righteous.”¹⁷⁰ The opportunity offered by Aquinas' imperfect happiness in this life was followed by Renaissance thinkers and continued by humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who “pounded classicism into Judeo-Christianity and Judeo-Christianity into classicism.”¹⁷¹ This development is visible, for example, in the figure of John Locke in the seventeenth century, who allowed for “virtue in pleasure” as well as “pleasure in virtue.” According to Jones, Locke found “true and solid happiness” in Christianity and society.¹⁷² Besides, his true happiness had to be approached by means of the senses or sensory experiences.

Dickinson's work resonates well with some aspects of Locke's theory because it emphasises sensation, perception, and experience as primary sources of knowledge. However, some of Dickinson's speakers consistently deny that those sensations could intuitively lead to the metaphysical experience of

¹⁶⁸ Cited in Richard Wilbur, “Sumptuous Destitution,” in *The Networked Recluse*, 115.

¹⁶⁹ McMahon, *Happiness*, 126.

¹⁷⁰ Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 81.

¹⁷¹ McMahon, *Happiness*, 150.

¹⁷² Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 93.

God.¹⁷³ Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1689, endorsing "the pursuit of happiness" as well as individuals' legitimate right to pursue it, had a global impact in fields such as philosophy, politics, and education. In his introduction to the essay, Kenneth P. Winkler claims that "it is one of the largest, richest, and most ambitious works in the history of philosophy," and that "it became recommended reading for students almost as soon as it first appeared in print."¹⁷⁴ More importantly, Locke's work introduced the pursuit of happiness into the Western political discourse, arguing that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure the happiness of its citizens.¹⁷⁵ While Locke's pursuit is based on sensitive experience, moral virtue, and divine order, the philosopher also suggested that people could pursue happiness in "various and contrary ways" because there are as many paths to happiness as palates.¹⁷⁶ So, how can happiness be pursued, and how can its right to be pursued be endorsed? For decades to come, this issue would be at the forefront of social, political, and philosophical debates.

The right to pursue happiness gained new force and meaning during the Enlightenment, most likely as a result of the American and French revolutions, influencing the modern understanding of it. According to McMahon, "there were more [essays on happiness] written in the eighteenth century than in any previous age."¹⁷⁷ Starting with Socrates's question "how shall we live?" and continuing with Aristotle's "what is the good of all our actions?," during this time, theological questions like "how can we be saved?" were translated into "how can we be happy?."¹⁷⁸ Nonetheless, happiness in the eighteenth century differed greatly from both pre-Socratic and post-Socratic tragic happiness. In fact, happiness in the eighteenth century placed a strong emphasis on pleasurable feelings, as evidenced by the Enlightenment's principle of utility, which proclaims

¹⁷³ Melanie Hubbard, "Dickinson, Hume, and the Common Sense Legacy," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 31. As expressed by Hubbard, Dickinson's speakers "make a place for the immediate intuition of one's own states, but not of another's, and not of the existence of God." For instance, in "F1438A - Sweet skepticism of the heart" (1877). This poem will be examined in chapter three.

¹⁷⁴ Kenneth P. Winkler, "Introduction," in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), ix.

¹⁷⁵ McMahon, *Happiness*, 188.

¹⁷⁶ McMahon, "The Quest for Happiness," in *The Wilson Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005): 65.

¹⁷⁷ McMahon, "From the Happiness of Virtue," 15.

¹⁷⁸ McMahon, *Happiness*, 209.

the greatest good (pleasure) for the greatest number – led by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. As a result, “happiness as pleasure” imposed “unprecedented demands on places, professions, laws, relationships, governments, and scientific academies,” according to McMahon.¹⁷⁹ Happiness was addressed as something attainable by all in this life, challenging a long-held belief that happiness was rare, a measure of perfection, and nearly a miracle.¹⁸⁰

Before delving into the implications of this revolutionary notion of happiness in Europe and America, it is necessary to return to St. Augustine's tradition, original sin, and its influence in Protestant thought, particularly in Calvin's views on happiness, given that Dickinson grew up and created her work in this context. Martin Luther attempted to reformulate the negative consequences of sin in his concept of earthly happiness. He realised that “it was not a sin to be happy,” but “it was because of sin that we were not.”¹⁸¹ The Reformation's leader then created, in McMahon's words, “a new image of Christian freedom and a new image of human happiness” based on eternal redemption through God's grace.¹⁸² Shifting from institutional to individual responsibility, only divine grace rooted in faith could deliver humans from the world's misery, corruption, and evilness. Thus, the pursuit of earthly happiness was justified by grace. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin agreed that the interpretation of Holy Scripture was the only way to reveal God's truth and will. As a result, the “calling,” or predestined election, became a major concern in Calvinism.

Dickinson's work was informed and permeated by Calvinist faith, and it sought to adapt and manipulate those teachings to suit her own purposes. According to Linda Freedman, “the opacity of Dickinson's poetic texture derives its quality from her desire to accommodate the beyond into the world of experience.”¹⁸³ In the sixteenth century, to some extent, Calvin also attempted to make room in this world for happiness. Although scholars have traditionally

¹⁷⁹ McMahon, “From the Happiness of Virtue,” 15.

¹⁸⁰ For example, consider the Socratic sage, Platonic philosopher, Aristotelian virtuous, Catholic saint, and Calvin's predestined elect.

¹⁸¹ McMahon, *Happiness*, 165.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁸³ Linda Freedman, “Touching the Wounds: Emily Dickinson and Christology,” in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 68.

focused on the most pessimistic aspects of Calvinist doctrine – informed by St Augustine's original sin, Stoic self-discipline, and Platonist dualism – Oberman demonstrates Calvin's major concern with the concept of happiness as well as “the humanistic dimension in Calvin's work.”¹⁸⁴ This is illustrated by the excerpt chosen by Oberman from Charles Trinkaus' essay on Calvin's theology:

I have tried to show how even in his conception of fallen man Calvin also shared the high regard of the Renaissance for man's capacities in the practical and intellectual spheres. Where he differed from his contemporaries, and particularly from the humanists, was in completely abandoning any hope for the spiritual or moral regeneration of mankind by its own efforts, and in believing that the small minority of the Elect, alone, for some inscrutable reason of God's, were decreed from eternity for justification. And they, too, for all that, were merely actors in a cosmic drama in the theatre of the world... [T]his image also was shared with the Neoplatonists, and it was constantly utilized by Shakespeare.¹⁸⁵

According to Oberman, it is paradoxical how two contradictory versions – Calvin's humanist and anti-humanist facets – coexisted in the same mind. In any case, Oberman assures us that “Calvin does not see man as born to 'exist' on the highest level of 'being,' but to be in pursuit of happiness (*felicitas*).... Alienation from God misleads man to believe that this fulfilment can be achieved through emancipation from God.”¹⁸⁶ For Calvin, grace reopens the possibility for individuals to move from misery to happiness after the fall, and it is this evolutionary process in his teachings that may remain hidden. In Oberman's words:

The long-range impact of the debate between Creationism and Darwinism may well help to explain why it could have gone unnoticed that Calvin does teach evolution, his own kind of evolution – in God's act of creation and in man's pursuit of happiness.¹⁸⁷

Indeed, the purpose of God's creation was to “serve mankind as a source and resource of happiness,” and to provide eternal happiness in heaven through

¹⁸⁴ Heiko A. Oberman, “The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin between Humanism and Reformation,” 253.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 253. Cited from Charles Trinkaus, “Renaissance Problems in Calvin's Theology,” in *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism* (Amn Arbor, 1983), 317-39, 332-3.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 265-6.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 268.

grace.¹⁸⁸ Meanwhile, people could enjoy earthly experiences while anticipating and rejoicing at the prospect of a future reward in heaven. Dickinson's work may shed light on this dilemma because, as one of her speakers asserted, "Mortality's Ground Floor / Is Immortality -."¹⁸⁹ Before doing so, given the influence of Locke's philosophy and Calvinist doctrine on Dickinson's context, it is important to briefly examine the place of happiness in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

The eighteenth-century's certainty in proclaiming the right of everyone to pursue happiness, despite the uncertainty of what that pursuit could be, created an ambiguity toward the concept that reached its apogee during the nineteenth century. For instance, the Declaration of Independence endorsed the right to pursue happiness from the start.¹⁹⁰ Jones's essay looks at some of the implications of the pursuit of happiness's influence in American history and culture, noting that "the words appear in a basic American document and the concept underlies many of our activities in religion, government, education, business, amusement, and social psychology today."¹⁹¹ Furthermore, the novel right to pursue happiness was embraced by a large number of states in their legislations:

Approximately two-thirds of the state constitutions adopted by the American people from the beginning of their independence to the beginning of the twentieth century have solemnly stated or guaranteed a right to happiness, or to pursue happiness, or to pursue and obtain happiness and safety, or to pursue happiness in some other connection.¹⁹²

As an example, in Virginia's Constitution of 1776, the pursuit of happiness – phrased as "pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety" – was, as Jones claims, "from the beginning of the revolution guaranteed to a large portion of the American people."¹⁹³ It is worth considering this concept of "the revolution of happiness" through the lens of M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). Regarding how appealing linear narratives may be as well as their influence in

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 272.

¹⁸⁹ "F1250A - If my bark sink –" (1872).

¹⁹⁰ Susan Manning, *Poetics of Character: Transatlantic Encounters 1700-1900* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 161.

¹⁹¹ Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 1.

¹⁹² Ibid., 26.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 13.

the eighteenth-century's idea of progress, Abrams, like Walzer, suggests that "the belief in an imminent revolution of which the effect of the well-being of humanity will be sudden, absolute, and universal" was, on the one hand, a primitive and recurrent way of thinking and, on the other hand, rooted "in the Biblical scheme of apocalyptic history."¹⁹⁴ Thus, the end of the eighteenth century was "another age of apocalyptic expectation" for Abrams.¹⁹⁵ This time, by anticipating universal happiness for all in this life. However, according to Jones, "in asserting the right to pursue happiness or to pursue and obtain happiness and safety, the eighteenth-century men asserted an absolute they failed to define," which produced an ambiguity towards the concept during the nineteenth century.¹⁹⁶

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the midst of this revolutionary and paradoxical moment in the conception of happiness, which was both the oldest and newest phenomenon, as well as at the (soon to be) centre of a fervent debate between creationists and evolutionary supporters. For Leyda:

The total reality of Emily Dickinson's circumstances and relationships (as far as these can be reconstructed) is the best of all levers to pry off accumulated speculation and romancing in order that we may see what sort of woman it was who wrote those poems. If the result seems contradictory and unsatisfactory and impossibly complex, so much the truer.¹⁹⁷

Embracing this idea of Dickinson's nimble believing and the paradoxes of the time in which she lived, this study is based on the hypothesis that the poet possessed one of the most appropriate minds for bringing her readers closer to a contradictory, unsatisfactory, and impossibly complex concept of (true) happiness, which many of her contemporaries would locate only in the afterlife.

Dickinson's Writings Resisting the Theological Interpretation of Happiness

Who has not found
the Heaven - below -
Will fail of it above -
For Angels rent

¹⁹⁴ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 62-3.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁹⁶ Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 99.

¹⁹⁷ Leyda, "Miss Emily's Maggie," 255.

the House next our's,
Wherever we remove -¹⁹⁸

Dickinson's notion of heaven on Earth appears frequently in her writings. These lines were shared by the poet in a letter to her niece Martha Dickinson while she was visiting her friend Sally Jenkins in Pittsfield around 1883, three years before the poet's death. One could argue that the persona does not see her death as an ascension to heaven where God or his servant Angels will be encountered, revealed, and happiness finally attained. On the contrary, she implies that heaven should be found, or must be found, "below," here on Earth and while alive, because that is the time when individuals' possibilities are still open. God's or Angels' residence is not above the stars since this location is not fixed or established; it fluctuates and follows us "wherever we go." If individuals can perceive it as such, this dwelling – or heaven on Earth – could be right next to them. Dickinson introduces this stanza in her letter by writing: "if ever the world should frown on you...tell him from me –."¹⁹⁹ By interpreting "world" as human beings collectively, it seems reasonable to think that Dickinson's words were an attempt to encourage the two girls to trust their own intuition in difficult times and rise above, perhaps, the expectations and requirements of their religious community. Dickinson's niece introduces her recollections of the poet as "reflections of one who for nearly twenty years was part of her daily life" in Martha Dickinson Bianchi's *Emily Dickinson: Face to Face* (1970).²⁰⁰ Actually, Dickinson advised her niece in one of her final letters, when she turned 18 years old, to "be true to yourself, Mattie – and 'Honor and Immortality' – although the first will do – the last is inferential, and I shall be prouder of you than I am, which would be unbecoming –."²⁰¹ Dickinson's verses in the context of the letter refer to the need to be confident in one's own abilities and instincts in order to find a heaven "below" – or to appreciate the value of mortality on Earth. This was undoubtedly

¹⁹⁸ "F1609B - Who has not found the heaven below" (1883).

¹⁹⁹ L845 (1883).

²⁰⁰ Martha Dickinson Bianchi, *Emily Dickinson Face to Face: Unpublished Letters* (Place of publication not identified: Archon Books, 1970), xxi. In "'Except the smaller size –': Aunt Emily's Poetry" in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, 117, Karen Sanchez-Eppler suggests that "while Bianchi's portrayal of her aunt is inevitably biased and romanticized, it matches Dickinson's own claims for the possibilities and poetics of play in their relationships."

²⁰¹ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, note to the text. Moreover, Judith Farr suggests that "the art of poetry" for Dickinson "led both to honor and immortality." *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 23.

Dickinson's concern throughout her lifetime, as her niece confirms, provided that “the nature and destiny of the whole human enterprise grew to be her real preoccupation.”²⁰² Examining Dickinson's early experiences in Amherst – and the concept of happiness in American educational and religious contexts at the time – assists in showing the relevance of Dickinson's particular journey through existence, as well as the ways in which her writings resisted theological, sentimental, and transcendental interpretations of happiness in nineteenth-century America.

During the first half of Dickinson's life, the religious and educational community in Amherst represented a major influence. On the one hand, according to Leyda's *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), “the village of Amherst was famous in the second half of the nineteenth century for having more ministers per capita than any other town in the United States.”²⁰³ On the other hand, as stated in the checklist for the 2017 exhibition *The Networked Recluse: Emily Dickinson's Connected World*, in Amherst:

Dickinson lived almost her entire life in the shadow of Amherst College, which was co-founded by her grandfather and where her father served as treasurer between 1835 and 1873. Life in a small college town brought a steady stream of visitors from far and wide, and Dickinson lived within an intellectually stimulating environment that would later be reflected in her letters and poetry.²⁰⁴

Amherst College was founded in 1821, during the Second Great Awakening, with the purpose of educating young men in the direction of Christian spiritual service. Dickinson's early correspondence, however, depicts her struggle with religious faith during the Amherst religious revival and, in particular, the conversion of most of her family and friends during this time. In a letter to her friend Abiah Root in 1846, for example, the aspiring poet wrote:

I feel that I am sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice, from which I cannot escape & over which I fear my tiny boat will soon glide if I do not receive help

²⁰² Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 54.

²⁰³ Leyda, “Introduction,” in *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), xxviii.

²⁰⁴ Bailey, *The Networked Recluse*, 15.

from above. There is now a revival in College & many hearts have given way to the claims of God.²⁰⁵

Further explored in chapter three, the image of that “awful precipice,” or abyss, will accompany the poet throughout her life and help her confront – instead of the “help from above” that she never received – the abysmal interpretation of a tragic happiness far removed from, as Dickinson confided in that same letter, “the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven.”

Dickinson's resistance to conversion can be traced throughout her early letters, as well as her early thoughts on happiness as a reward in heaven. Dickinson confided in a previous letter to Abiah Root that same year that she “was almost persuaded to be a Christian,” but she did not.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, in response to Abiah's decision to become a Christian, Dickinson stated: “I hope you are a Christian for I feel that it is impossible for anyone to be happy without a treasure in heaven.”²⁰⁷ This statement is, in fact, closely related to St. Augustine's and Calvin's ideas about the impossibility of earthly happiness – at least without God's grace – and the notion of eternal happiness as a reward or “treasure” in heaven. However, Dickinson continued: “does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity.... To think that we must forever live and never cease to be.”²⁰⁸ These passages reveal Dickinson's ambivalence about eternal happiness in heaven as well as unpromising happiness on Earth. Following that, Dickinson admitted to Abiah Root in September of that same year:

I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die.²⁰⁹

For Dickinson, conversion appeared to involve abandoning, downgrading, and yielding her mortality in favour of an unproven and illusory immortality in heaven.

²⁰⁵ L11 (1846).

²⁰⁶ The letter L11 continues: “I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly – and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior.”

²⁰⁷ L10 (1846).

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ L13 (1846).

An event reported in the *Mt. Holyoke Journal* in January 1848 is another example of the poet's opposition to religious conformism. This event captures Dickinson's point of view during her year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Clara Newman Turner wrote in "My Personal Acquaintance with Emily Dickinson" that "Miss Lyon [professor of the academy], during a time of religious interest in the school, asked all those who wanted to be Christians to rise;" Dickinson was "the only one who did not rise," and "in relating the incident to me, she said, 'They thought it queer I didn't rise' – adding with a twinkle in her eye, 'I thought a lie would be queerer'."²¹⁰ A lie would have been even stranger in Dickinson's quest for truth, because, as Wilbur points out, "her chief truthfulness lay in her insistence on discovering the facts of her inner experience."²¹¹ Dickinson wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey in 1850, "Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie [Dickinson's sister] believes she loves, and touches him, and I am standing alone in rebellion, and growing very careless."²¹² As evidenced by Dickinson's work, this was only the beginning of a rebellion against religious conformity and the devaluation of individuals' finite existence – as well as the possibility of a life worth living on earth – in exchange for eternal happiness in heaven, which enabled her to think, write, and act for herself and beyond religious constraints.

Dickinson's struggle with religious faith did not stop her from adjusting and adapting religious concerns to her own needs. As Leyda observes, "Dickinson cut out individual words and portions of entire pages, folded down corners and added botanical specimens" in her copy of the Bible (King James' version).²¹³ In line with Leyda, Jennifer Leader suggests that "the King James Bible is by far the book Dickinson cites most frequently in her work.... in order to repurpose it in service of her own themes."²¹⁴ In Wilbur's "Sumptuous Destitution," the author also illustrates how Dickinson:

Wrote in the metres of hymnody, and paraphrased the Bible, and made her poems turn on great words like Immortality and Salvation and Election. But in her

²¹⁰ Leyda, *The Years and Hours*, 136. *Mt. Holyoke Journal*, entry Jan 17, 1848.

²¹¹ Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," 113.

²¹² L35 (1850).

²¹³ Leyda, *The Years and Hours*, 22.

²¹⁴ Jennifer L. Leader, "'The Finite - furnished / With the Infinite -': Dickinson's Biblical Imaginations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, 481.

poems those great words are not merely being themselves; they have been adopted, for expressive purposes; they have been taken personally, and therefore redefined.²¹⁵

Since Dickinson explicitly stated in a letter to Susan, “Oh Matchless Earth - we underrate the chance to dwell in Thee,”²¹⁶ poetry helped Dickinson in her pursuit to bridge the gap between both her personal experience and her Calvinist inheritance. Similarly, Dickinson claimed in a letter to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross in 1873 that “each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person, for each of us has the skill of life.”²¹⁷ The “skill of life” can be associated with classical thought (pre- and post-Socratic), assuming that “happiness, in their view, was the product of the refined craftsmanship of living - something, at least in part, that we could make on our own.”²¹⁸ Everyone has the potential and ability to live a meaningful life.

Dickinson was thus able to redirect her thought and theological heritage from the sacred to the secular. According to Wendy Martin, Dickinson’s journey “from the polarities of salvation and damnation to the cyclicity of the seasons was arduous and required unusual vision, and her reward was not the revelation of the saints but the revelation of the moment.”²¹⁹ The sections that follow look at how religious’ interpretations of happiness in nineteenth-century America, as Clark Gilpin suggests, “affected the normative patterns of social organization, including gender roles, hierarchies of status, and the aims of education;”²²⁰ and the ways in which Dickinson’s writings consistently adjusted and challenged those theological assumptions.

The 1850s religious revival in Amherst shaped the concept of happiness in educational and religious teaching practices, which were heavily influenced by Jonathan Edwards’s views on grace and predestination. Jennifer Leader argues that the impact of Edwards’ 1774 book – *A History of the Work of Redemption* –

²¹⁵ Wilbur, “Sumptuous Destitution,” 113.

²¹⁶ H B49 (1870s).

²¹⁷ L388 (1873).

²¹⁸ McMahon, *Happiness*, 404.

²¹⁹ Martin, *An American Triptych*, 83.

²²⁰ Gilpin, *Religion around Emily Dickinson*, 9.

helped secure nineteenth-century American Protestant culture.²²¹ According to Susan Howe, “the Puritan consciousness of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) shadows and prefigures that of Emily Dickinson.”²²² Besides, Howe claims that Edwards’s views on grace and predestination were “proved by scientific discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton” – regarding his views of an “ordered universe” – and reinforced by Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and his emphasis on sensation as the source of experience.²²³ In *The Works of President Edwards*, he wrote:

The sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever. It will not only make them more sensible of the greatness and freeness of the grace of god in their happiness; but it will really make their happiness the greater, as it will make them more sensible of their own happiness; it will give them a more lively relish of it...²²⁴

Happiness appears to be even greater when those evil forces, as well as the inevitability of human misery without God's grace – granted only to the predestined, the elect – are acknowledged. God's mysteries may be unravelled by being aware of those forces pulling in opposite directions, of the twofoldness of what can be seen and what reminds us of the “unseen.” In Howe’s words, “everlasting damnation or the slim chance of election to salvation waited beyond an unseen Ocean.”²²⁵ The dogma of salvation, of predestination, implies that the path to eternal happiness may exist in the midst of this macrocosm, as St. Augustine's "happiness of hope" suggested. Edwards, like John Calvin, placed human experience in a cosmic setting through the Holy Scriptures and Christian redemption, allowing Dickinson to perceive a multiplicity of simultaneous experiences and possibilities. The poet noted in a letter to her cousins Norcross in 1873 that “the mysteries of human nature surpass the ‘mysteries of redemption,’ for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite.”²²⁶

²²¹ Leader, “Introduction: A History of the Work of Typology,” in *Knowing, Seeing, Being: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and the American Typological Tradition* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 1.

²²² Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 47.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²²⁴ Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 2.

²²⁵ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 45.

²²⁶ L389 (1873).

As this quotation indicates, Dickinson was more inclined to examine what was visible and thinkable, or what could be experienced through her senses; what was finite, and this was life on Earth:

I have no Life but this -
To lead it here -
Nor any Death, but lest
Dispelled from there -
Nor tie to Earths to come -
Nor Action new -
Except through this Extent
The love of you.²²⁷

One interpretation of this poem is that the speaker does not consider the benefits of an afterlife or the possibilities of an eternal life beyond the one she is currently living on Earth. Although the place in which she lives may or may not bring about the desired results, it is the only option available because there will be no more "Earths to come." As a result, any work, activity, or choice will be contained within the scope of this earthly experience – with the exception of love, which may be extended even if the object of love is no longer present. In 1877, Dickinson included this poem in a letter to her dear friend Samuel Bowles, editor of *The Springfield Republican*. In a previous letter to Bowles that same year, she wrote: "you have the most triumphant Face out of Paradise, probably because you are there constantly, instead of ultimately –."²²⁸ As in the aforementioned verses arguing that heaven is "below," for Dickinson, paradise (or eternal happiness) was not an ultimate destination but a place that was or could have been there all along. The uncertainty of heaven should not overshadow the certainty of this finite existence; in fact, a life worth living can be attained by creating a paradise on Earth.

We can see, therefore, that Dickinson's work rejected the Christianisation of happiness as a promise or reward in the afterlife; the poet used religious and biblical structures in her writings, but only on her own terms. Although Dickinson questioned most Protestant principles, including Original Sin, Keane contends

²²⁷ L515 (1877).

²²⁸ L489 (1877).

that “to wrestle with God, even at times to denounce him, is still to have a relationship, however stormy.”²²⁹ Nevertheless, Dickinson’s paradise “however imperfect, tends to be earthly.”²³⁰ Certainly, the poet borrowed some ideas from Calvinism, particularly Edwards, about the arbitrary nature of the universe, where experiences and possibilities could infinitely multiply, as well as her ability to think in terms of opposites.²³¹ Analogously, Dickinson’s emphasis on sensation, as suggested by Locke’s ideas, was deemed as one of her primary sources of experience. In this regard, and in accordance with tragic interpretations of happiness, Dickinson did not devalue her finite life or regard it as a trial; rather, she celebrated the opportunity to inhabit this world and identified its unpredictability and contingency as the source of its inherent worth. Dickinson’s poetic philosophy enabled her to ponder the possibility of happiness within the span of a lifetime by viewing life in its entirety, including all incidents and events.

Although religious doctrine consistently implied a devaluation of individuals’ finite lives in the hope of a divine reward in heaven, some of Dickinson’s writings insist on humanity’s incalculable worth beyond divinity. “To be human is more than to be divine,” the poet wrote in a letter to Higginson in 1877, “for when Christ was divine, he was uncontented till he had been human.”²³² One could argue that being human and living in this world trumps the condition of being divine. “I fear we think too lightly of the gift of mortality, which, too gigantic to comprehend, cannot be estimated,” Dickinson said later that year in a letter to Maria Whitney.²³³ The poet’s assessment redirects divine intervention into human mediation, which is central to her experience. Even if her mortal existence could not be fully “comprehended,” its endowments were undeniable.

Dickinson, according to Wilbur, saw “experience as a divine gift,” and poetry was “the chief source of her sense of blessedness.”²³⁴ Dickinson’s ability to constantly question her surroundings was made possible by her poetry writing

²²⁹ Keane, *Approving God*, 2.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

²³¹ These notions will be further examined in chapter two and chapter four.

²³² L519 (1877).

²³³ L524 (1877).

²³⁴ Wilbur, “Sumptuous Destitution,” 113.

in search of truth. Dickinson's letter to Susan (in which the poet places the art of guessing at the heart of their experience) also included the following verses:

Opinion is a flitting thing,
But Truth, outlasts the Sun -
If then we cannot own them both -
Possess the oldest One -²³⁵

In this short poem, the speaker suggests that opinion is not absolute knowledge since it could be based on an unproven idea or belief. Truthful facts, on the other hand, will “outlast the sun,” because their veracity will be repeatedly encountered. During Dickinson's lifetime, there was truth, or scientific discoveries that contradicted religious teachings and creationist theories. Dickinson's suspicion of the unreliability of theological beliefs is strengthened by Darwin's theory of evolution, and his emphasis on accident and chance. “It comforts an instinct if another have felt it too,” she wrote to Higginson in 1877.²³⁶

Dickinson, like Melville and Thoreau (among others), contributed to the general rethinking of chance in nineteenth-century American literature. According to Lee, a significant intellectual and cultural transition occurred in the United States during this time and, as a result, chance was progressively viewed as a difficulty that could “be managed but never mastered.”²³⁷ Lee argues that “as chance became increasing[ly] visible in American thought and culture, Dickinson pushes beyond a romantic skepticism most powerfully represented by strands of Emersonian thought to challenge the argument from design.”²³⁸ Darwin's discoveries added some intriguing elements to the ways in which happiness could be interpreted, as well as the extent to which chance and accidents, rather than design, were core elements of the natural world – or process of natural selection.

Dickinson, Darwin, and the Evolution of Happiness

He who understand [a] baboon [will] do more towards metaphysics than Locke.²³⁹

²³⁵ “F1495A - Opinion is a flitting thing” (1879).

²³⁶ L503 (1877).

²³⁷ Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, 4.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²³⁹ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, 410. From Charles Darwin's “Notebook M.”

Charles Darwin, more than any other scientist, cast doubt on providential design by assuming chance to be a governing principal in the natural process. Coupled with new developments in biology, geology, and anthropology, Darwin “profoundly altered” the concept of happiness by revealing the dominant role of emotional and instinctive drives in human decision-making processes.²⁴⁰ As McMahon writes, Darwin’s “instinctive emotions bear directly on our social interactions” and “are bound up closely with happiness;” for this reason, “human beings must struggle with the beast within.”²⁴¹ Following the publication of *On The Origin of Species* in 1859, a revolution in evolutionary theory occurred that swiftly expanded to all domains of knowledge, with Darwin emerging as its central figure. Darwin’s extensive reading and determination to place his ideas about happiness in the perspective of a much wider tradition are further evidenced by the numerous allusions to Coleridge, Locke, Bentham, Mill, Montaigne, Adam Smith, and Kant that can be found in his notes.²⁴² Darwin’s ideas are summarised in his autobiography, which is regarded as a seminal work in the history of happiness.

This study is primarily concerned with two aspects of Darwin’s observations: his disbelief in Christianity and his theory of happiness, which respectively convey his dismissal of the Christianisation of happiness as a reward in heaven. According to Patrick J. Keane, “Dickinson’s creative life coincided with the momentous changes associated with Darwin and Nietzsche, and her poems and letters reflect Darwinian and other challenges to faith in an increasingly secular age;” in fact, religious communities in New England were considerably affected by both *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*.²⁴³ For example, when *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland in a letter: “why the Thief ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us.”²⁴⁴ Dickinson may be implying that Darwin’s discoveries enhance both her views in particular and true knowledge in general by referring to his confidential information as “sweet.” In terms of happiness,

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 410.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 413.

²⁴² Ibid., 412.

²⁴³ Keane, *Approving God*, 13.

²⁴⁴ L359 (1871).

Darwin saw the world as a “bright total,” echoing Dickinson's formulation, and embraced the Solonian maxim of being unable to judge his own existence while still living.

Darwin declares in the opening of his autobiography, “I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life. Nor have I found this difficult, for life is nearly over with me.”²⁴⁵ This statement is closely related to Solon's views since happiness, according to him, can only be judged after death. Darwin is obviously still alive when he said this, but he admitted to imagining himself as a “dead man” reflecting on his own life.²⁴⁶ When recalling his time as a student at Cambridge, Darwin provided a detailed account of how scientific inquiry helped to clarify his doubts about religious dogma. For example, Darwin said of William Paley's *Natural Theology*: “I did not at that time trouble myself about Paley's premises; and taking these on trust I was charmed and convinced by the long line of argumentation.”²⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Darwin stated a few years later of his voyage in the *Beagle*:

By further reflecting that the clearest evidence would be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported, – that the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become.... I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation.²⁴⁸

Darwin's discoveries, given the laws of nature, stood in stark contrast to the miracles assumed to occur in religious dogma, which simultaneously framed and confirmed deistic doctrine. As a result, Darwin's theories reinforced Dickinson's early scepticism towards religious teachings, as evidenced by a letter she addressed to Judge Otis P. Lord in 1882, in which the poet stated: “but we

²⁴⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882: with Original Omissions Restored* (London: Collins, 1958), 21.

²⁴⁶ In line with Lear's suspicion, Darwin's need to imagine himself as a dead man – in order to estimate the value of his life as a whole – challenges Aristotle's virtue ethics and the possibility of determining whether or not a complete life of virtue has been carried out while still living.

²⁴⁷ Darwin, *Autobiography*, 59. According to Crumbley, natural theology was one of the most influential discourses during Dickinson's time. Despite seeing “evidence of a divine plan in every detail of nature,” Dickinson consistently questioned this notion. For instance, in “F710A - Doom is the house without the door” (1863) and “F185A - A wife at daybreak I shall be” (1861). Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen*, 25.

²⁴⁸ Darwin, *Autobiography*, 76, 85. Besides, Darwin evoked this journey as “the most important event in my life and has determined my whole career.”

[Dickinson and her sister Lavinia] thought Darwin had thrown "the Redeemer" away."²⁴⁹

Dickinson was aware of the challenges that Darwin's theories "posed to the tradition of natural theology."²⁵⁰ Dickinson, like Darwin, frequently turned to science for explanations:

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see -
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency!²⁵¹

These verses were sent to Samuel Bowles in 1860. Although religious belief may be considered "convenient" at times, the speaker suggests that science – as in Dickinson's poem on hope as a "strange invention" – may be more helpful and appropriate when immediate action is required. Furthermore, as Crumbley points out, the three variants of this poem show how "Dickinson's interest in magnifying and isolating key terms" was done "as a means of questioning the logic behind primary assumptions."²⁵² It is not surprising, then, that Dickinson's speakers attempted to define "hope" on numerous occasions. Dated in 1863, the final stanza of the poem opening "The winters are so short" is another example showing Dickinson's concern about the reliability of religious teachings:

And so there was a
Deluge -
And swept the World
away -
But Ararat's a Legend - now -
And no one credits Noah -²⁵³

Dickinson's speaker claims that no one believes in Noah, whose ark reached Mount Ararat. According to Eberwein's essay, geological discoveries "upset findings about Noah's ark, despite continuing efforts of scholars to accommodate

²⁴⁹ L750 (1882).

²⁵⁰ Jane Donahue Eberwein, "Outgrowing Genesis? Dickinson, Darwin, and the Higher Criticism," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 48.

²⁵¹ L220 (1860).

²⁵² Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen*, 35.

²⁵³ "F532A - The winters are so short" (1863).

scientific evidence to beliefs.”²⁵⁴ Despite their efforts, miracles were still unlikely to occur.

Although Dickinson did not likely read Darwin's books (as Eberwein suggests), the poet explicitly incorporated his scientific discoveries into her thought and poetry. Dickinson's careful examination of nature resembled Darwin's meticulous surveying of it.²⁵⁵ Besides, Darwin's theories were debated in the newspapers Dickinson read. When *On the Origin of Species* was published, for instance, several articles appeared either attacking or honouring his discoveries. “At the time, Darwin's work was receiving a warmer reception in America than in Britain,” writes Elizabeth Willis in “Dickinson's Species of Narrative” (2009), and “Asa Gray, the great natural historian based at Harvard, was its primary defender.”²⁵⁶ In 1860, *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article by Asa Gray, who zealously supported Darwin's evidence. Like Willis, Eberwein suggests that “with Gray providing Dickinson's introduction to Darwin, it is no wonder that she recognized explosive potential in the new scientific thinking but responded without fear – even, at times, with amusement.”²⁵⁷ Willis brilliantly explores one of these responses in her essay using a poem written by Dickinson three years after Darwin's theory of evolution was published:

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles -
Philosophy, dont know -
And through a Riddle, at the last -
Sagacity, must go -
To guess it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -

²⁵⁴ Eberwein, “Outgrowing Genesis?,” 53.

²⁵⁵ For instance, see *Emily Dickinson's Herbarium: A Facsimile Edition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁵⁶ Elizabeth Willis, “Dickinson's Species of Narrative,” in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 18, no. 1 (2009): 25.

²⁵⁷ Eberwein, “Outgrowing Genesis?,” 56.

Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
Blushes, if any see -
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
And asks a Vane, the way -

Much Gesture, from the
Pulpit -
Sure - Strong Hallelujahs roll -
Narcotics cannot still the
Mouse - Tooth
That nibbles at the soul ²⁵⁸

Given that Dickinson rarely uses periods in her poems, it is worth noting that the first verse declaring that “this world is not the conclusion” ends with a period; thus, Dickinson's speaker ironically or paradoxically concludes the statement declaring that there is more beyond life on Earth. One can then argue that this world is a conclusion or, at the very least, that it cannot be proven otherwise, despite the efforts of countless learned people.

For centuries, the belief in an afterlife – for which many people have died as martyrs – has justified suffering. However, no evidence exists to validate religious faith, no matter how certain it sounds from the pulpit. For Willis:

In Dickinson's poem, we see the force fields of accident and design, colliding like tectonic plates. By introducing ‘Species’ as the subject that follows her first line, Dickinson draws attention to the ways Darwin's narrative of natural selection rhymes with, and offers a narrative alternative to, the beginnings of ‘This World’ as told in Biblical creation narratives.²⁵⁹

Willis implies that by using the indefinite article before “species,” “the human is located relationally and delineated as a category, not as an autonomous entity with a singular history.”²⁶⁰ Instead of being part of a divine order, humans as a species are integrated into the natural world, where the fittest survive. Dated in 1884, the following is another poem examined by Keane:

²⁵⁸ “F373A - This world is not conclusion” (1862).

²⁵⁹ Willis, “Dickinson's Species of Narrative,” 25.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

Apparently with no
surprise
To any happy
Flower
The Frost beheads
it at its play -
In accidental
power -
The blonde Assassin
passes on -
The Sun proceeds
unmoved
To measure off
another Day
For an Approving
God ⁻²⁶¹

Despite the fact that the “happy Flower” is unsurprised by what has happened to it – death by frost – Dickinson's speaker is disappointed by this accidental, playful, and natural occurrence. However, the Sun goes about its business as if nothing had happened, and God seems to approve of it. If there is another reason for this to happen, the speaker is not aware of it. In Keane's reading, this poem highlights the “accident/design duality,” as well as “the conflict between an omnipotent, benevolent God and a violent natural world;” this “happy” but ephemeral flower, like those in other “flower poems,” symbolises “joy, innocence, and a beauty all the more to be cherished because of its transience and vulnerability.” ²⁶² Therefore, this poem suggests that a tragic reading of the world is necessary when assessing the circumstances under which fragile and finite beings must dwell. However, those characteristics are precisely the ones required to value more the fleeting happiness of this world. As illustrated in the poem, one of Dickinson's suspicions was that the workings of nature occur by chance rather than design.

²⁶¹ “F1668A - Apparently with no surprise” (1884).

²⁶² Keane, *Approving God*, 25-6.

Returning to chance and its value in pre-Socratic tragic tradition, or in Lears' formulation, in cultures of chance, Darwin deemed chance "indispensable" provided that "minor chance variations" were "the origin of new species."²⁶³ Darwin's discoveries called into question that linearity leading to progress, which was emphasised in the Exodus story, because natural selection had little to do with progress:

Darwinian 'laws,' even if they could be described precisely, operated apart from any intention or meaning. There was no teleology, except in an exclusively naturalistic sense. Thus from the providentialist point of view, Darwin's 'laws' of natural selection represented a surrender to chance.²⁶⁴

And this "surrender to chance," according to Lears, opened up a world of possibilities; chance could be viewed as a gift rather than a curse, given that Darwinian chance endorsed "a sense of wonder."²⁶⁵ Like Lears, Lee contends that Darwin's "doctrine of chances" was the true revolution of the nineteenth century, and that, more than any of her contemporaries, "Dickinson wonders how it feels to experience chance," provided that:

She enacts a theory of surprise – one that shows how experience leads to skepticism (not confidence), how surprise might (or might not) be poetically rendered, and how it feels to abandon one's self to chance (and the moments that frame its appearance).²⁶⁶

Although Dickinson's wonder will be further examined in chapter four in conversation with existential interpretations of happiness, it is worth noting how Darwin's discoveries favoured Dickinson's reflections regarding the connection between chance and wonder, as well as the enmity between chance and Providence:

Sunset at Night - is natural -
But Sunset on the Dawn
Reverses Nature - Master -
So Midnight's - due - at Noon -

²⁶³ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 180.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 183.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 184.

²⁶⁶ Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, 181.

Eclipses be - predicted -
And Science bows them in -
But do One face us
suddenly -
Jehovah's Watch - is wrong ⁻²⁶⁷

In Lee's reading, "turning Paley's watchmaker analogy against natural theology.... Dickinson notes that natural laws can always be undone by sudden anomalies." ²⁶⁸ In opposition to Aristotle's *Poetics*' argument about "well constructed plots," Dickinson's speakers insist that infinite plots emerge, create, and recreate as individuals live their lives because "no amount of experience can master chance." ²⁶⁹ Happiness could be tamed if chance could be mastered; however, historical, literary, and philosophical evidence suggests that this has not yet occurred.

Although Darwin claims that the following statement cannot be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, it appears plausible that "survival of the fittest" also includes "survival of the happiest:"

According to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails, though this would be very difficult to prove. If the truth of this conclusion be granted, it harmonises well with the effects which we might expect from natural selection. If all the individuals of any species were habitually to suffer to an extreme degree they would neglect to propagate their kind; but we have no reason to believe that this has ever or at least often occurred. Some other considerations, moreover, lead to the belief that all sentient beings have been formed so as to enjoy, as a general rule, happiness. ²⁷⁰

Darwin's notion of happiness is based on the premise that there is no inherent meaning to it because our universe can be understood as "the result of blind chance or necessity." ²⁷¹ For this reason, each individual should create her or his

²⁶⁷ "F427A - Sunset at night is natural" (1862).

²⁶⁸ Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, p. 195. According to Lee, another example of Dickinson's speaker presenting a reality that is far from Providential design and destiny, and instead is rooted in the contingency of existence is "F1578A - Meeting by accident" (1882).

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 196. Other examples from Lee's argument include: "F610A - From cocoon forth a butterfly" (1863) and "F926A - I stepped from plank to plank" (1865).

²⁷⁰ Darwin, *Autobiography*, 88.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 92.

own meaning. Directing one's own life and actions toward an externally determined goal that promises a future reward – as in theological interpretations of happiness – is preposterous to Darwin. Individuals should instead “follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones;” as a result, if individuals act “for the good of others,” they “will receive the approbation of [their] fellow men and gain the love of those with whom [they live]; and this latter gain undoubtedly is the highest pleasure on this earth.”²⁷² Similarly, Darwin emphasises the importance of higher impulses, which differ from sensual passions, and the fulfilment that humans can achieve by following their inner convictions.

Drawing on Darwin's observations, there is no doubt that Dickinson valued and followed her inner convictions throughout her life, and that the poet frequently encouraged her loved ones to do the same. Dickinson, for example, wrote to Samuel Bowles Jr. on the occasion of his engagement in 1883:

To ask of each that gathered Life, Oh! Where did it grow, is intuitive. That you have answered this Prince Question to your own delight, is joy to us all –

Lad of Athens, faithful be

To Thyself,

And Mystery -

All the rest is Perjury -²⁷³

Dickinson's speaker advises people to disregard any external assumptions as deceptive and insincere as long as they are honest with their own intuitions, instincts, and experiences. Páraic Finnerty's account connects “the Prince Question” to Hamlet's “to be or not to be” soliloquy on the meaning of life. This question, according to Finnerty, “is related to the mystery at the heart of the human condition;” thus, “Dickinson's sense that Hamlet epitomises the mystery at the heart of humanity” should be “all human beings must be ‘faithful’ to.”²⁷⁴ If the question can be answered at all, it will be done solely by each individual. Similarly, the intuition required to answer this question may be related to Darwin's

²⁷² Ibid., 94.

²⁷³ L865 (1883).

²⁷⁴ Páraic M. Finnerty, “‘Stratford on Avon – Accept us All:’ Emily Dickinson’s Shakespeare,” (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2000), 253. Since I was not able to access or acquire Páraic Finnerty's *Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare*, I will use his PhD dissertation instead.

impulses and instincts. As the speaker claims, individuals can avoid deception and fraud by being truthful to themselves, to their higher impulses, and to the fact that some things will never be revealed to them.

Given Darwin's point of view, Dickinson may have considered the love of her family and friends to be the highest gratification, as she pondered in a previously mentioned letter to Elizabeth Holland, in which she asked whether there was more to life than love and death. The love of others enriches human experiences and allows people to appreciate the value of life. By loving, caring for, and benefiting others, people can participate in the possibility of earthly happiness. One noteworthy example can be found in this letter to her beloved sister-in-law Susan, in which the poet expresses her delight at "the opportunity to serve those who are mine, and to soften the least asperity in the path which ne'er 'ran smooth'."²⁷⁵ Dickinson may have felt delight when she was able to assist her friends and family. Like Darwin, the poet considers loving others to be intrinsically valuable, as evidenced by this fragment written to Susan: "perhaps I can love you anew, every day of my life, every morning and evening - Oh if you will let me, how happy I shall be!"²⁷⁶ And, as Darwin claims, by loving anew, by being affectionate to others, individuals can gain this affection from others, which is the highest pleasure on this Earth for him. In another letter to Elizabeth Holland in 1856, Dickinson wrote, "pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world *insane*, and love me if you will, for I had rather *be* loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven."²⁷⁷ According to Martin, "love is at the core of her cosmology, and that for her, being loved by friends far surpassed power on earth or in heaven."²⁷⁸ Therefore, it is no surprise that Dickinson regarded loving and being loved as one of the highest delights in life because she preferred to "be loved" rather than have a position or reward that many people seek in their pursuit of happiness.

Darwin's theory of evolution, which demonstrated the fictitiousness of theological speculation in light of scientific evidence, proved to be a reassuring element for Dickinson's previous reservations on the subject. Furthermore, before

²⁷⁵ H L4 (1853). *Dickinson Electronic Archive* access (<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/>).

²⁷⁶ H L22 (1852).

²⁷⁷ L185 (1856).

²⁷⁸ Martin, *American Triptych*, 162.

moving on to the next chapter, there is a specific feature emphasised at the end of Darwin's autobiography on which Dickinson may have agreed:

If I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied could thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.²⁷⁹

When it comes to how poetry made her feel, Dickinson would undoubtedly agree with Darwin's desire to read more poetry, given how she articulated her feelings to Higginson: "if I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?." ²⁸⁰ On the other hand, one can argue that the weakening and strengthening of the emotional component of happiness has played a significant role in its evolution and transformation from classical to modern accounts.

To sum up, though pre- and post-Socratic classical account of happiness or a life well lived differed in their emphasis placed on fortune (in the former), and virtue (in the latter), happiness, or a life well-lived, was considered an objective and rational condition comprising the heterogeneity of experiences within the totality of any finite existence, and it occupied a privileged position as the highest and governing idea. The Judeo-Christian tradition reshaped this idea by viewing happiness as an affective state and emphasising negative emotions such as suffering. Similarly, it did not take into account the length of a lifetime, because happiness was envisioned as a reward in heaven after a period of trial on earth. Although these two interpretations of happiness are quite different, they do have one thing in common: in both cases, happiness was understood to be the inherent purpose of a person's life (or afterlife) and only attainable by "a happy few," as it was nearly a miracle. The right to pursue happiness was made "available" to everyone during the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, the failure to define this during the eighteenth century resulted in an ambiguous reception of the concept in the

²⁷⁹ Darwin, *Autobiography*, 139. Dickinson's Eternal Now and Nietzsche's Eternal Return, as discussed in chapter four, ponder the possibility of living again. Unlike Darwin's wish to live it somehow differently, this idea assumes that it should be exactly the same life.

²⁸⁰ L342A (1870).

nineteenth century. By then, the concept of happiness had engendered hostility among its adherents as it had lost its privileged position. In Dickinson's context, Calvinism located the best happiness in the Christian heaven by means of God's grace. This procedure allowed for the notion of chance embedded within happiness's possibility to be completely neglected in light of a divine Providence. Darwin's discoveries, however, restored chance into happiness's agenda and scientifically called into question Christianity's foundational claims.

Taking this history into account, the following chapter investigates how, in the nineteenth century, particularly in the United States, the sentimentalised idea of happiness was rooted in the literary tradition of the trial narrative form, which placed emphasis on negative psychological states, and how Dickinson's views consistently challenged it. Even though Dickinson's poetic strategies included both theological and sentimental structures, the poet's views on happiness were more closely related to pre-Socratic tragic traditions, such as the Solonian interpretation, that emphasised the value of contingency, indeterminacy, and mortality.

Chapter 2: Dickinson's Poetic Resistance to the Reification of Happiness in Nineteenth-Century American Sentimentalism

The Service without
Hope -
Is tenderest, I think -
Because 'tis unsustained
By stint - Rewarded
Work -

Has impetus of Gain -
And impetus of Goal -
There is no Diligence
like that
That knows not an
Until -¹

In this poem, Dickinson's speaker suggests that any action, decision, or choice would be "tenderest" if performed without expectation of future reward; that is, if done for its own intrinsic value. When the activity itself is rewarding for the individual's well-being, the emphasis is on the process rather than the outcome. However, this poem warns the reader that when the ends justify the means, most of our actions are devalued because they are not performed "without hope," but in anticipation of future gain. Similarly, the ends subjugate not only the process or means, but also the present time in pursuit of a better future. Furthermore, "services" are performed to benefit others rather than for a next-world life. In this case, any service would be more valuable if it could not be sustained. Why is "unsustained" service more tender than sustained service? One could argue that something "unsustained" lacks a foundation, making it precarious and thus "tender," or fragile. The syntactic repetition of "impetus," on the other hand, may imply how difficult it is for the speaker to avoid it. Whereas "impetus" is motivated, and motivation seeks reward elsewhere, there is a presentness and intrinsicness in "diligence." Though the speaker may find it difficult to act without motives,

¹ "F880A - The service without hope" (1864). Dickinson offers an alternative word in the fifth verse, "end" instead of "stint."

realising that she will benefit from doing so is the first step toward happiness. Cristanne Miller's analysis of this poem emphasises how people's actions, as the speaker implies, are generally performed in pursuit of a goal or within "the boundaries of motivation and impetus, of hope;" what the poem praises, instead, is "action that is performed solely for its own benefit."² This is "rewarded work" because the work is rewarding in and of itself, and when this occurs, means become ends and vice versa. Performing poetry was intrinsically rewarding for Dickinson's speaker. In suggesting that actions performed for their own benefit are momentous, this poem refuses to reify happiness.

The first chapter looked at how theological interpretations of happiness can be interpreted as devaluing people's finite lives by emphasising happiness as a reward in heaven, and how Dickinson's writings challenged this idea. It also looked at some of Dickinson's speakers' attitudes toward chance and how this phenomenon has been perceived historically as both a necessity and an element of human life that is impossible to master. Building on these historical contexts and philosophical questions, this chapter compares and contrasts Dickinson's work with other nineteenth-century literary interpretations of happiness, particularly within the genre of sentimentalism. Moreover, this chapter seeks out the narrative evolution of happiness from the Solonian concept, which is rooted in tragic form, to the sentimental concept, which is rooted in trial narrative form. This sentimental interpretation, I argue, bears a significant impact on our current conception of happiness. Nowadays, it is the need to predetermine happiness, to link an action or doing with a subsequent expectation of reward – an idea inherited and heavily influenced by theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness – that limits people rather than giving them the opportunity to live actively. In line with Solonian happiness, many of Dickinson's poems imply that actions are "tenderest" when performed without expectation of reward – done for their own sake. Sentimental approaches, by contrast, prevent the possibility of living actively in the present, which may lead to a happy life, by focusing on actions' future outcomes.

² Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar*, 84.

Therefore, this chapter argues for Dickinson's poetics of possibility as an alternative to the disadvantages of reifying happiness in nineteenth-century American sentimentalism, and its need to act in search of external compensation. Probing the ways in which theological interpretations of happiness devalue individuals' mortality by viewing their lives as a necessary trial before eternal happiness in heaven, I trace the extent to which Dickinson's writings, while rejecting the Christianisation of happiness, value the contingency of life, the gift of mortality, and the possibility of happiness in this life. Dickinson's works challenge and resist the affective or sentimental interpretation of happiness – its emphasis on happiness as a reward and the privilege attributed to negative affects. Dickinson's poems, letters, and letter-poems, on the other hand, restore the privilege granted to the idea of happiness in classical accounts while bringing the value of contingency and mortality into sharp focus – as in tragic interpretations of the idea.

As shown in the previously mentioned envelope poem opening "In this short life that only lasts an hour" the contingency of existence is rarely overlooked in Dickinson's oeuvre.³ The poet's speaker's concerns gradually allude to what is up to us – or "within our power" – in this life, and what escapes human agency, or "what befalls us," in Solon's words. Likewise, the speaker wonders if we can tell the difference between these two options. Post-Socratic philosophy, for example, claimed that through rational behaviour, or virtuous activity, individuals could achieve complete control over their lives by transforming contingency into agency, chance into reason, in any given situation. Despite the necessity of securing happiness in the face of chance through the exercise of – or the implementation of – models based on reason and virtue over centuries, this contingency has been preserved in the root of the word, hap-piness – happen, perhaps, mishap – which means "unfortunate event." According to Lears' *Something for Nothing*:

Happiness, in short, has long been linguistically dependent on chance.... Happiness is something that happens to you; it cannot be manufactured or controlled. That is the insight at the heart of the culture of chance, and that

³ "F1292A - In this short life that only lasts an hour" (1873).

(perhaps) is why it has survived so long – a counterweight to the powerful modern faith in the systematic pursuit of happiness.⁴

In Solon's views, "wholeness, plenitude, completeness, and perfection are impossible to achieve."⁵

Dickinson's speaker, like Solon, claims that the idea of being able to control any imaginable situation through rational behaviour, or the notion of completeness in an eternal happiness in heaven where everything, at long last, will be "within our power," is neither comforting nor desirable:

Their Hight in Heaven com -
forts not -

Their Glory - nought to me -
'Twas best imperfect - as it
was -

I'm finite - I cant see -

The House of Supposition -
The Glimmering Frontier that
skirts the Acres of Perhaps -
To me - shows insecure -

The Wealth I had - contented me -
If 'twas a meaner size -
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow Eyes -

Better than larger values -
That show however true -
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading – "I dont know" -⁶

The speaker does not find solace in the height and glory of heaven in the first stanza, or, in other words, this individual will not be at ease in a place where there is nothing else to be questioned due to its strangeness, or to be improved due to its imperfectness. Perfection and completion appear impossible to achieve as

⁴ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 38.

⁵ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 53.

⁶ "F725A - Their hight in heaven comforts not" (1863).

finite beings, and it is this impossibility that provides a variety of chances for individuals to exert themselves within this process. Imperfectness implies openness, and it is this openness that is required in a life where one cannot predict not only what is going on in the world, but also how people will react in a given set of circumstances.

Dickinson's poem revolves around the speaker's inability to see due to her finitude and, as a result, her openness to possibility. In the second stanza, the speaker reveals that what appears to be foundational is actually all "Supposition" and "Perhaps" on this side of death's "Frontier." As a result, from this limited perspective, control appears to be undesirable for her. It may appear different on the other side of the border, but here is where the persona is located. The third and fourth stanzas may imply that, while the riches of this earthly reality may appear smaller to some, they seem to be more convenient to the speaker than the "larger values" that an afterlife promises. Regardless of how strongly people believe in the promises of heaven, their lives are filled with "perhaps-ness," as the root of the word happiness implies. Therefore, no one actually "knows" their veracity, and not knowing is the speaker's final verdict.

Dickinson's poetics of possibility stand out as radically indeterminate. In his analysis of the Solonian interpretation of happiness, Soni's *Mourning Happiness* points out that "not only is it impossible to say in advance what will happen in the course of a person's life, but it is also impossible to specify in advance what will constitute happiness for that person;" for this reason, "the content of what constitutes happiness must remain necessarily and radically indeterminate," according to Solon.⁷ Drawing on this idea, another poem claims that this indeterminacy is both valuable and required:

How Human Nature
dotes
On what it cant
detect -
The moment that a
Plot is plumbed

⁷ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 54.

Its meaning is extinct –⁸

Dickinson's speaker, echoing Darwin's evolutionary terminology ("human nature" and "extinct"), recognises that this indeterminacy – that cannot be detected or known – is what individuals should value because when a plot or circumstance is "plumbed" or determined, it loses its current potentiality.

Although outcomes may appear more attainable and secure once they are reified, they are actually devalued. McIntosh's *Nimble Believing* delves into the ambiguous nature of the unknown in Dickinson's writings as both "needed and dreadful."⁹ The poet stated in a letter to her cousins Norcross in 1876 that "the unknown is the largest need of the intellect," and this is because the impulse that enables people to keep guessing and wondering is rooted in what has not yet been – or cannot yet be – discovered, identified, or determined.¹⁰ Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law Susan that they would not feel "at home" in a life that no longer questions because, as her speaker assures us here: "The Riddle that we guess / We speedily despise -."¹¹ In other words, the conditions we know do not appear to be as appealing as those that will be known or may always remain unknown. Because it is impossible to predict what will constitute a life worth living, each situation must be examined individually. According to Soni's book, unlike categorical and normative representations of happiness in Kant's and Hegel's philosophies, Solonian happiness is based on contingency and indeterminacy, with the value of each event or incident being measured individually provided that "the judgement of happiness subsumes within it every possible concern."¹² According to Albert Gelpi, Dickinson's writings "express not philosophic generalizations but the measure of a particular moment."¹³ For example, in this poem's first stanza:

"Morning" - means "Milking"
To the Farmer -
Dawn - to the Appenine -

⁸ "F1440A – How Human Nature dotes" (1877). Dickinson proposes a variation in the last verse: "Prospective is extinct." instead of "Its meaning is extinct –."

⁹ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 123.

¹⁰ L471 (1876).

¹¹ "F1180A – The riddle that we guess" (1870). This poem will be further analysed in chapter four.

¹² Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 61.

¹³ Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of a Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 69.

Dice - to the Maid.
"Morning" means - just - Chance
To the Lover -
Just - Revelation -
To the Beloved -¹⁴

"Morning" has different meanings for each individual depending on the situation, according to Dickinson's speaker. As stated in another poem, "Morning is due / to all -," but the concreteness of it manifests itself uniquely in each circumstance.¹⁵ Even if morning means "milking" to the farmer, it is impossible to predict whether the process will run smoothly, or even if it will run at all. Morning, as Dickinson's speaker suggests, means only "chance" to the lover, and the specific shape or configuration of that chance will not be revealed beforehand. "Morning" is a contingent experience, not just a contingent word. It is "dice to the maid," and it is dice to all of us. Like "How Human Nature Dotes," these verses are concerned with meaning-making in language and the ways in which meaning relentlessly fluctuates.

In terms of happiness, even though days' routines may be similar, they are never identical, and this uniqueness is critical when emphasising the presentness of time. When happiness is not predetermined, each morning represents a new opportunity to venture. Consequently, the narration of happiness, which encompasses the totality of individuals' finite lives, evades resolution, since this narrative is required for evaluating, or judging, what a life worth living is. The Solonian conception, however, "allows us to glimpse the reasons for the extraordinary privilege of happiness in classical thought," which connects to "the experience of finitude, mortality, and mourning" because "only death allows us to speak of a 'whole' life in a nonmetaphysical way."¹⁶ As Dickinson wrote in a letter to Higginson in 1870, "Shortness to live has made me bold."¹⁷ Life is sweet because of its brevity, which is constantly under siege by death.

Like Dickinson's unknown as both needed and dreadful, Solonian happiness is surrounded by a perspective of death that is both needed – in order

¹⁴ "F191A - "Morning" means "milking" to the farmer" (1861).

¹⁵ "F1621A - Morning is due to all" (1883).

¹⁶ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 29.

¹⁷ L352 (1870).

to estimate life – and dreadful – when mourning a loved one. Even if the possibility of a life worth living remains exceptional, or nearly a “miracle,” according to Solon, “the complexity, heterogeneity, and difficulty of living should not render happiness impossible *a priori*.”¹⁸ Soni's account draws attention to this paradoxical association in Solon's proverb; it is by linking happiness to death, or by valuing individuals' finite existence as such – for its mere finitude – that the Athenian poet “places within reach a happiness appropriate for beings destined to death like us.”¹⁹ Similarly, Dickinson's poetics place the possibility of happiness within reach by viewing mortality as both necessary and terrifying. What Dickinson's writings bestowed is not “the gift of happiness” – because no one should be called “happy” before death – but the possibility of happiness through “the gift of mortality,” since human beings are, as one of her poems assured, “Finite - to fail, but / infinite - to Venture -.”²⁰ Although people's time is limited, the opportunities to venture are limitless.

Dickinson's writings are concerned with the experience of life as an unpredictable and continuous process in which the only constant is change. “The mind is such a new place, last night feels obsolete,” the poet wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Holland in 1870.²¹ Soon after, Dickinson said to her cousin Louise Norcross: “No part of mind is permanent. This startles the happy, but it assists the sad.”²² This statement parallels Solon's proverb in some ways, because being satisfied or “happy” today does not guarantee satisfaction tomorrow. Similarly, because future experiences cannot be predicted, an individual cannot be pronounced “unhappy” while still alive. Dickinson's concern about circumstances beyond our control and the impact of chance in a life worth living was shared by Greek tragic poets and pre-Socratic thinkers such as Solon, as shown in “how many schemes may die.”²³ According to Nussbaum's *Fragility*, the question of chance should be of great importance to individuals at all times. However, it is worth noting how this question, or concern for the question, appears to have been erased at specific moments in history. Nussbaum, for example, associates this

¹⁸ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ “F952A - Finite to fail but infinite to venture” (1865).

²¹ L354 (1870).

²² L362 (1871).

²³ “F1326A - How many schemes may die” (1874).

issue with “the enormous influence of Kantian ethics on our intellectual culture,” which “has led to a long-standing neglect of these issues in work on Greek ethics.”²⁴ However, the themes of chance and possibility are central to Dickinson's poetics and way of life.

As Dickinson's persona implies in the following poem, a life worth living may fit within individuals' mortal existence by embracing and valuing life's indeterminacy until the moment of death – while considering the question of happiness at every stage of it:

Not knowing
when the Dawn
will come - I
open every Door
Or has it Feathers
like a Bird
or Billows like a
Shore —²⁵

Assuming that “Dawn” is death (which is only one interpretation), the speaker values death's unpredictability because it reminds her that our days are precious precisely because they are limited. Given that it is impossible to predict when those days will end, each day should be lived as if it were the last. The speaker's active disposition and awareness of individuals' finite condition allows her to value each moment and seek every possibility before the “Dawn will come” by opening “every door.” When she releases her grip on time, it appears she is also releasing her preconceived notion of what “Dawn” is; it could be a bird or a shore, for example. When we stop looking ahead, this dawn could signify a new beginning.²⁶ This interpretation is consistent with what Dickinson wrote in a letter to an unknown correspondent in 1875: “sweet it is as Life, with its enhancing Shadow of Death.”²⁷ The certainty of death – which encompasses the possibility

²⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 4.

²⁵ “F1647A - Not knowing when the dawn will come” (1884).

²⁶ Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 8. According to Farr, “it is Sunrise or Dawn, that Christian symbol of resurrection presented most dramatically in the gospels of Easter.” Although Farr suggests that *dawn*, for Dickinson, “signifies passage from the grave into eternal life;” I argue that in this poem *dawn* signifies a new beginning or new possibility here on Earth.

²⁷ Thomas Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, vol 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 545.

of tragedy – enhances the gift of mortality. Soni's account reflects on Solonian happiness as exemplified in Nietzsche's Eternal Return, which may also parallel Dickinson's Eternal Now.²⁸ Based on the interconnectivity of Solon's and Nietzsche's views, Soni poses the following question: “would one choose to live this life over and over again, forever, without the slightest alteration in any of its details?;” to answer yes to this question implies Nietzsche's “ultimate confirmation and seal” as well as Solonian's judgement “that pronounces this life happy.”²⁹

In opposition to Dickinson's and Solon's views on happiness as encompassing the wholeness of existence, being radically indeterminate, and underlining chance, mortality, and finitude within its boundaries, eighteenth-century literature – by means of the trial narrative form – transforms happiness into a discontinuous, reify positive emotional experience. In light of this transformation, the following sections examine the long-term effects that the trial narrative form had on nineteenth-century antipathy toward happiness. By the end of this chapter, I link the nineteenth-century tendency to privilege negative emotions in American sentimental literature to the characteristics of the trial narrative form, which are also linked to the Christianisation of happiness. This chapter demonstrates that Dickinson's poems and letters, as well as the works of other authors who influenced the poet's writings, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot, refused to find comfort in theological and sentimental interpretations of a life worth living because, by promising a better life (or reward) in the future, they neglected the life that presently is.

Dickinson's Speakers Opposing the Trial Paradigm

“Tomorrow” - whose location
The Wise
deceives
Though its
hallucination

²⁸ This topic will be further explored in chapter four. Nietzsche's Eternal Return typifies the highest affirmation of life, or happiness, on the assumption that an individual would choose to live his or her life again if given the opportunity to do so. Conversely, Dickinson's Eternal Now is based on the idea that, as expressed in one of her poems, “F690A - Forever - is composed of Nows –” (1863).

²⁹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 62.

Is last
that leaves -³⁰ (First stanza)

Dickinson's speaker underscores the delusion of tomorrow – its deceptive nature – as well as, paradoxically, its constant presence, because it is the “last that leaves.” However, the shift in temporality in happiness’s interpretation, from present to future time, as well as its reification, had long-term consequences for subsequent representations of the concept in Western philosophy. On the contrary, numerous Dickinson poems express how important the present moment is in the context of life as a whole. Within this totality, the conditions and elements of a life worth living can be encountered, provided that, as the opening line of another poem suggests, “Forever - is composed of Nows -.”³¹ In line with Solonian happiness, for some of Dickinson's speakers, every “now” matters, and the “nows” of tomorrow will be experienced “presently” in their due time. Individuals should not place their expectations in the future, as theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness do, because the luck of tomorrow, or the chances that tomorrow will bring, cannot be predicted today.

To examine Dickinson's writings' resistance to the affective interpretation of happiness ingrained in sentimentalism, where happiness becomes merely a positive emotional experience, it is necessary to understand the processes by which the trial narrative form suspends or postpones the question of happiness, which is the most fundamental question for Dickinson's speakers. By suspending this question through a section of the narrative, happiness becomes irrelevant, and its temporality is altered. As mentioned in chapter one, the effect of the phenomenon of happiness in the eighteenth century was to place the pursuit of the idea higher on the Western political agenda than ever before, while anticipating a new era in which human happiness seemed to reclaim the privileged position that it occupied in classical interpretations of a flourishing life – prior to the Christianisation of the concept. According to Soni, in contrast to the Solonian idea, whose views distinguish between the experience of happiness – which cannot be undergone within our lifetime due to the possibility of tragedy –

³⁰ “F1417A – ‘Tomorrow’ whose location” (1877) was included in a letter to Elizabeth Holland in anticipation of Dickinson’s brother return: “Austin will come tomorrow.” L490 (1877).

³¹ “F690A - Forever is composed of nows” (1863).

and factors that contribute to happiness – which are present at any time – the sentimental idea reifies the experience of happiness as a reward at the end of a trial, through the trial narrative form. This trial, or the circumstances that individuals must endure for the sake of happiness, is regarded as necessary. Paradoxically, it is during times of trial that the concern for happiness disappears.³² The question of happiness, according to Dickinson's speakers and Soni's argument, cannot be "suspended" because it is "a question of value in general," and every occurrence is significant when considering it.³³

Soni's account sees the trial narrative form as the pivotal mechanism involved in the eighteenth-century transformation of the concept of happiness. To some extent, during a portion of the narration, the story's characters must overcome trials and tests in order to be worthy of the reward of happiness at the end.³⁴ For this reason, the question of happiness is postponed during the trial, and by suspending the question during a portion of the narration, its absolute precondition – its highest privilege within the entirety of the narrative – is also postponed. So, for the time being, the question of happiness becomes as unimportant as happiness itself. Furthermore, Soni reminds his readers that, while the trial narrative "is projected back indiscriminately onto the Christian tradition of biographical narration" – as in St. Augustine's *Confessions* – it was hardly considered an "autonomous narrative form" back then; it is only in the eighteenth century, and throughout the literature of the period, that this autonomy is attained.³⁵ By devaluing the concept of happiness, as Soni claims, the trial narrative alters "the very frames of interpretation," resulting in "a transformation at the deepest level of the cultural and narrative imaginary of the West."³⁶ Many Dickinson's speakers warn her readers that the concern for happiness should not be reduced to ashes within a portion of the narrative – or similarly, within a portion of individuals' lives – and that the force of happiness, and its stimulus, should be

³² The difference between the mechanisms of the trial narrative form in sentimental and theological interpretations of happiness is that in the former, the period of trial ends before death since people will be able to experience happiness's reward sometime in the future. In the latter, the period of trial expands throughout individuals' mortal life, provided that happiness will be experienced in heaven.

³³ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 178.

³⁴ Some of the major determinations of happiness in nineteenth-century America will be further analysed throughout the chapter.

³⁵ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

within reach every now and then; on the assumption that tomorrow deceives the wise.

In contrast to some of Dickinson's speakers' perception of all moments being relevant and contained within the totality of experience, and pivotal to the reification of happiness in sentimental literature, the trial narrative creates the illusion of happiness's suspension. On the one hand, this is achieved by shifting its temporality and deferring its "reward" to the future, and on the other, by relegating happiness to the realm of emotion. According to Soni, the trial narrative as an autonomous form found its way through the discourse of sentimentalism, particularly in early sentimental novels, and was central to the transformation of the idea of happiness in the eighteenth century. With a few exceptions, these early novels are the first to devalue the classical interpretation of a life worth living by temporarily suspending the question of happiness.³⁷ These early novels are biographical in nature and are linked to Puritan biography and imagination; additionally, they established a link between the trial narrative form and "the narratives of suffering and trial that pervade Christian traditions of spiritual biography."³⁸

Dickinson was intimately acquainted with these stories, which had a significant impact on both her intellectual environment and poetic philosophy. One of the most famous examples was Richardson's best-selling sentimental novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. According to the author's preface, "the tendency of fiction to moral decay can be ameliorated by its potential for moral instruction;" specifically, on virtuous sensibility.³⁹ James Chandler quotes Isabel Rivers' chronology of British theological and ethical thought in *An Archaeology of Sympathy* (2013), which traces "first a partial displacement of grace by reason and then a partial displacement of grace and reason by sentiment."⁴⁰ From the possibility of happiness in tragic accounts, to the happiness of virtue in post-Socratic accounts, and then from the happiness of hope in religious accounts to

³⁷ Furthermore, some of these eighteenth-century novels will have a bearing on, and influence over, sentimental novels in nineteenth-century America.

³⁸ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 212.

³⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender, and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43.

⁴⁰ James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy the Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema*. (Chicago; Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3.

the right to pursue happiness during the Enlightenment; sentimental narratives endorsed a prospective experience of happiness as pleasure from an affective perspective by means of virtuous trial. In Pamela's case, for example, to preserve her chastity requires this kind of trial. If she can endure it successfully, as the novel's title suggests, her virtue will be rewarded. As Soni points out, "the trial narrative asserts that the greater violence, injustice, and suffering Pamela is willing to endure for the sake of her chastity, the more assurance we have in asserting that she is virtuous."⁴¹ Similarly, the more suffering she endures, the more confident readers will be in asserting that she is happy in the end.⁴²

In the trial narrative, then, deprivation and suffering are made intrinsically valuable rather than happiness. More specifically, the question of happiness becomes irrelevant during the trial's indefinite duration, and the experience of happiness is determined and reified as "a thing that arrives in its plenitude, after the trial, exists outside narrative, and can be experienced more or less directly."⁴³ According to Soni, this is "the collapse of the hermeneutic of happiness," since "the presence of the reward decides the question of happiness for us, in place of us, without us. We are merely observers of the experience of happiness, with no active role in the judgement."⁴⁴ Furthermore, the narrative of a life worth living in the present is subordinated to the expectation of the future reward. By shifting from means to ends, the narrative of happiness's "incidents" becomes irrelevant, because it is the "rewarded events" that are sought after and treasured. In other words, Dickinson's "service without hope," or the possibility of action performed for its own intrinsic value, vanishes completely. Given their awareness of the link between theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness, Dickinson's speakers actively opposed learning by trial, and questioned the shift from the momentousness of "the question of happiness" in this life to the presentness of "the sacrifice of happiness" in pursuit of future reward.

⁴¹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 196.

⁴² Ibid., 240. What Soni implies is that the paradox of the trial narrative where happiness "both matters and does not matter" is highly influential in other trial narratives, such as Richardson's *Clarissa*, Rousseau's *Julie*, and Kant's ethics. Likewise, "one consequence of the denigration of happiness in modernity is the compensatory privileging of negative affect as the locus of authenticity."

⁴³ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 239.

Dickinson's writings regard the question of happiness as the most important question – as Socrates did with “how shall we live?” – and indulge some of her speakers in the significance as well as contribution of every “incident” within the totality of their experience. Dickinson's “poignant question,” as her niece Martha suggests in *Face to Face*, was “can you make life go as you want it to these days, dear?”.⁴⁵ When comparing Socrates' question to Dickinson's, it is interesting to note, on the one hand, the active component in making “life go,” because it is the individual who, as she moves forward, leads her own way. On the other hand, the contingency of existence is also highlighted here, given that, in some cases, individuals may not be able to “make life go” as they would like. The question of happiness is thus central to Dickinson's work, and her personae find no solace in the heights of heaven or in action performed for future gratification. The following verses were included in a letter to the poet Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885 (a year before Dickinson's death):

Of God we ask
one favor, that
we may be for -
given -
For what, he is
presumed to know -
The Crime, from
us, is hidden -
Immured the whole
of Life
Within a magic
Prison
We reprimand the
Happiness
That too com -
petes with Heaven -⁴⁶

The poem begins with a clear reference to Original Sin and the need to “be forgiven” by God in order to enter heaven. However, the speaker appears to

⁴⁵ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 42.

⁴⁶ L976 included “F1675B - Of God we ask one favor” (1885). This letter – that I will refer back in chapter four – also contained a version of the poem “F1671 – Take all away from me but leave me Ecstasy” (1885).

disagree with this observation, claiming that she does not consider herself a sinner because she is unaware of the type of “crime” she has committed, or has been committed, since only God “is presumed to know.” This crime – or predetermined condition – does not allow individuals to live freely because they are condemned for it (in advance) during the course of their mortal existence by enclosing “the whole of Life within a magical prison.” The trial is thus justified by Original Sin and made necessary by the impression that individuals should become “worthy” of future happiness by sacrificing their present.⁴⁷ In this competition between earthly and heavenly happiness, the former is suspended, censored, and severely rebuked. As with the fictionality of hope, the fantasy of a trial as required to prove individuals' worth has a significant impact on theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness because, as Soni claims, “the trial depends on the fiction that existential concerns can be suspended and the labor of the trial narrative is to produce this fiction as effective and convincing” by conceiving “the ingredients of unhappiness” as needed.⁴⁸ This strategy is best executed in early sentimental novels, as well as in the discourse of nineteenth-century American sentimentalism, which will be examined further in light of Dickinson's writings.

Most of Dickinson's poems advocate learning by opposites, as an alternative to trial hermeneutics. To appreciate gains through losses and delight through despair does not imply prioritising loss and despair over gain and delight, as is embedded in sentimentalism's discourse – as is its preference for negative emotions. In fact, what it means is that the nature of human beings' finite condition is to be at the expense of chance – or, to use Nussbaum's phrase, “to be in need” – and knowing that they might lose something makes them value it more highly. As an example, a young Dickinson wrote to her friend Emily Fowler in 1850: “you make me so happy, and glad, life seems worth living for, no matter for all the trials.”⁴⁹ It is not surprising, given Dickinson's Calvinistic background, that the concept of life as a trial was instilled and integrated in her theological and

⁴⁷ This research argues for Dickinson's speakers as being already “worthy” because of the mere fact of being alive, on the assumption that life, or existence, is intrinsically valuable. However, in religious accounts, individuals must prove their worth throughout their mortal existence since, due to original sin, their worth is depreciated beforehand.

⁴⁸ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 194-6.

⁴⁹ L32 (1850).

educational context. Nonetheless, some of Dickinson's speakers' views offer a glimpse of a life worth living here on Earth without the need for additional trials. Fifteen years after that letter, the poet sent these verses to her sister-in-law Susan:

Not what We
did, shall be
the Test,
When Act and
Will - are done,
But what
Our Lord inferred
We would,
Had we Diviner,
been -⁵⁰

The poem's opening negation reinforces the speaker's assertion that neither what we did nor what we will do (or what we are currently doing) should be regarded as a test or a trial, assuming that people's actions are motivated by their own impulses and desires, rather than by a higher purpose. This view echoes "the service without hope" and its emphasis on the ideal of "action performed solely for its own benefit." If humans were "divine," they might have accepted life as a test in order to achieve eternal happiness in heaven. However, since human beings are not divine – or they are unsure whether this possibility even exists – but finite, their actions and will should better reflect this condition. As Miller observes, "Dickinson sees her place in the world primarily in terms of contrasting and shifting polarities."⁵¹ In the poem "The summer that we did not prize," for example, the speaker implies that it undoubtedly "instructs us by / departure now."⁵²

Similarly, Dickinson's speaker reiterates the importance of processes within the confines of people's finite existence in the first stanza of the following poem, despite the certainty that they will eventually end:

⁵⁰ "F972A - Not what we did shall be the test" (1865).

⁵¹ Miller, *Poet's Grammar*, 18.

⁵² "F1622A - The summer that we did not prize" (1883). In the selected verse, the word-choice that Dickinson offers to her readers is "more" instead of "now."

To make Routine
a Stimulus
Remember it
can cease -
Capacity to
terminate
Is a specific
Grace -⁵³

As the persona in these verses suggests, routines will also end at some point, and thus its stimulus could be maintained if people recognise this circumstance. In fact, it is this contingency that is both intrinsically valuable and latently terrifying for Dickinson's speakers. Dickinson wrote in a letter to T.W. Higginson in 1863: "Best Gains – must have the losses' test, / To Constitute them, Gains."⁵⁴ By cherishing life's vicissitudes, Dickinson's speakers aimed to perform actions for their intrinsic value rather than for external gratification. In contrast to *Pamela's* impetus for virtue, Dickinson's poetic personae strive to live actively and purposefully without – or as far as possible – the impetus of reward. The following section delves into the effects of the reification of happiness as a reward, as well as its major determinations and how Dickinson's writings consistently objected to them.⁵⁵

Dickinson's Writings Rejecting the Reification of Happiness as a Reward

My Reward for Being,
was This -
My premium - My Bliss -
An Admiralty, less -
A Sceptre - penniless -
And Realms - just Dross -⁵⁶ (First stanza)

Dickinson's speaker insists on the intrinsic value of being alive in this opening. In contrast to the trial narrative form's suspension of concern for happiness and its

⁵³ "F1238A - To make routine a stimulus" (1871).

⁵⁴ L280 (1863).

⁵⁵ For instance, the determination of happiness as pleasure, marriage, money or fame, afterlife or heaven, and freedom.

⁵⁶ "F375A - My reward for being was this" (1862).

temporal alteration, the speaker appears to recognise the fact of being alive as rewarding enough because her “Reward for Being” was “This,” precisely “Being” in itself. Similarly, “This” could refer to “My Premium” and “My Bliss,” both of which could refer to the poem's first verse. The use of the possessive pronoun “My” before reward, premium, and bliss may create a direct link between all of these terms at once. The images’ interchangeability in the first three verses thus indicates an internal connection between being, reward, premium, and bliss (the importance of which is highlighted by dashes), which starkly contrasts with the externality of “An Admiralty,” “A Sceptre,” and “Realms,” that are “less,” “penniless,” and “Dross,” as well as worthless if separated from the essential position of being as intrinsically valuable. While the reward of being is part of the speaker's inner world, other “rewards” that are externally and superficially assessed, such as admiralty, a sceptre, or realms, are not worthy of tribute. According to Miller's interpretation, “This” may acquire “extraordinary significance” because “it remains absolutely mysterious and absolutely feared or desired.”⁵⁷ “This” might also allude to a phenomenon she is unable to identify, like happiness, as a person cannot be described as happy until “being” vanishes. “This” could also refer to Dickinson's poetic identity, given that she uses poetry or poetic structures to make sense of, or better understand, the world she lives in. In either case, Dickinson's speaker does not perceive the possibility of happiness as the end result of a process or as a reward at the end of a trial; rather, the stimulus of happiness, the opportunity of being alive – or the reality of being a poet – is rewarding in and of itself.

Regarding Dickinson's views on happiness as enclosing the totality of experience, it is always the question and concern for happiness that contributes and adds to a bright total.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the trial paradigm ingrained in sentimental discourse allows “happiness” and “unhappiness” to be separated, as if they were independent from each other, by shifting from the question of happiness to the experience of happiness. As a result, this change has the potential to shift happiness into the domain of affection. Soni claims that sentimentalism “legitimizes a denarrativized, affective conception of happiness”

⁵⁷ Miller, *Poet's Grammar*, 81-2.

⁵⁸ This “bright total” refers to Dickinson's key term “circumference,” and it will be further explored in chapters three and four.

and, through the trial narrative form, justifies “the perplexing privilege accorded to unhappiness” both within its discourse and “in modernity more generally.”⁵⁹ Another implication of the preceding is the tendency in the use of the trial narrative in sentimental literature to conclude with a happy ending, confirming happiness's displacement to the limits of narrative. According to Soni's account, this happy ending is “*antithetical to the classical conception*” because its “value resides in the entirety of rather than simply its outcome.”⁶⁰

By shifting happiness's temporality from total to partial, from continuous to episodic, it becomes obsolete to wait until death for the judgement of a life worth living – as Solon's conception demonstrates – since happiness no longer stands for the span of a lifetime. As a result, “the experience of happiness in the present, whether affective or theological, is accompanied by a denial of finitude and mortality.”⁶¹ This denial has had a significant impact on the transformation of happiness, from “difficult but possible” in classical interpretations to “easy (affective), because it can be present at any moment, and impossible (theological), because it never endures for the eternity it seems to promise.”⁶² The fact that its definition has been changed to refer to “the very experience of happiness itself” suggests that happiness can be directly linked to and transformed into an affect or feeling.⁶³

The trial narrative allows us to understand how modern lives can be structured according to the unhealthy alternation between the misery (trial) of work, during which we ‘earn’ the reward of happiness and a quasi-narcotic leisure in which we passively enjoy our ‘happiness’.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the trial narrative has a discordant and incongruous effect in that it reduces the value of happiness – which becomes a concept among concepts, an experience among experiences – while being unable to reduce the inherent privilege granted to happiness in classical approaches to it. For Soni, the reification of happiness hastens its deformation, and the result represents “the

⁵⁹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 197. Soni also observes that the cult of melancholy during Romanticism is a result of the trial narrative form's privilege of negative emotions.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

most enduring legacy of the trial narrative,” which still exists today.⁶⁵ Nowadays, the impact of this reification, as well as the concept's deformation, is a critical component in comprehending the processes by which the present in particular, and individuals' mortality in general, have been devalued in pursuit of prospective reward.⁶⁶

Dickinson's narrative resists the notion of happiness as episodic by being rooted in the multiplicity of life's experiences in agreement with the human condition of mortality and finitude, as exemplified in the following poem:

As old as Woe -
How old is that?
Some Eighteen
thousand years -
As old as
Bliss
How old is
that
They are of
equal years -

Together
chiefest they
are found

But seldom
side by side -
From
neither of
them tho'
he try
Can

⁶⁵ Ibid., 258. In line with Soni, what Nussbaum infers in *Fragility* is that this cultural legacy might be connected with Bernard Williams' concept of "shame culture," discussed in his book *Shame and Necessity*, often meaning "a culture totally focused on external assessment and reward." Nussbaum, *Fragility*, xxxii.

⁶⁶ As explored in chapters three and four, Dickinson's Eternal Now reminds her readers that individuals live only in the present and that every activity they perform and every person they meet will eventually cease to be.

Human
nature
hide⁶⁷

The speaker tries to establish the first occurrence of sorrow and joy by asking how old they are. It appears that “they are of equal years,” and while they are frequently found “together,” it is ironic that they are rarely found “side by side.” Nonetheless, it seems that from neither of them “can Human nature hide.” Dickinson's speaker, to some extent, refuses to accept, or even consider plausible, the idea that “Woe” and “Bliss” can be separated. This claim contradicts theological and sentimental claims that happiness and unhappiness can be distinguished by altering their temporality. Because both are inherently a part of the whole, they will always be encountered intertwined within the fabric of an individual's life experiences at unspecified moments in time. Thus, the complexities and contingencies of happiness elude representation and reification for Dickinson's persona, and the intrinsic value of living eludes further reward because its occurrence is already priceless. Due to its significant impact on the concept of happiness in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dickinson's writings must be examined in light of sentimentalism's discourse and its main determinations.⁶⁸

Although many Dickinson's writings challenged the assumption, marriage has traditionally been viewed as a major determinant of happiness as a reward. Soni's account delves into other potential causes of reified happiness, assuming that “the determination of happiness as a reward granted and experienced at the end of the narrative dictates what concrete forms happiness can take in the aftermath of the trial narrative.”⁶⁹ Some of those concrete forms, which Soni notes may be interchangeable, are, first and foremost, the determination of happiness as money, fame, or assets in general. As previously mentioned, in the United States, the right to pursue happiness was established following the American Revolution and encouraged by the Declaration's paradox on how happiness could be

⁶⁷ “F1259 – As old as woe” (1872). Dickinson's proposes three word-choices in this poem. In verse six, “Joy –” instead of “Bliss.” In verse eleven, “chiefly” instead of “chiefest.” And in verse twenty, “may” instead of “Can.”

⁶⁸ This study has focused on one of those determinations in chapter one, namely happiness as a reward in heaven.

⁶⁹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 267.

attained. McMahon's study asserts, referencing Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*:

The greater part of men, that is, pursued happiness through wealth, a route that the so-called father of capitalism knew to be a devious path. And although this 'deception,' this trivial pursuit, was undeniably a powerful engine of growth, it was dubious means to lasting satisfaction. Smith himself denied the connection, as did Jefferson, Franklin, and many others.⁷⁰

Second, the reward of happiness as pleasure or positive affect is linked with sentiment culture, and its characteristics will be examined in relation to nineteenth-century American sentimentalism. Third, the pursuit of happiness through the institution of marriage, or "the event of marriage," after overcoming the trial that, as Soni asserts, ushers in "the time of consummation, satisfaction, and fulfilment: the time of happiness itself."⁷¹ Happiness's reification, as well as its discontinuous perception, establishes an extreme duality between "moments of happiness" to be noticed and counted for, and "moments of unhappiness" to be ignored as part of the trial.⁷²

Death, which was seen as the most important event in a lifetime in classical and religious tradition – either as the moment for the judgement of happiness or as the passage to it – is translated into the event of marriage as the most significant in the modern era. Similarly, the institution of marriage combines "the four determinations of happiness as a reward" because it is expected to bring about pleasurable emotions, a heavenly afterlife, and an increase in status or wealth.⁷³ According to Soni, "the narrative logic of the marriage plot suits the trial narrative and its reified conception of happiness astonishingly well, and this no doubt helps account for the importance of the marriage plot in the early history of the novel;" thus, in contrast to Solonian happiness, in which all events within a lifetime were relevant, this new narrative adopts marriage as "the *telos* of the plot."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ McMahon, *Happiness*, 330.

⁷¹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 268.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 269.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 279-80. Additionally, what Soni points out is that "marriage gives socio-institutional form to the new idea of happiness, just as in the funeral oration the Solonian idea of happiness could acquire embodiment in the polis."

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18. Marriage, for example, had no special status as a plot event in earlier novels.

Some of Dickinson's poems emphasise the significance and value of everyday happenings. In particular, they suggest that minor occurrences can be as important – if not more so – than major events:

The incidents
of love
Are more than
its Events -
Investment's best
Expositor
Is the minute
Per Cents -⁷⁵

In this brief poem, Dickinson's persona reflects on the importance of love's minor happenings within a lifetime, rather than its major celebrations, such as marriage. In terms of form, the fact that the word "incidents" is not capitalised contrasts with "Events," implying that minor occurrences are frequently ignored or unaccounted for in light of the reverberance of major ones. Nonetheless, it is the "insignificant" events in life that, minute by minute, are a better representation of any endeavour and will prove their value "Per Cents" in the long run. One could argue, then, that in the course of people's lives, it is the intrinsic value of those incidents of love that must be treasured and recognised, rather than the future reward exemplified by marriage. The speaker's perspective in this poem closely parallels Solonian views on the importance of daily occurrences, which are set against a sentimental tendency – via the trial narrative form – to exaggerate only those "rewarding" major occasions.

As with Dickinson's opposition to theological interpretations of happiness and its reward in heaven, some of her poems may approximate marriage as the result of "giving up" one's own life resolutions, particularly in the case of women:

She rose to His Requirement -
dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable
Work

⁷⁵ "F1172A - The incidents of love" (1870).

Of Woman, and of Wife -⁷⁶ (First stanza)

Miller's analysis notes how "by the end of the first line, the poet has already undercut her initial claim that the wife's new 'honourable' position involves any real elevation" by alternating and playing with the metrical lengthening of words, such as the polysyllabic "Requirement" in contrast with the monosyllabic "dropt."⁷⁷ This presumed rise is immediately dropped, as are other instances detailed in "The Playthings of Her Life." In this poem, Dickinson's speaker does not appear to regard marriage as a rewarding event; rather, it appears to be an act of renunciation.⁷⁸ Another poem that might express a similar idea is this one:

A solemn thing - it was -
I said -
A Woman - white - to be -
And wear - if God should
count me fit -
Her blameless mystery -

A timid thing - to drop
a life
Into the (purple) mystic well -
Too plummetless - that it
come back -
Eternity - until -

I pondered how the bliss would
look -
And would it feel as big -
When I could take it in
my hand -
As hovering - seen - through
fog -

⁷⁶ "F857A - She rose to his requirement - dropt" (1864).

⁷⁷ Miller, *Poet's Grammar*, 43.

⁷⁸ Regarding Dickinson's views on marriage, she believed that if performed under egalitarian conditions, it was not an act of renunciation. See Judith Farr's "Emily Dickinson and Marriage: 'The Etruscan Experiment'," in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

And then - the size of this
"small" life -
The Sages - call it small -
Swelled - like Horizons - in my
breast -
And I sneered - softly - "small"!⁷⁹

Dickinson's speaker reflects on the means by which she is genuinely choosing the kind of life she wants to live – perhaps against more conventional options such as marriage. She may “timidly” choose to become a poet, and even if that choice does not seem worthy enough in the eyes of others – as some may judge it as a “small” affair – her creative choice appears to be the best option for her. This poem, according to Marcia Falk, “is not about choosing to be a bride or a nun, but about the process by which the speaker comes to reject such a choice;” thus, it is about rejecting traditional (or imposed) roles and instead embracing “an autonomous, self-created life.”⁸⁰ For Barbara Mossberg, the poem depicts “the connection Dickinson makes between a poet's life and a renounced woman's life,” a relationship she gradually unfolds in her poetry.⁸¹ In Maurya Simon's interpretation, Dickinson proposes that language, as a meaning-making device, serves as a bridge between the self and the outside world, and thus “strives to achieve what Coleridge considered the basis of art: ‘the harmonizing of opposites’.... Such ‘harmonizing’ pervades Dickinson's life and work.”⁸² Indeed, “the harmonising of opposites” is one of Dickinson's most well-known poetic strategies for pondering a contradictory reality which, in the nineteenth century, offered few options for women other than marriage as the path to happiness.

⁷⁹ “F307A - A solemn thing it was I said” (1862). Dickinson proposes numerous word-choices in this poem. In the second stanza, “purple” instead on “mystic,” and “return” instead of “come back.” In the third stanza, “glimmering” instead of “hovering.” In the fourth stanza, “vest” instead of “breast.”

⁸⁰ Marcia Falk's reading in *Emily Dickinson: A Celebration for Readers*, ed. Suzanne Juhasz and Cristanne Miller (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1989), 24, 27. Falk also suggests that this poem, read in the context of “F353A - I'm ceded - I've stopped being theirs” (1862), might be about “how crucial was the choice of her own identity, an identity contrasted with the one imposed on her by others.”

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 37.

Several interpretations contend that Dickinson's poems about marriage are written from an external vantage point. For instance, Shira Wolosky asserts that Dickinson's "wife" poems are frequently written "from a position firmly not her own."⁸³ According to Adrienne Rich, Dickinson did not decide against marriage as a result of a "pathological retreat or a conscious decision;" rather, marriage "was a fact in her life," as it was in "her contemporary Christina Rossetti's [religiously dedicated woman]; both women had more primary needs."⁸⁴ Instead of thinking about marriage as the event to be desired, as in the case of sentimental narratives, Dickinson regarded it as a simple fact – although it did not actually happen, it could have.⁸⁵ Martin, like Rich, observes that "the wife's expectations of security in marriage are as illusory as the converted sinner's hopes of heaven" for Dickinson.⁸⁶ For this reason, many Dickinson's speakers reject the reification of happiness as a reward in heaven or marriage. Furthermore, their emphasis on present temporality reflects the illusory nature of future hopes in a contingent and unpredictable world.

Some of Dickinson's speakers highlight the importance of every situation by valuing everyday occurrences since, as stated in the poem that opens chapter one, people do not know "how many schemes may die in one short afternoon." So far, suspending the concern for the question of happiness and its privileged position in classical accounts – at the end of the eighteenth century, it becomes a question among questions, a concept among concepts – and its reification as either a future reward or an immediate pleasurable experience have been some of the major effects of the trial narrative form's alteration of the idea. Happiness's temporal transformation then allows it to be further transmuted into the realm of emotions.

Dickinson's work approaches emotion rationally and does not prioritise negative affects. As Eberwein implies, Dickinson uses "intellectual rather than

⁸³ Wolosky, *Poetry and Public Discourse in 19th century America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 20. For instance, in "F280A - The world stands solemn to me" (1862) and "F225A - I'm 'wife' - I've finished that" (1861).

⁸⁴ Rich, "Vesuvius at home," 188.

⁸⁵ This idea will be furthered analysed in the context of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

⁸⁶ Martin, *An American Triptych*, 104. For instance, in "F353A - I'm ceded - I've stopped being theirs" (1862) and "F375 - My reward for Being, was This -" (1862).

emotional forms of expression – even in the presentation of feeling.”⁸⁷ Her writings demonstrate a blending of thought and emotion, as well as the interdependence of both responses in all types of deliberation because “the mind lives on the heart.”⁸⁸ Similarly:

The Heart is the
Capital of the
Mind -
The Mind is a
single State -
The Heart and
the Mind together
make
A single Continent.

One - is the
population -
Numerous enough -
This ecstatic
Nation -
Seek - it is
Yourself -⁸⁹

In contrast to Platonic dualism, Dickinson's speaker underpins the imperious union of heart and mind, emotion and reason. In fact, they are both parts of the same whole, forming “a single Continent.” Likewise, they cannot be separated because their nature is to rely on one another when assessing specific situations. Therefore, individuals' own selves are the result of the mix that “this ecstatic nation” entails. Dickinson's speakers challenge the duality and separation of experience by seeing reason and emotion as equally necessary for rational judgement.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Cited in Deppman, “Say Some Philosopher!,” 258.

⁸⁸ “F1384A - The mind lives on the heart” (1875).

⁸⁹ “F1381A - The heart is the capital of the mind” (1875).

⁹⁰ This idea stands in accordance with Nussbaum's deliberation on the rationality of emotions in *The Fragility of Goodness* and Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

However, in the context of happiness, the emphasis placed on reason by post-Socratic accounts was replaced by grace in Christian narratives, and then by emotion in sentimental literature. Sentimentalism established its dominance as a literary, intellectual, and social phenomenon by combining the effectiveness of emotion and literature through transformative processes that directed it, as Ellis suggests, “into powerful forms of political argument and literary production in the nineteenth century and beyond.”⁹¹ Moreover, Soni's account highlights sentimentalism as “an agent in the historical process by which an ethics of tragedy is subverted by the nascent moral vision of the trial narrative.”⁹² Suffering is understood as a necessary condition for the trial within this narrative, serving “a purpose beyond the concerns of happiness;” as a result, “there is no call to alleviate the situation of the other,” to feel neither responsible for, nor concerned by it.⁹³ For Soni, the paradigm of the trial narrative form is exemplified by Kant's and Hegel's philosophies, which emphasise the necessity of suffering in the disclosure of individuals' virtuous disposition and authentic inner personality.⁹⁴ On the one hand, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* concludes, “it is in suffering (*Leiden*) that they [the law of morals and the image of holiness and virtue] show (*Zeigt*) themselves most excellently.”⁹⁵ In Hegel's doctrine, on the other hand, the trial paradigm, in which happiness is described as a “final aim [for which] these monstrous sacrifices have been made,” serves as justification in the process of granting special attention to ends rather than means.⁹⁶

Soni also emphasises that by separating happiness from virtue, Kant, Hegel, and Rousseau removed concern for happiness from the historical and political agenda. The desire for happiness evolved into a desire for freedom, which was adopted as “the content of modernity's story” in which individuals could “pursue

⁹¹ Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, 221. In addition, Soni contends that Romanticism, which is discussed in chapter three, is the pinnacle of a sentimental culture. Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 291.

⁹² Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 324.

⁹³ Ibid., 307. According to Soni, “the drift in the meaning of the word ‘sympathy,’ from pity toward empathy, identification, and emulation, is not innocent; it is the mechanism that allows sentimentalism to favor increasingly a trial hermeneutic over a tragic one.” It is “through the identificatory logic of sympathy, concern for the other's happiness is no longer our responsibility.” *Mourning Happiness*, 313.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 383, 344.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 342. This is the conclusion of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

⁹⁶ Cited in Douglas, *Feminization*, 205. Quoted from Walter Kaufmann's *Hegel: Reinterpretation* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 251.

happiness.”⁹⁷ Like Soni, Zapedowska's “Dickinson's Delight” postulates how Western thought has privileged the study of negative emotions, from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* to Freud's ideology, arguing that critical theory and literary studies have been primarily “preoccupied with painful affects and modes of negativity.”⁹⁸ This affirmation will be examined further in the context of nineteenth-century American literary and lyric sentimentalism, as well as its impact on Dickinson's work and the poet's response to it. Prior to that, it is worth noting that in a culture that values negative emotions as a result of viewing life as a trial, it appears obvious that no one would choose to live that life, or go through that trial, ever again.

When one shifts from a tragic to a trial interpretation of happiness, life appears to be the least valuable possibility. “Because existence is always a trial,” Soni affirms, “Kant believes nobody of ‘sound mind’ would ever choose to live life again;” thus, “this stands in stark contrast to the classical idea of happiness, where a judgement of ‘happy’ was tantamount to an affirmation of eternal return in the Nietzschean sense.”⁹⁹ Dickinson's writings frequently confronted Kant's predicament in their refusal to consider life as a trial, as evidenced by the poet's concept of Eternal Now. Although I will examine Dickinson's Eternal Now in chapters three and four, it is important to remember this before moving on to the consequences of the trial paradigm in evaluating the role of emotions in nineteenth-century American sentimentalism and the way Dickinson's writings refused to privilege negative emotions.

Dickinson's Views in Dialogue with Nineteenth-Century American Literary Sentimentalism

Eden is that old-fashioned House
We dwell in every day
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away

How fair on looking back the Day

⁹⁷ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 387.

⁹⁸ Zapedowska, “Dickinson's Delight,” 3. This essay will be further explored when discussing nineteenth-century American lyric sentimentalism.

⁹⁹ Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 349.

We sauntered from the Door
Unconscious our returning
But discover it no more¹⁰⁰

Many Dickinson's poems, unlike those of most of her sentimental contemporaries, refused to devalue the condition of mortality. One of the poet's most recurring images is of paradise – heaven or Eden – on Earth.¹⁰¹ Since the speaker implies that “we dwell every day” in Eden, this poem emphasises the value of mortality. However, the existence of this heavenly home on Earth remains unknown until “we drive away” or die. For this reason, daily experience tends to be better estimated through loss or death. When people lose sight of their mortality or cease to perceive their own frailty – or when they forget that “our returning” is never guaranteed – “our abode” may go unnoticed. People's lives are lived here and now, not in the future or above this world.

Following happiness's displacement into the domain of emotion, this section investigates how previous reifications of happiness operate in nineteenth-century American literary sentimentalism. It also looks at the similarities between theological and affective approaches to happiness, Ann Douglas's account of the feminisation of American culture, and how Dickinson's writings stood up to sentimental interpretations of happiness by going beyond gender identity. Eberwein's description of Dickinson's sentimental context is a good starting point for this discussion: “by fixing attention on domestic life and locating heroism in meek acceptance of suffering, sentimental literature exalted women in their capacities as dutiful daughters, sacrificing mothers, and model Christians,” justifying “all crises as moral tests.”¹⁰² This fragment explicitly paraphrases Soni's argument in relation to the trial narrative's proceedings and major consequences, such as the acceptance of suffering as a moral test or trial, the substitution of happiness for virtue – the virtue of being dutiful, sacrificial, and exemplary as a woman – and the link between affective and theological approaches to living a

¹⁰⁰ “F1734A - Eden is that old fashioned house.” For another example of Dickinson's conception of Heaven on Earth, see “F1144A - Paradise is that old mansion” (1868).

¹⁰¹ I have briefly referred to this idea in chapter one when examining Dickinson's letter to her niece Martha Dickinson, in which the poet claimed that “Who has not found the Heaven – below – / Will fail of it above –.” F1609B (1883).

¹⁰² Eberwein, *Strategies of Limitation*, 41.

life worth living. In the late eighteenth century, one of the first opponents of sentimental standards was Mary Wollstonecraft and her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*:

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation... This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others....: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to calm the passions.¹⁰³

Wollstonecraft, in contrast to an excessive strain on sensibility, advocates for the need to adequately cultivate the powers of the intellect in proportion to it, as this “exercise of understanding” seems to be the only way to “calm the passions.” Her advice on the urgency of blending reason and feeling, thought and emotion, without prioritising either, echoes Dickinson's modes of expression as well as the poet's course of action. However, Wollstonecraft's and Dickinson's perspectives were not representative of their respective contexts.

The triumph and failure of the sentimental project during and after America's revolutionary period may symbolise the rise and fall of the concern for happiness as an all-encompassing notion.¹⁰⁴ Sarah Knott's *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (2009) implies how significant was the sentimental discourse in the reconstruction of both society in general and the individual in particular. According to Knott, “society promoted happiness; the state restrained vice....At its most perfectibilist, the society imagined was reckoned on the straight road to heaven;” nevertheless, this project failed since “sensibility became the object of censure as much as optimism.”¹⁰⁵ British sentimentalism and sensibility traditions influenced North American culture.¹⁰⁶ It was assumed that feelings of sympathy and solidarity aided in the development and expression of the sensible self in social interactions. Locke's sensational metaphysics served as a

¹⁰³ Cited in McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press New York; Oxford University Press, 1996), 106. Quoted from *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Pickering, 1989), 130.

¹⁰⁴ The terms sentimentality or sentimentalism, and sensibility will be used as synonyms throughout the chapter.

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Besides, Knott argues that “sensibility in the American Revolution is a story of transnational contingency and struggle, not nationalist teleology.”

foundation for all sensibility philosophers. In David Hume's and Adam Smith's moral theory, for example, sensibility was both the foundation of morality and the driving force behind action. For Locke, the "self is that conscious thinking thing.... Which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness and Misery."¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to note in Locke's assertion how pleasure and pain, happiness and misery are perceived as opposites and independent of one another. However, given Dickinson's depolarisation of experience as well as her learning by opposites strategy, her speakers imply that pleasure and pain are not mutually exclusive, and that misery is contained within happiness. Given that the sentimental project was inextricably linked to the pursuit of happiness from the start, central to Knott's account is the fact that "sensibility was a constituent element of revolution, and the falling short of the American goal of a sympathetic society to secure life, liberty, and happiness's pursuit.... For good and ill, sensible selfhood – socially constituted, socially turned – shaped the American founding."¹⁰⁸ The defining features of this sentimental project were explored and exemplified in both prose and poetry in the United States.

Sentimental novels are extremely useful for understanding the goals and values of nineteenth-century American culture and society. According to Lauren Berlant, there is a connection between sentimentality and "the fantasy of a better proximate world."¹⁰⁹ This fantasy alludes to, or is connected with, the Christian ideal of a New Jerusalem, as well as the notion of a better future instilled by the trial narrative form. In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction (1790-1860)*, Jane Tompkins asserts that the sentimental novel emerges "as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time."¹¹⁰ Tompkins' book focuses on "the other American Renaissance" (the one left out of F.O. Matthiessen's account) and some nineteenth-century best-selling novels, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Knott, *Sensibility*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 19,22.

¹⁰⁹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 31.

¹¹⁰ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 126.

For Tompkins, the revival movement's guiding ideals, which influenced American culture in the years preceding the Civil War, were arguably best expressed in sentimental literature. For this reason, "the critical practice that assigns Hawthorne and Melville the role of heroes, the sentimental novelists the role of villains, and the public the role of their willing dupes, loses its credibility."¹¹¹ There was no distinction between fiction and religious propaganda within the sentimental project, and, according to Tompkins, "the highest function of any art, for Warner as for most of her contemporaries, was the bringing of souls to Christ;" thus, the sentimental novelists' goal was to bring people closer to religious teachings, as well as to insist that "all true action is not material, but spiritual."¹¹² Like Tompkins, David Reynolds conveys that "sensational narratives carried the burden of theological precept."¹¹³ These novels, like Richardson's *Pamela*, were always instructive in form, emphasising the importance of a specific virtue, and they usually place a strong emphasis on sensorial experience, given that "the welfare of the nation," as Tompkins implies, "depended upon the virtue of the individual citizen."¹¹⁴ Given that American women lacked the means to either escape or change their social standing, "the ethic of sentimental fiction.... was an ethic of submission."¹¹⁵

Although Dickinson's poetic idiom incorporated elements of this tradition, her writings – particularly her bride poems – actively challenged the ethics of submission and renunciation ingrained in the workings of sentimental fiction. These texts situate "the experience of domestic bliss" in the present "religion of the home."¹¹⁶ According to Tompkins, social historians have typically held a negative view of the home ideology, believing its promises of happiness to be unreal and the limitations associated with them to be intolerable. These women were, however, entitled to and compensated for cultivating bliss in their domestic seclusion, which will eventually lead to its heavenly promise. For that purpose, the sentimental heroine's life revolves around the pain and suffering of

¹¹¹ Ibid., 149.

¹¹² Ibid., 149-51.

¹¹³ Cited in Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 153. Quoted from David Reynolds' "From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Story-Telling in America," in *American Quarterly* 32 (Winter, 1980): 479-498.

¹¹⁴ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 156.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 165.

learning to restrain one's own impulses, provided that this learning is their intrinsic vocation. According to Tompkins, "in a sense, these novels resemble, more than anything else, training [or trial] narratives;" as an example, in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, there are "massive tests of Ellen's faith."¹¹⁷ For Warner's readers:

Steeped in the Christian tradition of self-denial and submission to God's will, Ellen's suffering, as she gradually gives up the right to *be* herself, is necessary. It is not only necessary; it is desirable.... The end point of the disciplinary process is the loss of self.... By the end of Warner's novel, Ellen does not exist for herself any more, but only for others.... Ellen is rewarded for her suffering, like Job – to whom she is twice compared.¹¹⁸

The loss of self is thus required for Ellen's virtuous activity, the value of which is proportional to how much she has suffered and sacrificed for others. In fact, this idea is diametrically opposed to Dickinson's speakers' endeavour, which is to discover their own selves, and follow their inner convictions and instincts. Referring back to Dickinson's letters to both her niece Martha and Samuel Bowles Jr., the poet strongly advised them to be faithful to themselves rather than to others or God. Nonetheless, the fiction of Ellen's trial, as both necessary and desirable, stands out at the heart of Warner's novel's educational enterprise. Furthermore, given that Mr. John will eventually marry Ellen, the story's happy ending validates Soni's views in which happiness is displaced to the limits of the narrative and thus relegated to the presence of a reward.

Although Dickinson rejected the Calvinist interpretation of happiness, her contemporary Harriet Beecher Stowe's writings assist us in detecting the interweaving of religious and sentimental notions. Stowe was a major figure in nineteenth-century American sentimentalism, and her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had an unprecedented impact by being the bestselling novel of the century.¹¹⁹ According to Karl Keller, Stowe was a prime example of "the Puritan typologizer of American hopes;" given that "Stowe's New England novels repeat and emphasize the traditional analogy between the Bible and America and between

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 176, 179.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 181-2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 124. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "the most important book of the century. It was the first American novel ever to sell over a million copies, and its impact is generally thought to have been incalculable."

early America and the America to be.”¹²⁰ These novels, for Keller, may be reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards' views on grace as the path to eternal blessedness. Gail K. Smith's article on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, reflects on the fact that “earthly life” is consistently portrayed “as merely a shadow of, or code for, its heavenly reality.”¹²¹ Although Stowe's characters' good deeds were not motivated by a desire to secure a heavenly reward, but rather by a desire to help others, there is a crucial eschatological framework to their lives.

Regarding the phenomenon of death, Tompkins contends that in Stowe's work, “dying is the supreme form of heroism,” because death “is the equivalent not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not a loss of it; it is not only the crowning achievement of life, it *is* life.”¹²² Death, as in theological interpretations of happiness, represents the passage to eternal happiness in heaven. The novel's “ethics of sacrifice” provides its ideological framework by considering “to give one's life for another” to be “the highest human calling.”¹²³ As in Warner's novel, Stowe's ethics of sacrifice are closely linked to theological interpretations of happiness and the need to give up one's own self in order to succumb to the demands of others. James Baldwin famously critiqued this element of Stowe's novel in “Everybody's Protest Novel” (1949), saying:

She embraced this merciless doctrine with all her heart, bargaining shamelessly before the throne of grace: God and salvation becoming her personal property, purchased with the coin of her virtue.... *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, is activated by what might be called a theological terror, the terror of damnation.”¹²⁴

In light of Baldwin's words and what he refers to as “the terror of damnation,” Dickinson's poem “of God we ask one favor” warns readers of the dangers of

¹²⁰ Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 102, 106.

¹²¹ Smith, Gail K. “Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Sentimental Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*, edited by Dale M. Bauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

¹²² Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 127. For instance, Little Eva's death is compared with Christ's death. In Tompkins' words, “they enact a philosophy, as much political as religious, in which the pure and powerless die to save the powerful and corrupt, and thereby show themselves more powerful than those they save.”

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹²⁴ James Baldwin, “Everybody's Protest Novel,” in *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 535. Regarding “the protest novel,” Baldwin claims “they emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream.”

acting fearfully. Besides, in theological and sentimental accounts, happiness is assumed to be at the expense of “the coin of virtue;” thus, sacrifice and suffering must be offered or exchanged in order to achieve it. According to Tompkins, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contrasts with works like George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, where everything depends on human agency and decision-making unfolding in a temporal sequence that withholds revelation until the end.¹²⁵ According to Keller's account, there were ties between the Beecher Stowe and Dickinson families, and Dickinson most likely read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For instance, in a letter to her brother Austin in 1853, Dickinson wrote: “Father was very severe to me; he thought I'd been trifling with you, so he gave me quite a trimming about ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Charles Dickens’ and those ‘modern Literati’ who he says are nothing, compared to past generations, who flourished when he was a *boy*.”¹²⁶ However, the poet's work resisted and transformed the majority of the “major Puritan assumptions of her age;” such as the privilege granted to suffering.¹²⁷

What St. Armand referred to as “the new Sentimental Love Religion” is another compelling example within the theological and sentimental cult of suffering.¹²⁸ For instance, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward)'s best-selling *The Gates Ajar* (1868) provided “a popular alternative to a cultural crisis” as a result of “the urgency of the Civil War,” which “accelerated an irrepressible conflict between masculine Calvinism and feminized sentimentalism.”¹²⁹ Phelps' literary phenomenon is also referred to as “the apotheosis of the consolation literature of the day” in Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, because this detailed account of the reification of happiness as a reward in heaven stands as an excellent document regarding “American religious and cultural history.”¹³⁰ Douglas's account suggests that “the triumph of sentimentalism in nineteenth-century America is never clearer than when one realizes the relatively small number of romantic writers and theologians, male and female, this country

¹²⁵ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 134. *Middlemarch* will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

¹²⁶ L113.

¹²⁷ Keller, *Only Kangaroo*, 115.

¹²⁸ St. Armand, *Her Culture*, 43.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³⁰ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (London: Papermac, 1996), 269-70. In Douglas' words, “the book appropriately focuses on the conflict among the would-be consolers of Mary, a New England girl who has lost her adored brother in the Civil War.”

produced.”¹³¹ In terms of cultural, emotional, and gender expectations, Dickinson's work frequently confronted the basis of this triumph.

As well as sympathetic emotions, sentimentalism was also grounded in the threats and fears of God's vengeance. In *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* (2015), Kevin Pelletier observes how academics who focus on sympathetic emotion underestimate the roles that “vengeance and fear” play in sentimental narratives, as well as the importance of God's retaliation threats in nineteenth-century sentimentalism.¹³² Despite the fact that sentimentalism fostered a community bonded by an enduring sense of compassionate love, there was also a strong belief in fear as an essential “engine of cultural and political transformation,” provided that fear frequently served as a motivator to love.¹³³ Consequently, Pelletier's book investigates how theological and sentimental traditions were constrained by their use of fear as the impeller of love. For example, in Stowe's early novels (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*), “expressions of love and reminders of God's retribution appear together, suggesting that terror is just as fundamental as love to Stowe's theory of sentimentality.”¹³⁴ Because the value and outcomes of characters' actions in these novels is measured by God's retribution, either as reward or punishment, and it is him who determines whether their virtuous behaviour will bring them closer to happiness's prospective experience, Pelletier's observations resonate well with the mechanisms embedded within the trial narrative form.

On the contrary, several Dickinson's speakers frequently seek to value process over outcome, and while the experience of fear, like the experience of grief or sorrow, is likely to occur in life, it should not guide individuals' actions in light of God's retaliation. By being “Entitled to myself - precise - / And fitting no one else -,” her personae often strive for acting independently of external threats and prospective fears.¹³⁵ Although sentimental tradition attempted to reduce the terrors of the Calvinist God and redirect him toward a more sympathetic and

¹³¹ Ibid., 308.

¹³² Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 2.

¹³³ Ibid., 3. According to Pelletier, “God's apocalyptic vengeance” was already “a familiar source of dread in Protestant America.”

¹³⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁵ These verses are part of “I am alive - I guess” (F605A, 1863).

loving attitude, it actually included, as Pelletier puts it, “much of the same Puritanical authoritativeness.”¹³⁶

When one considers that fear, specifically fear of God's vengeful anger, was one of the main themes of the Puritan sermon, it becomes clear how religiously entwined sentimentalism was. Consequently, religious interpretation and sentimental interpretation of happiness were also intertwined. According to Pelletier, fear of God's anger was necessary “to bind the Puritan society to its theological obligations and to compel its communicants to act with Christian virtue;” hence, Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” served “as an ideological precursor to the structure of apocalyptic sentimentalism.”¹³⁷ Given Dickinson's context, it is true that during the Second Great Awakening, there was an emphasis on God's redeeming power through individual grace, and ministers worked to foster conversion experiences among religious communities in order to promote a pious way of life that will allow people to experience the promise of happiness and salvation in heaven. This is well depicted in Dickinson's early letters to Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey, in which the poet discusses how most of her family and friends are converting to Christianity, as well as her own doubts and suspicions about becoming one. However, given that God was both “loving and wrathful,” according to Pelletier, there was “no clean break between hard-line Calvinist theology and the more moderate forms of belief that sought to replace it.”¹³⁸ Therefore, while sentimental happiness appeared to be predicated on a present loving attitude and a sympathetic interpersonal relationship, it was actually based on a religious interpretation of it that emphasised the necessity of today's sorrows and sacrifices in order to avoid tomorrow's fears.

Despite their reservations about the veracity and ethics of sentimental universals, antebellum authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Emily Dickinson championed sympathy. In Marianne Noble's words:

¹³⁶ Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism*, 7.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

All of them – even Stowe in her later works – voice skepticism toward sentimental aesthetics and distance themselves from its affective tactics and its normative tendencies. They do not defend the value of sentimentalism but instead position themselves against it, or at least at some distance from it.¹³⁹

In the case of Stowe, it seems ironic that one of the most prominent representatives of American sentimentalism in her early novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, could later develop sceptical attitudes toward the phenomenon. When considering Dickinson, one could argue that her initial distrust of sentimentalism grew stronger over time. Noble's reading of the poem "I cried at pity - not at pain" stands out as an example of the ways in which Dickinson's speakers questioned "the normative sympathy of sentimental culture, portraying it as ethically impoverished for claiming knowledge where a benevolent non-knowing would be less violent;" given that "the only person who can be fully known is a dead person."¹⁴⁰

The idea that no one can be fully known while alive is consistent with Solon's proverb and the fact that all lives must end before they can be judged. Claiming knowledge or control in the face of a lack of evidence, on the other hand, is an inherent feature of both theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness. Another poem in Noble's analyses is the following:

The butterfly obtains
But little sympathy
Though favorably mentioned
In Entomology -

Because he travels freely
And wears a proper coat
The circumstances are certain
That he is dissolute

Had he the homely scutcheon
Of modest Industry

¹³⁹ Marianne Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 13.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 220-1. As in "F394A - I cried at pity - not at pain" (1862).

T'were fitter certifying
For Immortality -¹⁴¹

Although entomologists may be fond of butterflies, Dickinson's speaker laments how others may show a lack of empathy for these insects. One reason butterflies are not certified for "immortality" is that they do not actively "work" as hard as bees and prefer to roam and travel in more nomadic ways. According to Noble's reading, this poem explores "the possibility that a kind of psychological homelessness might preserve one's freedom without actually requiring one to endure poverty;" additionally, people may not sympathise with butterflies because they "do not reinforce conventional middle-class values of modesty and industry."¹⁴² In opposition to sentimental notions that praise and encourage the perfecting of certain virtues in women, such as chastity, modesty, and obedience, as exemplified in Richardson's and Warner's novels; Dickinson's work conveys, as Noble observes, "that sentimental approaches to sympathy are part of the problem, not the solution."¹⁴³ These approaches, however, had a significant impact on how women in general, and women writers in particular, should act, write, and think about what it means to live a meaningful life.

The sentimental discourse produced a feminisation of values and virtues as a result of the dominance of emotion within it. According to Ellis, "an integral part of this gendered transformation of manners was the emergence of a corpus of women's writing that was decorous and virtuous;" additionally, the appreciation of sensibility was deemed as "a feminine attribute."¹⁴⁴ Like Ellis's, Douglas's account thoroughly documents this phenomenon. Douglas explores the close relationship between Victorian and modern mass culture in her book, admitting that "perhaps Victorian sentimentality appeals to us not because it is so remote but because it is so near."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, perhaps the sentimental interpretation of happiness appeals to us because it is the most similar to its modern counterpart. According to Douglas, women increased their power and

¹⁴¹ "F1701A - The butterfly obtains."

¹⁴² Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy*, 222.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 226. Noble's argument also draws from "F238A - How many times these low feet staggered" (1861) in which "Dickinson manages the very difficult task of criticizing false consciousness but not those caught up in it."

¹⁴⁴ Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, 23-4.

¹⁴⁵ Douglas, *Feminization*, 3.

status “through the exploitation of their feminine identity,” as the standards of the time demanded, as well as through the exploitation of their feminine “virtue;” it is through literature that “the Victorian lady and the minister were joining, and changing, the literary scene.”¹⁴⁶ It is worth noting how the trial narrative underpins such a link, given how, as Douglas claims, “they inevitably confused theology with religiosity, religiosity with literature, and literature with self-justification.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, sentimentalism also mixed up self-justification and virtue, virtue and suffering, suffering and trial, and trial with ultimate reward or happiness. For Douglas, “the sentimentalization of theological and secular culture was an inevitable part of the self-evasion of a society both committed to laissez-faire industrial expansion and disturbed by its consequences.”¹⁴⁸ To some extent, Douglas’s views resonate with the nineteenth-century desire and hostility toward happiness, its immediate enjoyable experience and delayed reward, as well as the misery of the trial in contrast to its pleasant gratification at the end.

Some of Dickinson’s speakers did not appear to be “at home” in the vicinity of theological and sentimental approaches to happiness, as they actively embraced suffering in the hope of future reward for the sufferer. In her essay “Emily Dickinson and the Economics of Desire,” Joan Burbick writes:

Obliquely pointing to the religious dictums of her class, Dickinson presents speakers of individual poems as victims within a value system that teaches the virtue of renunciation. As a result, this value system requires self-mutilation and finally death as payment for life.¹⁴⁹

The agreement between those religious dictums and sentimental ones both expands and justifies a renunciation of certain values – such as the value of happiness’s concern – in exchange for a postponed reward after enduring the system’s moral tests. With this in mind, Dickinson’s persona in the following poem carefully examines the ambiguity of the virtue of renunciation:

Renunciation - is a piercing

¹⁴⁶ Douglas, *Feminization*, 7-8. What Stowe called “pink and white tyranny” in 1871. This also connects with *Pamela*’s chastity and her trial in pursue of virtue.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁹ Joan Burbick’s “Emily Dickinson and the Economics of Desire.” In *American Literature* 58, no. 3 (1986): 376.

Virtue -
 The letting go
 A Presence - for an Expectation -
 Not now -
 The putting out of Eyes -
 Just Sunrise -
 Lest Day -
 Day's Great Progenitor -
 Outvie
 Renunciation - is the Choosing
 Against itself -
 Itself to justify
 Unto itself -
 When larger function -
 Make that appear -
 Smaller - that Covered
 Vision - Here -¹⁵⁰

The poem's complex structure reflects the complexity of the concept of renunciation. The first statement confirms renunciation's bittersweet nature as a virtue, and what follows may be interpreted as its elusive temporality, as its impetus is both present and expected in the future. Renunciation is choosing not to choose in terms of a "larger function," a "higher purpose," or "service *with* hope," all of which are directly referenced in the poem that opens this chapter. The repetition of the reflexive pronoun "itself" may imply a gap in knowledge or a blank scene between desire and dread for an event that, due to its ambiguous nature, is difficult to identify and justify. Burbick assures that "through the magic of her art, Dickinson expresses 'having' without the fear of deprivation or the necessity of restraint," as exemplified in her poem "Take all away / from me, but / leave me Ecstasy," where "ecstasy" could signify "poetic reverie."¹⁵¹ As a result, there is no restraint or renunciation within this poetic imagination because it is

¹⁵⁰ "F782A - Renunciation is a piercing virtue" (1863). In this poem, Dickinson offers some word-choices in the next to the last verse: "flooded" and "sated" instead of "Covered."

¹⁵¹ Burbick, "Economics of Desire," 376-7. For Burbick, some examples of Dickinson's poems on transforming renunciation into adaptation are: "F872A - Deprived of other banquet" (1864) and "F995A - The missing all prevented me" (1865). Besides, the poem "F1671B - Take all away from me but leave me ecstasy" (1885) will be further examined in chapter four.

essentially an inner opening to infinite possibilities. According to Martin, Dickinson's work rejects "the assumption that each experience, idea, or event must always be subordinate to another," delving into "the resonance and ambiguity of opposites instead of polarity and stratified differentiation."¹⁵² Dickinson's writings offer an alternative to the standards of her time, as exemplified by religious and affective approaches to living a flourishing life, as well as, as I will discuss later, the popular emphasis on negative emotions ingrained in American lyric sentimentalism.

Dickinson's Work Challenging the Privilege of Negative Affects in Nineteenth Century's (Women) Lyric Sentimentalism

Dickinson's work did not prioritise negative emotions, although these affects provided a socially responsive opportunity for women writers in America. What Virginia Jackson, Marianne Noble, and Eliza Richards look at in their criticism of nineteenth-century American women's writing, according to Zapedowska, is how the vast majority of poets focused on "representations of sorrow and pain."¹⁵³ In their book *Writing Life: Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson*, Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta assert, using Julia Kristeva's theory,¹⁵⁴ that Dickinson's suffering, or personal anguish, "moulded the three major components of the poet's work: the theme, the language, and the form;" consequently, "by using pain as a poetic strategy she transformed her private biography into a literary text."¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, Smith and Kapusta imply that Dickinson's suffering was transformed into metaphor by her awareness of the therapeutic effects of poetry, resulting in "the most vivid and original verse" and allowing her to assist all those who were "gripped by pain."¹⁵⁶ One common observation in their book is Dickinson's portrayal of delight as more ephemeral than pain. As an example:

¹⁵² Martin, *American Triptych*, 82. For instance, "the oxymoron served as the main structure for Dickinson's sense of the indecipherable ambiguity of existence."

¹⁵³ Zapedowska, "Dickinson's Delight," 13.

¹⁵⁴ Cited in Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta, *Writing Life: Suffering as a Poetic Strategy of Emily Dickinson* (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2011), 10. Kristeva's theory suggests that "the earliest anthropological experience" of separation from the mother is the "first signal of human suffering." Likewise, the baby's cry, which represents speech, indicates that "lack is necessary for the sign to emerge."

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

Too happy Time dissolves
itself
And leaves no remnant by -
'Tis Anguish not a Feather
hath
Or too much weight to fly -¹⁵⁷

In this poem, Dickinson's speaker suggests that the experience of delight vanishes faster than the experience of anguish. While pleasant moments leave "no remnant by" and tend to fade quicker, pain feels heavier and has a more lasting effect on people's minds. This could be related to the fact that anguish is linked to danger, and the need to remember that is part of people's survival instinct. In any case, it appears reasonable to associate the experience of joy and delight with the experience of pain and suffering.

Given the trial narrative form's focus on "the virtue of suffering," it is not surprising that American lyric sentimentalism emphasised negative affects after happiness was reified, determined, and transformed into an emotional experience. Considering this, it is essential to look into definitions of happiness in American poetry, as well as the conditions of Dickinson's lyric reception, in order to demonstrate the poet's refusal to accept emotional and religious approaches to a life well lived by focusing on, to use Zapiedowska's formulation, amplitude rather than lack. McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility* (1996) reflects on the relevance of sentimental poetics, presenting the contradictory nature of an affective tendency as a result of "the Age of Reason."¹⁵⁸ McGann explains how these poetries developed "new and non-traditional modes of expression," based on the assumption that "no human action of any consequence is possible – including 'mental' action – that is not led and driven by feeling, affect, emotion."¹⁵⁹ This hypothesis may be linked to Dickinson's "The Service without Hope" and the difficulty of creating modes of interaction that do not have an "Until." McGann also claims that twentieth-century pedagogy established lyric as the poetic form model," after a long process of the "lyricisation of poetry" that Virginia Jackson

¹⁵⁷ "F1182A - Too happy time dissolves itself" (1870).

¹⁵⁸ Cited in McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility*, 2.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

traces back to the eighteenth century.¹⁶⁰ According to Jackson, all poetry was “reduced to lyric,” resulting in a new genre that was “totalized in print” during the nineteenth century.¹⁶¹ One of the primary characteristics of lyric sentimentalism is its emphasis on the privatisation of pain and “the poet's burden of suffering,” as Jackson claims:

While private feeling may seem the point of first-person affective expression, then, the popularity of the genre in the nineteenth century also indicates that sentiment was a public interest, and it is that interest itself that may account for the surcharge of the ‘sentimental’.¹⁶²

It is no surprise, then, that Dickinson's writings were received, read, and plunged into this (female) lyric sentimentalism.

As in the case of learning by contrast, where losses help people better estimate their gains, Dickinson's work acknowledges suffering and pain as required mechanisms to better appreciate delight and joy. In contrast to the trial narrative paradigm, Dickinson's speakers' suffering may serve a purpose, but it is never beyond the concerns of happiness. According to Juhasz's *The Undiscovered Continent*, some of Dickinson's poems demonstrate “that pain must be experienced, because it leads to insight, to knowledge.”¹⁶³ To grasp this insight, Juhasz observes that the poet's work focuses on the “qualities of pain” – its intensity, duration, and evolution – as well as its form, both before and after it appears.¹⁶⁴ For example, in “After great pain, a formal / feeling comes -,” Dickinson's speaker examines the sensation that is left behind when pain disappears.¹⁶⁵ In contrast, the following poem attempts to express the experience of pain itself:

Pain - has an Element
of Blank -
It cannot recollect
When it begun - Or if

¹⁶⁰ Virginia Jackson, “Beforehand,” in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶² Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 210-11.

¹⁶³ Juhasz, *Undiscovered Continent*, 52.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶⁵ “F372A - After great pain a formal feeling comes” (1862).

there were
A time when it was not -

It has no Future - but itself -
Its Infinite contain
Its Past - enlightened to
perceive
New Periods - Of Pain.¹⁶⁶

In this poem, Dickinson's speaker is caught in the middle of a painful experience, making her feel as if there is a "blank" outside the moment itself because it is impossible to recall when the pain began or when it will end. In other words, pain consumes everything. On the one hand, it absorbs the past because the speaker cannot recall not being in pain. It also absorbs the future because the speaker believes that additional pain caused by past pain will plague the future. Interestingly, Dickinson defined tenderness in a very similar way in a letter to Judge Otis P. Lord in 1882: "yet Tenderness has not a Date - it comes - and overwhelms.... The time before it was - was naught, so why establish it? And all the time to come it is, which abrogates the time."¹⁶⁷ Although these two emotional experiences appear diametrically opposed, Dickinson's work, enabled by her own experience, has the capacity to naturally intertwine and connect them.

Referring back to the death of her nephew Gilbert a year after Dickinson's letter to Otis P. Lord, the poet wrote to Susan (mother): "the first section of Darkness is the densest, Dear, After that, Light trembles in –."¹⁶⁸ Even if pain appears to occupy all dimensions of space and time, it will eventually allow "light" to pass through it. Another example is Dickinson's letter to her cousins in 1870, the Norcross sisters: "I suppose the pain is still there, for pain that is worthy does not go so soon. The small can crush the great, however, only temporarily."¹⁶⁹ Again, the poet's letter emphasises the temporal nature of pain and links its intensity to its duration; the greater the loss (or delight), the greater the pain. According to Juhasz, "Dickinson courts all feelings and finds value therein."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ "F760A - Pain has an element of blank" (1863).

¹⁶⁷ L750 (1882).

¹⁶⁸ Leyda, *Years and Hours*, 412. Dickinson's letter to Susan after Gilbert's death in late November 1883.

¹⁶⁹ L357 (1870).

¹⁷⁰ Juhasz, *Undiscovered Continent*, 173.

“Dickinson's power,” observes Juhasz, is “the ability to do her best work. This requires the ability to be her best self, live her best life – and then write about it.”¹⁷¹

In terms of Dickinson's sentimental poetic context, Cheryl Walker investigates and reflects on the diversity of nineteenth-century American women's poetry. Walker, as quoted in Elizabeth Petrino's “Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry,” advocates categorising poets into early national, romantic, realist, and modern as “a useful way to explore the variety and complexity of nineteenth-century American women's poetry.”¹⁷² Walker believes that modern poets resist sentimentalism. This affirmation implies that, to some extent, and to varying degrees, early national poets, romantics, and realists did not oppose sentimentalism. It is therefore interesting to consider which interpretation of happiness might be more prominently depicted in their writings – whether classical, theological, or affective interpretation – and how, or if, Dickinson's writings fit among these categories. However, Walker admits that “women's poems are hybrids, often combining more than one style and literary movement.”¹⁷³ Petrino asserts that, with the exception of Dickinson, “between 1820 and 1885, editors often characterized women's verse as affective, ‘natural,’ and spontaneous and portray women as unconscious wellsprings of emotion.”¹⁷⁴ According to Petrino, Alice Cary's “The Washerwoman” depicts “the tragedy of a woman's plight [Rachel] by sentimentally placing her disappointment in the context of her failed social ambitions [a union with ‘old crazy’ Peter], which were typically fulfilled for women through *marriage*,” and, while the final stanza suggests a “marriage in heaven,” “its ambiguous tone suggests that the outcome may differ from her expectations.”

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 175.

¹⁷² Cited in Elizabeth Petrino, “Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123. Quoted from Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden: Women poets and American Culture before 1900*.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 123. Similarly, different interpretations of happiness might also be combined and blended together as in the case of theological and affective approaches.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 124-6. In recent decades, however, Petrino points out that there is some evidence to suggest that women and men “spheres” were more “fluid” than it was thought. For instance, “male poets, such as Longfellow, Whittier, Freneau, and Emerson, also inscribe sentimental moments or at least reflect beliefs in family and religion that female poets share.”

Her heart had worn her body to
A handful of poor dust, -
Her soul was gone to be arrayed
In marriage-robcs, I trust.¹⁷⁵

To some extent, the trial narrative form at work in Cary's poem is disguised as "tragic." Given that Rachel's expectation of a determined happiness in marriage is not fulfilled, the lack of a "happy ending" implies that her (partial) narrative is unhappy or "tragic." Similarly, her future hopes of a marriage in heaven follow McMahon's and Soni's account of sacrificing happiness in this life for eternal blessedness in heaven. Cary's poem can thus be interpreted as a synthesis of affective and theological interpretations of happiness.

Dickinson's work confronts and refuses the theological, philosophical, and literary modes of representing happiness archetypal of the (sentimental) Victorian period. For Petrino, "like Jackson and Reese's poems, Dickinson's lyrics reveal the individualism, fractured syntax, and relativism that is more characteristic of the modernists than the Victorians."¹⁷⁶ Petrino carefully examines Dickinson's poem "Each life converges to some centre" to demonstrate her point. Its interpretation "conveys the syntactical ambiguity and lack of a perceived philosophical or religious centre" within the poem.¹⁷⁷ In more detail, Petrino conveys that, despite the ungraspable design, "Dickinson argues that there is still a 'Centre' to which 'Expressed - or still -' each human life converges;" however, the poem is unable to pronounce "the indeterminacy of where or what that center might be."¹⁷⁸ Indeed, the failure to ascertain this indeterminacy is closely related to the Solonian interpretation of happiness, in which happiness must remain unspecified – as the effects of its reification will undoubtedly suspend and devalue the concept itself.

Similarly, Dickinson's poem's "centre," or goal, should be left ambiguous. Petrino concludes her analysis by declaring, "paradoxically, although the goal

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 134. Last stanza of Alice Cary's poem "The Washerwoman."

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 138. In a letter to T.W. Higginson, Dickinson comments on Hunt Jackson's *Verses* (1870) by stating: "Mrs. Hunt's poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs-Browning, with the exception of Mrs. Lewes." L368.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 138-9. "F724B - Each life converges to some centre."

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 139.

may be unattained in one lifetime by a single 'Life's low Venture,' eternity ensures that the pursuit will continue again and again."¹⁷⁹ Petrino's words convey a crossover between Dickinson's views and Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence. Similarly, in a letter to Susan, the poem's allusion to a link between the present and eternity, or "present eternity," is articulated: "There is no first, or last, in Forever –" because "it is Centre, there, all the time –."¹⁸⁰ Dickinson's speaker's "centre" could thus be interpreted as the present time. In other words, until death, people live in an eternal "now" that is constantly replaced by, or at odds with, the illusory expectation of tomorrow. Dickinson's personae, in contrast to theological and affective interpretations of happiness that are rooted in a future temporality, are well-grounded in a (contingent) present moment. "More than any other poet," Petrino claims, "Dickinson uses ambiguity and indeterminacy to question the predominant mode of belief while maintaining a radically open poetic form."¹⁸¹

Dickinson's force of happiness and power of poetry takes on new meaning when viewed in light of Jackson's "poetics of misery." Jackson's account examines the historiography of Dickinson's production and reception in order to comprehend the force of suffering in the context of nineteenth-century lyric sentimentalism by posing the question, "what if Dickinson did not write lyric poems?." ¹⁸² Although Dickinson's lyricism has traditionally governed "all statements about all aspects of Dickinson's writing," according to Jackson, this judgement is both decontextualised and mysticised.¹⁸³ Scholars such as Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart, among others, have attempted to deconstruct those "genre distinctions," arguing for Dickinson's deliberate artistic integrity rather than lyricism.¹⁸⁴ According to Miller, the lyric has been associated with "Sappho and the feminine" for more than a century, while the epic has been associated with "masculine heroics and makers." ¹⁸⁵ However, "Dickinson regarded the poet as powerful and poetry as an expression rivalling divine

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁸⁰ H B56A (1864).

¹⁸¹ Petrino, "American Women's Poetry," 139.

¹⁸² Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 53.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 53-5. For Jackson, "it is the literary criticism since Higginson [Dickinson's first editor] that has created the discourse of lyric reading that in turn editors and readers have recognized in Dickinson."

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸⁵ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 25.

epiphany in its ability to inspire, not as effeminate;” she associated poetry with action and power dynamics.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, Deppman suggests that Dickinson’s trying-to-think poems represent “a new generic shape for the lyric.”¹⁸⁷ Despite this evidence, her writings – and Dickinson herself – became the most prominent exponents of nineteenth-century lyric sentimentalism by viewing pain as the emblem and hallmark. The importance of delight in Dickinson’s poetry is highlighted in Zapedowska’s essay, which challenges the traditional portrayal of Dickinson as a poet of pain, suffering, and renunciation.

In Dickinson’s late writings, the theme of delight becomes more prominent. “No lodging can be had for the delights that come to earth to stay, but no apartment find and ride away,” she wrote in a previously mentioned letter to her cousin Louise Norcross.¹⁸⁸ The experience of delight is hardly adherent and easily lost in this prose fragment, as in “Too happy Time dissolves / itself.” According to Zapedowska, after 1861, “happiness often becomes an object of philosophical contemplation, a theoretical condition that can be dissected and assessed.”¹⁸⁹ This statement resonates well with the distinction between classical and modern approaches to happiness. While happiness, or a life well lived, refers to the sum of life’s experiences in the former, happiness is displaced into the domain of emotional experience in the latter due to the effects of the trial narrative form. Although Juhasz’s position on “abstemiousness over joy” may contradict Zapedowska’s, the latter insists that Dickinson’s writings saw happiness as “the substance of life,” as in Dickinson’s poem “To be alive - is Power -.”¹⁹⁰ This study, like Zapedowska’s, is based on the assumption that Dickinson’s poems and letters frequently acknowledge the intrinsic value of existence. In a letter to T.W. Higginson, for example, the poet wrote in 1870: “I find ecstasy in living - the mere sense of living is joy enough.”¹⁹¹ In other words, living does not require any additional purpose or external reward.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸⁷ Cited in Miller, *Reading in Time*, 27-8. As Miller observes, Dickinson discusses “poetry” rather than the “lyric,” a term she never employs in her work.

¹⁸⁸ L362 (1871).

¹⁸⁹ Zapedowska, “Dickinson’s Delight,” 9. As in “F1718A - Rather arid delight.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 10. “F876B - To be alive is power” (1864) will be further analysed in chapter four in light of existential interpretations of happiness.

¹⁹¹ L342A (1870).

¹⁹² This idea will be further explored in light of Nietzsche’s and Camus’s views in chapter four.

Life on Earth for Dickinson meets all of the criteria for being considered a paradise. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland in 1873, for example, the poet stated: "I have never believed [Paradise] to be a superhuman site. Eden, always eligible, is peculiarly so this noon."¹⁹³ Zapedowska notes that Dickinson shared her poem "Take all away from me but leave me ecstasy" – which emphasises "the supreme value of happiness" – with several friends in 1885, a year before her death.¹⁹⁴ By linking Dickinson's views on "happiness preceding suffering" with Levinas' concept of "the happiness of being," where "the fulfilment of happiness" represents "the original state against which one measures suffering and loss,"¹⁹⁵ Zapedowska's account embraces Darwin's intuition on the survival of the happiest. In a related manner, Zapedowska's interpretation of Dickinson's poem opening "None can experience stint" asserts that "deprivation can be recognized only by reference to original fulfilment," which complicates, as previously stated, "the prevailing image of Dickinson as a poet of renunciation."¹⁹⁶ The following poem is central to Zapedowska's point of view:

Unto the
Whole - how
add?
Has "All" a further
Realm -
Or Utmost
an Ulterior?

Oh, Subsidy
of Balm!¹⁹⁷

According to Zapedowska's interpretation, "the speaker attempts to imagine something beyond the 'All' and comprehend the 'All' through its boundaries;" however, this All is "literally impossible to contain in the mind."¹⁹⁸ This concept is consistent with Solonian happiness and the impossibility of determining "All"

¹⁹³ L391 (1873). In this letter, Dickinson also enclosed the poem "F1285C - The most triumphant bird" (1873).

¹⁹⁴ Zapedowska, "Dickinson's Delight," 10.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 11. "F870A - None can experience stint" (1864).

¹⁹⁷ "F1370A - Unto the whole how add?" (1875).

¹⁹⁸ Zapedowska, "Dickinson's Delight," 1.

before people die. It is also related to Lear's critique of Aristotle's virtue theory and the inability to judge whether or not a life is worth living while it is still ongoing. For Zapedowska, "while the poem, by its own admission, fails to theorize happiness, it rhetorically enacts the futility of its endeavor," because it considers that "happiness is an 'All' with no exterior," and "it cannot be approached from without."¹⁹⁹ According to Dickinson and Solon, thus, the futility of defining happiness displays the impossibility of determining the idea *a priori*.

Dickinson's writings approach emotional interdependence from a nondualistic perspective by not emphasising negative emotions. As Zapedowska suggests, Dickinson's work and poetry "extends between the emotional, conceptual, and rhetorical extremes of 'All' and 'missing all'."²⁰⁰ The concept of happiness is central to Dickinson's work. It is worth noting that happiness as a theme may be associated with classical approaches to living a life worth living, whereas happiness as an emotion may be associated with a sentimental theory of the concept. Taking both instances into consideration, Zapedowska's findings demonstrate Dickinson's poetic lexicon of joy "as varied as that of sorrow," as well as the poet's persevering belief that poetic subjectivity emerges more in amplitude than in lack.²⁰¹ As Dickinson admitted in this letter to Louise Norcross: "affection is like bread, unnoticed till we starve, and then we dream of it;" therefore, feeling and affection in any of its modalities is more needed and valued when it is absent.²⁰² For Dickinson's persona, the absence of emotion is more terrifying than the intensity of it:

Whether the poetic act is painful, pleasant, or simultaneously painful and pleasant, whether it creates or threatens to destroy, for Dickinson it results from,

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 2-3. Zapedowska examines "F1370A - Unto the whole how add?" in relation to "F995A - The missing all prevented me" (1865). For Zapedowska, Paula Bennet is "one of the few scholars for whom Dickinson's 'All' carries more substance than 'missing all'."

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 4

²⁰¹ Ibid., 13. For instance, synonyms for happiness in Rosembaum's concordance to the poems: "delight, transport, rapture, bliss, ecstasy, contentment, glee, pleasure, gaiety, balm, an Eden." As Zapedowska points out, "poetry arises from a sense of emotional, intellectual, and verbal abundance that begs to be expressed in language."

²⁰² L379.

and produces, excess rather than lack, fulfillment rather than frustration, 'All' rather than 'missing all'.²⁰³

Thus, in Dickinson's viewpoint, the simultaneity of affective responses is a condition ingrained within an individual's mortal existence – since gain invariably entails loss and vice versa.²⁰⁴ Similarly, this contingency should be cherished rather than feared, embraced rather than rejected, provided that no matter what effect it has – or the circumstances in which an individual must cope with it – there will always be learning after the experience:

We knew not that
we were to live -
Nor when - we are
to die -
Our ignorance our
Cuirass is -
We wear Mortality
As lightly as an
Option Gown
Till asked to take it
off -
By his intrusion, God
is known -
It is the same
with Life -²⁰⁵

Life is known by the intrusion of death – as well as God. Dickinson's speaker celebrates life's unpredictability because “our ignorance our Cuirass is -.” Nobody chooses to live – to be born – and no one knows when “we are to die;” it is precisely this unawareness, this unknown, that is expressed in this poem as a required – dreaded as well as necessary – condition. Humans should not take anything for granted, assuming they are unaware of the time when their mortality will be “taken off.” As a result, the ways in which individuals value and appreciate their own existence form the foundation of their responses to the rationality of

²⁰³ Zapedowska, “Dickinson’s Delight,” 20. Additionally, Zapedowska claims that it should not be denied that many Dickinson’s poems also originate in negative emotion.

²⁰⁴ In her letter L399, Dickinson wrote: “Parting is one of the exactions of a Mortal Life.”

²⁰⁵ F1481A - We knew not that we were to live.

emotions. Dickinson “upsets the expectation that nineteenth-century women write poetess verse” by insisting on a poetic subjectivity born of delight.²⁰⁶ Dickinson was a poet, and through her poetry, she explored and analysed a wide range of human emotions without favouring negative affects.

Alternatives to Theological and Sentimental Interpretations of Happiness in Dickinson’s Anglo-American Literary Context

Dickinson's writings demonstrate that creativity can be rooted in both delight and suffering. The power of (writing) poetry, in Dickinson's opinion, is ecstatic and healing, as well as a source of infinite knowledge, openness, and possibility that allows the creation, manifestation, development, and expansion of her various voices. For Bennet, “Dickinson wrote many poems on the role of the artist and the ontological status of art.”²⁰⁷ As shown in this poem’s first stanza:

This was a Poet -
It is That
Distills amazing sense
From Ordinary Meanings -
And Attar so immense²⁰⁸

One could argue that the ability to extract complex and extraordinary meanings from the mundane is a valuable and practical skill. Similarly, Dickinson's speaker emphasises the intrinsic value of poetry and being a poet – “And Attar so immense.” According to Miller's analysis, Dickinson's nonspecific pronouns have numerous references as well as remarkable significance. In this case, the opening could imply that “the poet is a part of [her] world and of [her] poems.”²⁰⁹ Dickinson's personae are fully integrated and constantly merging in these worlds because “The Poets light but / Lamps -,” which allow readers to see.²¹⁰ In contrast to traditional representations of happiness in nineteenth-century sentimental literature in the United States, Dickinson's Anglo-American literary context offered a viable alternative to affective and theological interpretations of a life worth living.

²⁰⁶ Zapedowska, “Dickinson’s Delight,” 20.

²⁰⁷ Bennett, “Emily Dickinson and Her American Women Poet Peers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 228.

²⁰⁸ “F446A - This was a poet” (1862).

²⁰⁹ Miller, *Poet’s Grammar*, 78.

²¹⁰ “F930A - The poets light but lamps” (1865).

For instance, William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Emily Brontë were all major influences on the poet's work and thought, and their writings enabled Dickinson's speakers to challenge major reifications of happiness.

Unlike the aforementioned writers that Dickinson esteemed and cherished, most Victorian women's poetry, as Angela Leighton points out, "grows out of a struggle with and against a highly moralised celebration of women's sensibility." Rooted in the trial narrative form and the perception of life as a moral test that must be endured, Leighton's account highlights "the ideal of creative but suffering femininity."²¹¹ As a result, suffering is thought to be the driving force behind creativity and authenticity. Historically associated with the female poet:

Renunciation, rejection and despair are thus gestures loaded with inherited, mythic meaning for the woman poet who, in the wake of high Romanticism, was still very conscious that being a poet was not simply a professional occupation, but an idea to be invented and lived out.²¹²

And Dickinson certainly reinvented herself through poetry and vice versa. There was another poet who encouraged Dickinson to truly "see." In Shakespeare's words, "When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see," which Dickinson paraphrased as "What I see not, I better see."²¹³

Shakespeare's legacy and influence in Dickinson's work – as well as in American culture – is undeniable, and she refers to him by name in one poem and thirteen letters; in addition, four other poems "undisputedly refer to Shakespeare," according to Finnerty's account.²¹⁴ According to Howe, "Dickinson's poems are monologues without a named narrator, their supreme source is Shakespeare."²¹⁵ Dickinson's most famous quotes on the English poet are: "While Shakespeare remains Literature is firm –," "He has had his Future who has found Shakespeare," and, in a letter addressed to Susan, Dickinson

²¹¹ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 3.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹³ "F869A - What I see not I better see" (1864). Shakespeare's Sonnet 43.

²¹⁴ Finnerty, "Dickinson's Shakespeare," 1. Those poems are: "F776 – Drama's Vitallest Expression is the Common Day" (1863), "F266 – What would I give to see his face?" (1861), "F1489 – A Route of Evanescence" (1879), and "F869 – What I see not, I better see" (1864).

²¹⁵ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 72.

declared: “with the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living – To say that sincerely is strange praise.”²¹⁶ Shakespeare was a source of literary and philosophical insight for the poet. Possibly, Dickinson's nondualistic emotional perception was influenced by Shakespeare's long-term effort to deconstruct the polarisation of experience, since “my grief lies onward and my joy behind,” as he said in Sonnet 50.²¹⁷ Rich's essay asserts that Dickinson had “a mind engaged in a lifetime's musing on essential problems of language, identity, separation, relationship, the integrity of the self; a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare.”²¹⁸ In light of Shakespeare's pivotal role in Dickinson's work and life, Finnerty's account situates his writings within both the nineteenth-century American context and Dickinson's. Her correspondence, according to Finnerty, demonstrates that “Shakespeare was integrated into Dickinson's life and the lives of her correspondents” and that “his words are used to reiterate and clarify Dickinson's own.”²¹⁹ For example, “that sort must heal itself,” a reference to Macbeth, was sent in three letters to three different correspondents.²²⁰ Another example is Othello's “he that is robb'd, not wanting what is stolen, Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all,” which Dickinson paraphrased as “he that is robbed and smiles, steals something from the thief.”²²¹

Dickinson's later works frequently centred on Shakespeare's tragic characters and their death scenes.²²² In a letter to Mary Higginson enclosing a flower in 1877, Dickinson wrote: “I send you a flower from my garden – Though it die in reaching you, you will know it lived when it left my hand – Hamlet wavered for all of us.”²²³ According to Finnerty, Dickinson's narrative of the flower's story, and her reference to Hamlet, alludes to “the flower's ‘unseen’ tragic story;” furthermore, “while Mrs. Higginson shall only witness the final scene of the

²¹⁶ In letters L368, L402, and L757 respectively.

²¹⁷ Shakespeare, Sonnet 50. This assertion is the epigraph to one of Eliot's *Middlemarch* chapters (Book VIII, Chapter LXXXII), a book that Dickinson loved.

²¹⁸ Rich, “Vesuvius at Home,” 185

²¹⁹ Finnerty, “Dickinson's Shakespeare,” 139.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 133. Those letters were: L332 to Perez Cowan (1869), L669 to the Norcross' sisters (1880), and L986 to Susan's brother, Thomas Gilbert, after the death of his brother (1885).

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 135. In *Othello* (I, iii, 192-4).

²²² *Ibid.*, 232.

²²³ L512 (1877).

tragedy of Dickinson's flower, its entire story, through her reference to Hamlet's universal wavering, becomes itself representative."²²⁴ In contrast to affective and theological interpretations, in which only the story's ending appears relevant, and in accordance with Solonian happiness, Dickinson's story represents the entire trajectory of the flower, not just its outcome. Similarly, Hamlet's request to Horatio to "report his cause" before he dies emphasises the importance of the totality of experiences.²²⁵

Dickinson's "references to Hamlet are commonplace as he symbolises for her the intellectual struggle with the mysterious questions of life and death," writes Finnerty.²²⁶ People's lives, as expressed in Dickinson's poem "Drama Vitalest Expression is the Common Day," are filled with unique and recurring daily "dramas" and "tragedies" that are surrounded by uncertainty and mystery. According to Stanley Cavell's "Hamlet's Burden of Proof," "the play interprets the taking of one's place in the world as a process of mourning, as if there is a taking up of the world that is humanly a question of giving it up."²²⁷ The simultaneity of "taking up" and "giving up" parallels Dickinson's learning by opposites and the estimation of gain through loss, or success through failure. Soni's account, like Cavell's, suggests that happiness can only be judged by considering people's finiteness and mortality, as well as through the process of mourning. As Finnerty demonstrates, Shakespeare "became very important to her as she faced her own mortality."²²⁸ Shakespeare's tragic perspective on existential matters was thus a far more reliable source of knowledge and guidance for Dickinson than sentimental standpoints.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work, particularly her epic poem *Aurora Leigh*, influenced Dickinson's thought and career and served as an alternative to affective interpretations of a life worth living. According to Alison Chapman, "as an aspirational and overtly foreign precursor, Barrett Browning was seen as a

²²⁴ Finnerty, "Dickinson's Shakespeare," 232.

²²⁵ Dickinson references this scene in L1028 (1886) to Susan: "Do you remember what whispered to 'Horatio'?"

²²⁶ Finnerty, "Dickinson's Shakespeare," 252. One example is the aforementioned letter to Samuel Bowles Jr. in which Dickinson referred to "the Prince Question."

²²⁷ Stanley Cavell, "Hamlet's Burden of Proof," in *Disowning Knowledge, in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 189.

²²⁸ Finnerty, "Dickinson's Shakespeare," 233. Other Shakespearean tragedies mentioned in Dickinson's writings include *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Ophelia and Desdemona's death scenes, and Hamlet and Romeo.

transnational poetess who offered a model for American women's public agency."²²⁹ For Leighton, Browning, influenced by Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, refused to accept the "restrictions of femininity" imposed by Victorian and sentimental culture.²³⁰ In her elegies, Dickinson emphasises, as Petrino's essay implies, "how the act of reading her poems transforms the speaker," rather than Browning as a literary celebrity.²³¹ Dickinson wrote four tribute poems to Browning, and in "I think I was enchanted," she described her reading of *Aurora Leigh* as a "Lunacy of Light:"

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl -
I read that Foreign Lady -
The Dark - felt beautiful -

And whether it was noon
at night -
Or only Heaven - at noon -
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell -²³² (first two stanzas)

According to Chapman's analysis, Dickinson's encounter with Browning's epic poem had a seductive and transformative effect, similar to a spiritual conversion that was "both saintly and magical" as well as "present and vibrant."²³³

Like Chapman, McIntosh asserts that Dickinson's reading of *Aurora Leigh* "is presented as an outrageous but plausible alternative to a Calvinist conversion experience," since "the 'change' in a traditional conversion cannot be 'defined' or 'explained'."²³⁴ Dickinson's life and poetic persona were undeniably influenced by Browning's epic poem, precisely because the experience of reading her could not be defined. By depicting the lives of two "unmarried women: Aurora the poet and

²²⁹ Alison Chapman, "'I think I was enchanted': Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Haunting of American Women Poets" in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy Frank (London: Routledge, 2007), 111.

²³⁰ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 78-80.

²³¹ Petrino, "'I went to Thank Her -': Dickinson's tributes to Literary Celebrities," in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 26, no 2 (2017): 17.

²³² F627A - I think I was enchanted.

²³³ Chapman, "I think I was enchanted," 116.

²³⁴ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 133.

Marian Erle the fallen woman,” Browning's *Aurora Leigh* challenges the sentimental reification of happiness as a reward in marriage.²³⁵ The events in this epic poem are enclosed by Aurora's calling to be a poet:

I choose to walk at all risks. - Here, if heads
That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,
For my part I choose headaches -²³⁶

Aurora's determination to become a poet by walking “at all risks” and choosing “headaches” may parallel Dickinson's early ambition when she wrote to her friend Abiah Root: “the shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea.”²³⁷ Similarly, buffeting “the sea” entails selecting risks and headaches. Another example of Browning's tendency to defy convention through Aurora's character is:

I had my wish,
To read and meditate the thing I would,
To fashion all my life upon my thought,
And marry or not marry. Henceforth none
Could disapprove me, vex me, hamper me.²³⁸

Aurora emphasises her autonomy and will to choose whatever she wants in this instance, rather than having to conform to pre-established Victorian patterns and conducts of behaviour. Nobody will be able to disapprove, vex, or hinder her if she is faithful to herself, as Dickinson's poems frequently assert.

In terms of marriage, Aurora does not regard it as The Event upon which her entire life should be settled or focused. On the contrary, she admits that she may “marry or not marry,” and that this circumstance is neither fixed nor predictable. Aurora's response to Romney's marriage proposal in Book II goes as follows:

If I married him,
I should not dare to call my soul my own
Which so he had bought and paid for...²³⁹

²³⁵ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 103.

²³⁶ Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Second book, lines 106-8.

²³⁷ L39 (1850).

²³⁸ Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Second book, lines 955-9.

²³⁹ Ibid., Second book, lines 785-7.

Marriage seems to be a renunciation for Aurora – much like Dickinson's wife poems or early thoughts about conversion – and it does not appear to be a reward or an honourable position. Rather, it seems that she is being sold, or that she is giving up her true vocation, which is to be a poet. When considering her life's purpose, Aurora embraces the Solonian proverb:

Shall I fail?
The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
'Let no one be called happy till his death.'
To which I add, - Let no one till his death
Be called unhappy.
Measure not the work
Until the day's out and the labour done,
Then bring your gauges.²⁴⁰

Happiness, or a life worth living, cannot be measured or determined "until the day's out and the labour done," or until death. And if happiness cannot be determined until death, no one should be "called unhappy" until then.

Browning's addition to Solon's proverb underscores that contingency can go either way. Although the conditions for happiness exist all along, the fact that a person cannot be pronounced "happy" while living may be perceived as discouraging. However, the inability to be pronounced "unhappy" may encourage individuals to continue pursuing their specific endeavour. In any case, Dickinson admired Browning's insight, so having "Mrs. Browning's endorsement" for Solonian happiness may imply Dickinson's agreement with it.²⁴¹ As in Dickinson's case, *Aurora Leigh* served as an inspiration for another writer, George Eliot, whose heroine Armgart shared some of Aurora's perspectives on the meaning and consequences of marriage for women, she declared:

I will not be
A pensioner in marriage. Sacraments
Are not to feed the paupers of the world.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., Fifth book, lines 73-9.

²⁴¹ In letter L368 to Higginson in 1871, Dickinson wrote when they were discussing about books: "'Bells and pomegranates' I never saw but have Mrs. Browning's endorsement."

If he were generous – I am generous too.²⁴²

Marriage, according to Leighton, was “a state of sentimental pauperism, of continuing gratitude to the charity of men” for Browning's and Eliot's characters, Aurora and Armgart.²⁴³ In the same breath, neither marriage nor heaven, as a predictor of happiness or as a reward in the afterlife, gave Dickinson's speakers any solace.

Dickinson made numerous references to George Eliot's works in her letters, indicating that Eliot was one of her favourite writers.²⁴⁴ Regarding the influence of classicism in Anglo-American cultural and literary context in the nineteenth century, Winterer assures that “among the most compelling aspects of the study of antiquity was classical philology, the critical study of ancient texts.... Joseph Scaliger, Isaac Casaubon, and Richard Bentley, for example, stand out as giants of early modern scholarship.”²⁴⁵ Therefore, “it is no surprise that George Eliot chose the name Casaubon for the passionless, pedantic classicist in her novel *Middlemarch*.”²⁴⁶ Dickinson wrote the following in a letter to her cousins Frances and Louise Norcross in 1873: “what do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory except that in a few instances this ‘mortal has already put on immortality’.”²⁴⁷ Given that Eliot's voice can still be heard today, this can allude to the eternity of her words. In light of this, Eliot's *Middlemarch* will be explored as a rebuke to the sentimental approach to happiness, with special emphasis on its conclusion as well as some chapters' epigraphs. In Book V, Chapter XLIV opens as follows:

I would not creep along the coast, but steer
Out in mid-sea, by guidance of the stars.²⁴⁸

²⁴² Cited in Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 104.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁴⁴ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 19. Some references to George Eliot in Dickinson's writings are: in L456 (1870), Dickinson wrote, “she is the lane to the Indies, Columbus was looking for;” in L710 (1881) after Eliot's death, “the look of the words [stating the death of George Eliot] as they lay in the print I shall never forget. Not their face in the casket could have had the eternity to me. Now, *my* George Eliot.”

²⁴⁵ Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 7.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴⁷ L389 (1873).

²⁴⁸ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 2000), Book V, Chapter XLIV, 271.

Because no reference is provided, it is assumed that these are Eliot's verses, and they certainly echo Dickinson's fragment sent to Abiah Root, in which the poet stated that she would rather take risks by buffeting the sea than be safer by the shore. Dickinson's letter to Abiah continued: "I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more."²⁴⁹ A young Dickinson seems to prefer, as Eliot's speaker claims, the "guidance of the stars" over the guidance of religious faith. And this decision obviously involves chance, risk, and danger; however, this danger may also be a source of insight and esteem, as one of Dickinson's poems assures by concluding: "Danger - deepens Sum -."²⁵⁰

Similarly, Eliot's verses express a preference for being "out in mid-sea" rather than being protected by the coast, and to follow your own will and intuition. This idea of being true to yourself is emphasised in Sir Henry Wooton's poem "The Character of a Happy Life," which opens Chapter LVI:

How happy is he born and taught
That serveth not another's will;
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his only skill!
.
This man is freed from servile bands
Of hope to rise, or fear to fall;
Lord of himself, though not of lands;
And having nothing, yet hath all.²⁵¹

According to Wooton's speaker, the only way to free oneself from external assessment is to be truthful to oneself – that is, to be one's own master. Furthermore, being "Lord of oneself" may be regarded as the most valuable asset for a mortal being. In a similar vein, several Dickinson's speakers repeatedly convey this message. In this short poem, for example, Dickinson's persona ensures the extent to which freedom originates within:

²⁴⁹ L39 (1850).

²⁵⁰ "F865A - Expectation is contentment" (1864).

²⁵¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book VI, Chapter LVI, 341.

No Prisoner be -
Where Liberty -
Himself - abide with Thee ⁻²⁵²

Likewise, the next stanza emphasises the importance of being your own master and being true to yourself in order to avoid deception:

He who in Himself believes -
Fraud cannot presume -
Faith is Constancy's Result -
And assumes - from Home ⁻²⁵³ (First stanza)

Unlike religious faith, which is based on external adoration and worship, Dickinson's speaker believes that a consistent faith in oneself is the path to inner freedom.

Both Dickinson's and Eliot's speakers are aware of the limitations and constraints that cultural values and conventionalisms instilled during the Victorian era may impose on individuals' quest for freedom in this life. This idea is cleverly addressed in *Middlemarch*'s final scene:

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.²⁵⁴

Like Solonian happiness, Eliot's narrator assures that the wholeness of life's experiences cannot be inferred from a fragment. Even though the novel has come to an end, the adventures of its characters continue because they are still alive – figuratively – and events continue to happen to them. Every incident will lead to another, and every assumed ending will lead to a new beginning, until the “real finale,” or death, occurs. As a result, the marriages in *Middlemarch* are inconclusive; they are simply new beginnings:

²⁵² “F742A - No prisoner be” (1863).

²⁵³ “F835A - He who in himself believes” (1864). Dickinson proposes an alternative word in the last verse, “infers” instead of “assumes.”

²⁵⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 510.

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic – the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.²⁵⁵

Eliot's finale dismisses happiness as a reward in the event of marriage. Similarly, it questions the concept of episodic happiness as well as the temporality of the trial narrative form, which employs a fragment as a sample of wholeness, despite the fragment's typicality. As J. Hillis Miller's essay assures, "as long as the person is alive no safe generalizations about the texture of human life may be made."²⁵⁶ As long as a person is alive, possibilities remain, as Dickinson suggested in a letter to her cousin Louise in 1859: "you and I might tug for a life, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds, and we all can listen. What if we learn, ourselves, some day! Who indeed knows?."²⁵⁷ Because no one knows whether people will learn or not, it is everyone's responsibility to keep "looking on," since, to paraphrase one of Dickinson's aphorisms, we are "finite to fail but infinite to venture." This constant need to venture is shared by some of Eliot's characters and Dickinson's speakers, as is their struggle to embrace the Victorian limitations imposed on women's (proper) behaviour.

The Brontë sisters, whose lives and writings Dickinson loved, were characterised by a notable lack of respect for the expectations of proper feminine decorum.²⁵⁸ According to Howe, a careful study of Emily Brontë's "life and work is crucial for understanding Dickinson."²⁵⁹ Given that this section's length does not permit a thorough examination of Emily Brontë's life and work, I will focus on *Wuthering Heights*, along with a few poems and literary elements that helped to

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 510-1.

²⁵⁶ J. Hillis Miller, "A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing is Concluded: Middlemarch's 'Finale,'" in *Middlemarch in the 21st Century*, edited by Karen Chase (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 134-35.

²⁵⁷ L199 (1859).

²⁵⁸ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 60. In L742 to Elizabeth Holland in 1881, Dickinson wrote: "reminded again of gigantic Emily Brontë, of whom her Charlotte said, 'Full of ruth for others, on herself she had no mercy.' The hearts that never lean, must fall. To moan is justified."

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 61.

clarify Dickinson's objection to the notion that happiness is the reward of marriage or heaven. Brontë challenges both assumptions at once in *Wuthering Heights* through Catherine's dream:

I was going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy. That will do to explain my secret, as well as the other. I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven.²⁶⁰

In her dream, Catherine does neither find comfort in heaven, where she was sobbing and desiring to return to her mortal existence, nor in Linton's marriage, provided that he is not the person she is in love with. The passage thus highlights Catherine's suspicion towards the promise of happiness as a reward in both heaven and marriage. Brontë's character is not reassured by the prospect of heavenly blessings or marital happiness, and her predicament may have influenced some of Dickinson's speakers' mistrust in these matters.

Finnerty's "Transatlantic Women Writers" investigates how Catherine's marriage concerns are exemplified in Dickinson's wife poems, such as "I'm 'wife' - I've finished that -."²⁶¹ Besides, he examines the ways in which Catherine's apprehension about the heights of heaven parallels Dickinson's speaker's discomfort.²⁶² According to Finnerty, by equating marriage and heaven as reifications of happiness, Brontë's characters and Dickinson's speakers are "sarcastically suggesting that neither offers women happiness or fulfilment, despite their promises of security and status."²⁶³ Instead, these promises may be unappealing to Dickinson's persona, who claims:

The Fact
that Earth
is Heaven -
Whether Heaven
is Heaven or

²⁶⁰ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 1990), 62.

²⁶¹ "F225A - I'm 'wife' - I've finished that."

²⁶² For instance, in "F437B - I never felt at home below" and "F268A - Why do they shut me out of heaven?"

²⁶³ Finnerty, "Transatlantic Women Writers," in *Emily Dickinson in Context*, 113.

not
If not an
Affidavit

Of that
specific Spot
Not only must
confirm us
That it is not
for us
But that it
would affront
us

To dwell in
such a place ⁻²⁶⁴

Dickinson's speaker recognises that whether or not there is a heaven, the fact that individuals have the opportunity to live on Earth should be sufficient reason, or confirmation, that heaven is not suitable for mortal beings. As in Catherine's dream, it is possible that people would be disappointed "to dwell in such a place." As a result, heaven appears to be irrelevant, regardless of whether the possibility exists or not.

One of Dickinson's favourite poems was Emily Brontë's "No Coward Soul," which was chosen to be read at her funeral. Dickinson included a stanza from this poem in a letter to Maria Whitney in 1884, along with the question: "Did you read Emily Brontë's marvellous verse?:"

Though Earth and Man were gone
And Suns and Universes ceased to be
And thou wert left alone,
Every Existence would exist in thee ⁻²⁶⁵

There is no doubt that Brontë's work was a source of inspiration for Dickinson, as evidenced by some of the topics that both writers discussed. In *Wuthering*

²⁶⁴ "F1435A - The fact that earth is heaven" (1877).

²⁶⁵ L948 (1884).

Heights, as Carol Jacobs puts it, “one dreams of finding its center only to find that the center is a dream.”²⁶⁶ This “omitted centre” is characteristic of Dickinson’s work. This omission, as in “Each Life Converges to Some Centre -,” does not deny its presence somewhere; rather, it argues that its position varies depending on each individual and fluctuates depending on the circumstances. Another point of agreement among these authors is their strategies for resisting (conventional) assumptions about gender performativity. According to Finnerty, Brontë’s blurring of these notions in her novels is similar to “Dickinson’s penchant for gender-blurring constructions, of identities composed of male and female parts.”²⁶⁷ Howe claims that Brontë and Dickinson were “two of the self-emancipated ‘little women’ Nietzsche was so fond of scorning,” and that they “often anticipate him in their writing.”²⁶⁸ Dickinson and Brontë “felt God and Nature separating from each other” by rebelling against “a sin-obsessed Fundamentalist religion.”²⁶⁹

Dickinson’s writings, influenced by an Anglo-American literary context that stood firm against dominant interpretations of happiness in the nineteenth century, resist the hermeneutics of trial imposed by theological and sentimental approaches. Similarly, her poems confronted the partiality and incongruity of episodic happiness by embracing the totality of life’s experiences inherent in classical interpretations of a life worth living and, in particular, by appreciating the infinite possibilities that a mortal life provides. Dickinson’s work, like Solonian happiness, estimates the value of everyday occurrences within the openness and uncertainty of chance. “Dickinson refused to be diminished by the constraints of feminine virtue and propriety that paralyzed so many Victorian women,” Martin writes.²⁷⁰ Beginning with Dickinson’s “The Service without Hope,” this chapter aimed to present the difficult task that appreciating the intrinsic value of actions without a further purpose, aim, or reward represents for individuals. Dickinson’s speakers frequently reflect on the near impossibility of acting in the absence of “an Until.” Likewise, it appears exceedingly difficult for affective and theological

²⁶⁶ Carol Jacobs, “At the Threshold of Interpretation,” in *Wuthering Heights*, 353.

²⁶⁷ Finnerty, “Transatlantic Women Writers,” 113. For instance, “Queen-page,” “Earl-girl,” and “Woman-boy.”

²⁶⁸ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 62. To some extent, Dickinson’s views on happiness will be analysed in light of Nietzsche’s, and vice versa, in chapter four.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 77. This idea will be further explored in chapter three in light of Emerson’s transcendentalism.

²⁷⁰ Martin, *American Triptych*, 80.

interpretations of happiness to estimate the inherent value of life in itself, as both notions are deeply rooted in happiness's rewards, goals, and ends rather than cherishing its processes, means, and possibilities. Therefore, this study argues for Dickinson's poetic resistance to happiness's reification in nineteenth-century American sentimentalism.

By considering the poet's views in light of Solonian happiness, I have explored the ways in which most Dickinson's speakers value the contingency of existence and regard the question of happiness as the question of our lives, as well as how her writings oppose the trial paradigm and reject the reification of happiness as a reward. Given the centrality of negative emotions in sentimental discourse, Dickinson's poems offer an alternative to theological and sentimental interpretations of happiness by emphasising the intrinsic value of being alive, the significance of each "now," and the infinite possibilities that people's finite condition offers. With this in mind, the following chapter examines how, as Howe observes, "Dickinson takes sovereignty away from God and bestows it on the Woods."²⁷¹ It argues that happiness in Emerson's transcendentalism sheds light on Dickinson's interpretation of a life worth living. It also looks into the impact of theological and sentimental interpretations in Dickinson's romantic context, viewing romanticism "as an advanced state of sentimentalism," as McGann puts it, and influenced by "the traditions of sensibility and sentiment."²⁷² Michael Ferber also notes that romanticism may be classified as part of the bigger and more widespread sentimental movement. However, Dickinson, like the romantics, rebelled against the sensibility cult by going beyond its constraints.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 80.

²⁷² McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*, 1-2.

²⁷³ Michael Ferber, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

Chapter 3: Dickinson's Writings Reshaping Transcendental Notions of Happiness

Is Bliss then, such Abyss -
I must not put my foot amiss
For fear I spoil my shoe?

I'd rather suit my foot
Than save my Boot -
For yet to buy another Pair
Is possible,
At any store -

But Bliss, is sold just once.
The Patent lost
None buy it any more -
Say, Foot, decide the point!
The Lady cross, or not?
Verdict for Boot!¹

Unlike theological and sentimental approaches, which assume that happiness's reward belongs to the future, this poem encourages its speaker to make a final decision about the kind of life she wants to live right now: whether to take risks and explore the abyss, or the unknown, in order to make the most of her life; or to avoid spoiling "her shoe" and live enclosed within the limits of what she already knows, or is comfortable with. The poem begins with an unexpected and unsettling question; Dickinson frequently employs question marks to indicate that what seems to be true may not be or should be distrusted. Is bliss really such an abyss? The speaker's inability to fully estimate the implications of these ill-defined concepts adds weight to her query. Actually, the possibility of asking such a question already hints at the speaker's awareness of its significance, as evidenced by the abundance of words with long vowels in this first stanza, which provides a melodic and slow progression from verse to verse and allows the reader time to reflect on it.

¹ "F371A - Is bliss then such abyss" (1862).

The negation “I must not put my foot amiss” in the second stanza illuminates the speaker's possibilities through contrast. For example, not putting the “foot amiss” may refer to a lack of action, such as not pacing or moving in a specific direction for fear of putting the foot in the wrong place. This negation process allows for exploration and potential newness of perception, which may be required before approaching the initial question. More importantly, will the speaker's new perspective on life as an abyss encourage her to trust her intuition and be authentic in her journey, taking risks and challenging the status quo without fear of the unpredictability that those decisions will undoubtedly produce? To some extent, this current choice should not be postponed since, as the aphorism beginning the third stanza assures the reader, “Bliss is sold just once.” As in the poem “I had a daily bliss,”² bliss is portrayed as something tangible and concrete that the speaker can grasp or buy. Individuals can only keep this possibility alive by stepping outside of their comfort zone and accepting that bliss may bring forth unexpected circumstances that replicate the experience of being on a precipice and force the speaker to place the “foot amiss.” As a result, only by taking those risks will individuals be able to perceive bliss as a possibility.

The speaker's capacity for action, as well as her attempt to improve and value the process itself, is reinforced by the frequency of verbs in the present tense. The shift in tense from present to past at the start of the third stanza suggests that bliss may be thought to be “on sale” multiple times – that the experience of bliss, or perhaps its reward, may be postponed or suspended until a later time. However, as the poem progresses, “the purchase of bliss” appears to be further away or, simply, no longer available. “Say, Foot, decide the point! / The Lady cross, or not? / Verdict for Boot!” asserts the poem's conclusion. It lends the poem a sense of urgency, which seems ironic given the significance and impact of such a “Verdict,” whether to accept the possibility of bliss (or happiness) – with all of its consequences and indeterminacies – or to renounce it in advance due to its impending danger. As with Emerson's advice to individuals to remain “unsettled” (discussed further in this chapter), Dickinson's speaker implies that

² “F1029A - I had a daily bliss” (1865).

this unsettlement, or indeterminate life circumstances, is characteristic of the question and judgement of happiness.

Following an examination of the affective interpretation of happiness rooted in sentimentalism (via the trial narrative form), its connection with theological interpretations of happiness (where the experience of happiness is reified and determined as a future reward), and the ways in which Dickinson's writings challenged these notions, this chapter focuses on Emerson's transcendentalism and its impact on Dickinson's work and thought, as well as other American writers of the time who contributed to Dickinson's views on happiness. It also discusses Dickinson's central idea of circumference in relation to romantic and transcendental concepts of happiness, as well as the literary strategies she used to challenge them in order to experience an Eternal Now, or "eternity in time."

"Emerging from an Abyss, and reentering it – that is Life, is it not, Dear?,"³ Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law Susan about a year before her death. In the context of this fragment, the descent into the abyss, or exploration of the unknown, appears to be a necessary condition for comprehending the value of finitude. According to Crumbley:

Entering the desired dark of the abyss, then, necessitates descent into the darkened expanses through which life circulates in the process of acquiring consciousness.... Dickinson's spatial metaphor – 'Circumference' – applies to the efforts of consciousness to illuminate the magnitude within which the self dwells.... Her poetic project falls outside the aims of self-completion and individual consummation that characterize traditional understandings of the sublime.⁴

Dickinson's circumference contains – or is contained within – an abyss that must be acknowledged and descended into in order to acknowledge the beauties and dangers of this life. In terms of happiness, Dickinson's efforts to be aware of where "the self dwells" appear to be an extremely difficult task, given that taking your entire life into evaluation while living and then deciding your next step on this basis would seem to be inconceivable. As she implies in the poem "Unto the

³ L1024 (1885).

⁴ Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen*, 140.

Whole - how add?," it seems impossible to consider this wholeness. Surrounded by death, Dickinson's circumference, which represents the sum of her experience and her inability to fully estimate it, resonates well with Solonian happiness.

Dickinson defines existence as a sequence of descents into and ascents from the abyss of life.⁵ Beginning in the early 1860s, several Dickinson poems, as Bennett observes, narrate "her fall from metaphysical grace" and the impact this had on her thoughts and perceptions.⁶ Bennett underlines the poet's use of her conflict with the abyss as a metaphor for her views on the inadequacy of transcendental thought in a universe where contingency, chaos, and the lack of absolute meaning appear to be the only guaranteed truths. Bennett situates the abyss in Dickinson's work in "the ungraspability of transcendent meaning," because "anything is possible in a world that is fundamentally absurd."⁷ Although the opportunity of living is granted to all humans by the mere fact of birth – or by that bliss which, at the very least, is sold once – individuals, with their consciousness, must pace alone in this journey through the abyss.⁸

Contextually, Ralph W. Emerson's and Emily Dickinson's concern with consciousness was most likely inherited from the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, whose ideas were widespread throughout America's educational system and popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century.⁹ Analogously, the influence of transcendentalist thought and liberal ideas led to Dickinson's intellectual abyss and the contradictory nature of reality. It was no longer a matter of salvation or damnation in the afterlife, but of making the most of this life.¹⁰ Given Dickinson's unwavering love of poetry and nature, it is no surprise that her

⁵ Joanne Feit Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 179-81. For instance, see Diehl's analyses of "F508A - A pit but heaven over it." Besides, Diehl observes that "what both Emerson and Dickinson call the abyss finds at least one of its origins in Jonathan Edwards' blazing pit of Hell."

⁶ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-4. Dickinson's views on the absurd will be further explored in light of Albert Camus's absurdism in chapter four.

⁸ In chapter four, Dickinson's writings will be examined along with Nietzsche's existential views in order to appreciate the poet's approach to the chaotic nature of existence as well as her tragic insight.

⁹ Susan Manning, "How Conscious Could Consciousness Grow? Emily Dickinson and William James," in *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 311.

¹⁰ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 63. For McIntosh, Dickinson's reading evidences how "liberalism came to her from many sources," such as Longfellow's *Kavanaugh*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Emerson, Carlyle, Thoreau, Brownings' *Aurora Leigh*, George Eliot, etc.

writings are infused with images and themes popularised by Anglo-American Romantic writers. For Dickinson, we are a part of nature. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland in 1866, for example, the poet wrote: "I saw the sunrise on the Alps since I saw you. Travel why to Nature, when she dwells with us? Those who lift their hats shall see."¹¹ Changes in perception begin within, and by perceiving differently, people can better approach the mysteries of life and nature. McIntosh describes Dickinson as "one of the most incisive and adventurous Romantic poet-thinkers."¹² According to Gary Lee Stonum, Dickinson's vocabulary is rife with romantic terms like "joy," "dread," "awe," "transport," "exhilaration," and so on.¹³ "In Dickinson's sensibility," McIntosh suggests, "her attraction to sublimity is balanced by her awareness of the ridiculous in a world of dynamic change and evanescence."¹⁴ Numerous scholars saw the romantic tradition – which highly influenced transcendentalism – as a critical component in understanding Dickinson's approach to the vicissitudes of life and death. For this reason, both traditions' approaches to happiness will be compared in light of Dickinson's and Emerson's writings.

Dickinson's work and thought were significantly influenced by Emerson, with whom she shared geographical proximity and some personal knowledge. In "Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss," Feit Diehl stresses the centrality of power in their relationship. Emerson teaches her about the obstacles she must face in order to "write poems that win from nature the triumph of freedom for the imagination."¹⁵ Power, according to Emerson and Dickinson, comes from within the individual. In terms of their perceptions of existence's abyss, Feit Diehl invokes Edwards' "blazing pit of hell" as an initial instigator; however, unlike Emerson, Feit Diehl conveys that "the flames are self-generated, created by the power of her own imagination" in Dickinson's abyss.¹⁶ Keller finds it surprising that the connection between Dickinson and Emerson has largely gone unnoticed.¹⁷ Rather than Emerson's ideology, he believes that "it was Emerson

¹¹ L321 (1866).

¹² McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 51.

¹³ Gary Lee Stonum, *The Dickinson Sublime* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 79.

¹⁴ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 10.

¹⁵ Joanne F. Diehl, "Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss," in *ELH* 44, no. 4 (1977): 683.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 698.

¹⁷ Keller, *Only Kangaroo*, 149.

as push, as stimulus, as prophet-motivator, as prime mover, as provocateur” who assisted Dickinson in her quest for true knowledge.¹⁸ Like Keller, Capps asserts that “of all American authors whom she read, Emily Dickinson can be most closely associated with R.W. Emerson.”¹⁹ On several occasions, Dickinson herself admitted that “Emerson was personally important to her.” In particular, in 1846, her father's student Benjamin Newton gave Dickinson “a beautiful copy” of Emerson's *Poems*.²⁰ When Emerson came to Amherst for the first time and was hosted at Austin's [Dickinson's brother] and Susan's house, Susan's “Annals of the Evergreens,” written after the event, remarks that “the same winter brought Emerson.... As Aunt Emily says, ‘as if he had come from where dreams are born’.”²¹ Furthermore, Dickinson made references to his writings throughout her career, and her poems contain traces of Emerson's.²²

Dickinson's closest friends admired and respected Emerson's intellect.²³ Following the deaths of Emerson and Charles Wadsworth in 1882, a letter sent to Otis P. Lord confirms Dickinson's affliction: “my Philadelphia [Wadsworth] has passed from Earth, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson - whose name my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the secret Spring. Which Earth are we in?.”²⁴ Despite the fact that Emerson's presence and ideas were highly visible and influential in Dickinson's intellectual environment – both thinkers shared a concern for the unknown, the importance of processes, the uncertainty of existence, the fluidity of consciousness, and the need to experiment – “she was not an Emersonian.”²⁵ In terms of religious belief, McIntosh writes that “Emerson's sense of the divine is imbued with an evanescent unknown.”²⁶ For Keller, Dickinson's interaction with transcendentalist doctrine – “moved by” rather

¹⁸ Ibid., 164. It will also be discussed further how Emerson influenced other American writers, such as Whitman, Melville, and Thoreau.

¹⁹ Cited in Keller, *Only Kangaroo*, 154. Quoted from Capps' *Dickinson's Reading*.

²⁰ Ibid., 150. At about the same time, Dickinson also received Emerson's *Essays, Second Series*.

²¹ Ibid., 151.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Cited in McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 15. In McIntosh's words, “Emerson was an example of enlightenment for Dickinson's intellectually minded friends – for Susan Dickinson ‘a revered hero,’ for Maria Whitney ‘the holiest men,’ and for T.W. Higginson the writer to whom he claimed to owe the greatest debt.”

²⁴ L750 (1882).

²⁵ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 15-6.

²⁶ Ibid., 16-7. According to McIntosh, “like Dickinson, Emerson puts his poetic faith in transforming or disturbing moments of illumination.”

than “moved into it” – reveals how deeply rooted the transcendentalist urge was in American Puritanism.²⁷ Both Emerson and Dickinson, according to Porter, were “language makers, but contradictory ones, who prepared new eyes and new ears for the modernist era;” similarly, “both thinkers relied on the power of language and art to shape thought, along with their belief that perception alters due to cultural ethos and vice versa.”²⁸ However, “in consciousness, craft, and language,” both writers differed because “Dickinson cut and dispersed where Emerson and then Whitman embraced and unified.”²⁹ Martin, likewise, focuses on the differences between the two writers, contrasting Dickinson's holistic perspective with Emerson's linearity.³⁰ In terms of these differences, while Dickinson's views on happiness were influenced by Emerson's, their perspectives differed in several ways.

Emerson's principles of happiness appeared throughout most of his *Essays*. In “Sermons,” he asserts how “virtue asserts its majesty, and becomes the home and fountain of unlimited happiness.”³¹ Although Emerson's virtue and celebration of the Golden Mean can be traced back to classical approaches to the idea, his mention of “unlimited happiness” appears to refer to happiness as an experience rather than a theme. In “Nature,” he says, “the happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.”³² In other words, the holiness of nature as God's perfect creation should be the reference point in people's pursuit of happiness. “I must be myself,” Emerson assures in “Self-reliance,” since “if you can love me for what I am we shall be the happier.”³³ Happiness, according to this assertion, is procured by the vindication of staying true to oneself, as well as being loved for the same reason. Emerson goes on to say that insisting “on yourself” is the one “gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation.”³⁴ Given this circumstance, one could argue that Emerson deemed happiness as a force contained within, and part of, “a whole life's cultivation;” thus, this idea corresponds with classical interpretations of

²⁷ Keller, *Only Kangaroo*, 166.

²⁸ Porter, *Modern Idiom*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 257, 261.

³⁰ Martin, *American Tryptic*, 121.

³¹ Emerson, “Sermons,” *Prose and Poetry*, 9.

³² Emerson, “Nature,” *Prose and Poetry*, 49.

³³ Emerson, “Self-reliance,” *Prose and Poetry*, 131.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

happiness as enclosed within the totality of experience. Emerson elevates “the momentousness of the present” in “Circles” by revealing that “to fill the hour, - that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval.”³⁵ Furthermore, Emerson claims that “five minutes of today are worth as much to me, as five minutes in the next millennium. Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, *today*.”³⁶ Therefore, being oneself and appreciating and respecting “the present hour” are core principles in Emerson's and Dickinson's approaches to living a life worth living. Similarly, Thoreau's commitment was to discover who we are and what we want; however, how can people be themselves in order to appreciate the present moment?.³⁷ Or, as Emerson asks at the start of “Experience,” “where do we find ourselves?.” We find ourselves in the process.³⁸

Although the fluidity of process is one of Emerson's central themes, Lears' account suggests that he was also a leading advocate of the “culture of control.” In “Fate,” for instance, Emerson assures that “fate then is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; for causes which are unpenetrated;” thus, turning Providence into progress, Lears asserts that “Emerson epitomized the consensus that provided moral and ontological coherence for many Americans' lives throughout much of the nineteenth century.”³⁹ Echoing Edwards' providential and cosmic scheme, Emerson implied that events had meaning and purpose. In “Self-reliance,” he contended to “*use* all that is called fortune;” nevertheless, “even as Emerson wed freedom and fate, fissures in the consensus were appearing.”⁴⁰ Dickinson's poetics purposefully exposed many of those crevices, as shown in the following poem:

³⁵ Emerson, “Circles,” *Prose and Poetry*, 203. Therefore, it is “to finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.” Subsequently, this presentist interpretation will be further explored.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁷ Emerson, “Experience,” *Prose and Poetry*, 203. As Emerson warns his readers, “we live amid surfaces and the true art of life is to skate well on them.” Considering this idea in connection with Dickinson, Manning points out that “Dickinson's poetry attempts to supply this failure in language's ability to convey the inner surface of thought;” by “widening the gaps between words, her writing emphasizes the experiential reality of the entities that have no name.” Manning, “How Conscious,” 313.

³⁸ Emerson, “Experience,” in *Prose and Poetry*, 294. Emerson opens his essay with the question “where do we find ourselves?.”

³⁹ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 142-3. In other words, “providence survived, whether one called it Manifest Destiny or Scientific Progress or Saxon Superiority.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 142-3.

On a Columnar Self -
 How ample to rely
 In Tumult - or Extremity -
 How good the Certainty

 That Lever cannot pry -
 And Wedge cannot divide
 Conviction - That Granitic
 Base -
 Though none be on our side -

 Suffice Us - for a Crowd -
 Ourself - and Rectitude -
 And that Assembly -
 not far off
 From furthest Spirit - God -⁴¹

Dickinson's speaker finds solace in the fact that she can always rely on her "Columnar Self" in difficult circumstances. Even if her views or thoughts are diametrically opposed to those of others, she will have her own truth in which she genuinely believes. Her own "Granitic" self is sufficient in the face of adversity and wrongdoing, and this self-reliance may shine brightly near God. Nevertheless, what Wolosky's essay claims is that Dickinson's "poetics of retraction extend to her treatments of autonomous unity and self-reliance" and "almost any text that seems to assert power, completeness, and sufficiency of self also questions, exposes, and subverts such assertions."⁴² According to Wolosky's analysis of the poem, "what first appears, then, to be a declaration of absolute independence, emerges instead as a defensive, ambivalent contraction of selfhood, unto its own undoing."⁴³ Unlike Dickinson, who saw self-sufficiency as both necessary and terrifying, the American model, heavily influenced by Emerson, persuades people of the benefits of an ideal self-reliant paradigm in which nothing is lacking. For Wolosky, though, "Dickinson's poetry contests the

⁴¹ "F740A - On a columnar self" (1863). In the last verse, Dickinson proposes a word-choice: "Faithful" instead of "Spirit."

⁴² Wolosky, "Dickinson's Emerson: A Critique of American Identity," in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 9, no 2 (2000): 134.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

American model of self-reliance not only because it is gendered but because it is partial, untrue to experience, and morally troubling.”⁴⁴ Dickinson's poems frequently depart from Emerson's ideal of complete self-sufficiency, exposing its flaws instead.

Extending on Emerson's meditations on the fluidity of all things, Deppman emphasises that the reality in which Dickinson's poems are rooted is one “in which there are no certainties, metaphysical or otherwise,” provided that “not only is God inaccessible, but neither science nor theology are capable of filling the gap that this absence creates.”⁴⁵ Dickinson's writings constantly overdramatise and confront this gap in their attempt to deconstruct some of her era's accepted truths:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that
caused it -
Block it up
With Other - and 'twill
yawn the more -
You cannot solder an
Abyss
With Air -⁴⁶

If, as Dickinson's speaker assures, it is impossible to fill a gap unless the same substance that was embedded before is provided, and assuming that such a substance is no longer present, providing that “God cannot be found;”⁴⁷ this chapter is concerned with Dickinson's writings' attempt to bridge this opening as well as its implications within the happiness's story. According to Bennett and Deppman, Dickinson ended up deconstructing and dismantling “what her society saw as settled ‘truths’” by “testing the intellectual absolutes of her own period.”⁴⁸ Instead of being tested by those absolutes, as in theological and sentimental approaches to happiness, Dickinson's endless questioning through poetry

⁴⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁵ Cited in Bennett, “Introduction,” in *Woman Poet*, xix. Quoted from Jed Deppman “Trying to think like Emily Dickinson.”

⁴⁶ “F647A - To fill a gap” (1863).

⁴⁷ “F1581A - Those dying then” (1882).

⁴⁸ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, xxii.

enabled her to create a unique substance made of words capable of soldering that unsoldered abyss with great effort. According to Bennett, Dickinson's poetry "twists the strands of Puritan and sentimental concepts of God into a critique of both."⁴⁹

The following sections thus investigate Dickinson's views on a life worth living in light of the transcendental concept of God, with the assumption that Emerson's ideas can help us understand Dickinson's poetic philosophy in particular and the concept of happiness in general.⁵⁰ Dickinson's "abdication of Belief,"⁵¹ to some extent, needed to be adapted to the needs of a society that, as a result of the Enlightenment promise of happiness for all, was not willing to wait until death for it. Dickinson's is "a human art with a sacred purpose," according to McIntosh, as revealed in her poem that begins "Myself was formed a carpenter" and ends "We - Temples build - I said -."⁵² According to McIntosh, "hers is a woman's art not bound by the publishing conventions that prevent women from building temples;" likewise, Dickinson's thought and oeuvre represent "a culmination of her period's cultivation of fluid consciousness and uncertainty," because, as previously stated, faith was doubt in her poetic journey towards the abyss.⁵³ "My business is circumference," the poet wrote in a letter to T.W. Higginson in 1862.⁵⁴ Later that year, Dickinson declared in a letter to Elizabeth Holland, "My business is to love" and "My business is to sing."⁵⁵

Therefore, this chapter analyses Dickinson's idea of circumference in light of the romantic tradition. Similarly, I will briefly examine some of the major romantic poets and their "conflict with happiness," as well as the connection between British romantics and American transcendentalists in terms of happiness. In doing so, I argue for an interpretation of happiness in Dickinson's work that differs from

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁰ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 7. With regards to Dickinson's religious thinking, McIntosh suggests that its complexity and apparent inconsistency might be associated with liberal influences during her lifetime, such as Unitarianism, transcendentalism, and sentimentalism.

⁵¹ As expressed in her poem "F1581A - Those dying then -" (1882).

⁵² "F475A - Myself was formed a carpenter" (1862).

⁵³ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 12-4.

⁵⁴ Farr, *Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 29. According to Farr, the term "circumference" is one of Dickinson's "metaphors for poetry."

⁵⁵ L268 and L269 respectively (1862). As Miller points out, "my business is to love" appears in Josiah Gilbert Holland's *Miss Gilbert's Career* (co-editor *Springfield Republican*). *Reading in Time*, 3.

the transcendentalist approach to it in nineteenth-century America. Her tragic understanding of happiness, for example, contrasts with Emerson's transcendental and ideal scheme. Moreover, Dickinson's writings offer insightful methods to cope with the abysmal contingency ingrained within happiness as a possibility.

Dickinson's Oeuvre in light of the Romantic Poets and their Conflict with Happiness

Till Death - is narrow
Loving -
The scantest Heart extant
Will hold you till your
privilege
Of Finiteness - be spent -⁵⁶

Dickinson's opening can be read as all is love until death. Echoing Solon's "all is life until death" in the context of Dickinson's letter, "Is there more? More than Love and Death?,"⁵⁷ it is not surprising that her speaker praises the "privilege of Finiteness." According to Diehl, "death itself becomes the crucial and determining factor in the capacity to love, not the poet's death, but the death of the one she loves."⁵⁸ As examined in chapter one through several Dickinson's speakers' approach to death, as well as Soni's account of Solonian happiness in chapter two, death itself is the critical factor determining the ways in which individuals lead their lives; thus, mortality, in the first place, should make people value, appreciate, and cherish this life. Besides, the attitude toward, or perception of, death has been enormously influential in happiness's historiography. On the one hand, death was viewed as a gateway to the eternal happiness of heaven in religious approaches to happiness. However, dying was no longer necessary in the pursuit of happiness in sentimental approaches because, as a result of its reification, happiness's rewards could be experienced prior to it. Bearing this in mind, it is critical to situate Dickinson's approach to the phenomenon of death in

⁵⁶ "F831A - Till death is narrow loving" (1864). For a complete discussion of this poem, see Diehl's *Romantic Imagination*, 142.

⁵⁷ L873 (1883).

⁵⁸ Diehl, *Romantic Imagination*, 142. Dickinson's work in light of the experience of death will be further examined in chapter four.

dialogue with romantic and transcendental perceptions of it, as well as their concerns about the secularisation of theological interpretations of happiness.⁵⁹

With regards to the afterlife, Andrew Bennett claims that most romantics were “unable to find consolation or redemption in the thought of a non-human, non-physical, non-earthly future.”⁶⁰ According to David Simpson’s “Romanticism, Criticism and Theory,” the romantic period’s melancholy mood suggests a schism not only between self and society, but also within the self itself – between body and soul. To some extent, “Romanticism is governed by a sense of the inadequate fit between the real and the apparent, heaven and earth.... It imposes not the peace of being or understanding, but the anxiety of becoming and wondering.”⁶¹ The apprehension of both becoming and wondering was shared by figures such as Emerson and Dickinson on the other side of the Atlantic. As Keane observes, “Dickinson’s imagination was dialogic and transatlantic.”⁶² For instance, in a letter to Higginson in 1873, she wrote: “for Poets, I have Keats – and Mr. and Mrs. Browning.”⁶³ Wordsworth’s poetry was also introduced to Dickinson by Benjamin Franklin Newton, her father’s student who had previously shown her Emerson’s poems.⁶⁴ According to Keane, “the fact remains that in Dickinson’s as well as Emerson’s America, Wordsworth was part of the transatlantic conversation; unsurprisingly, the four-volume Longman edition of his *Poetical Works* (1832) was in the Dickinson family library.”⁶⁵ Within this conversation, Dickinson had undoubtedly encountered romantic interpretations of morning’s symbolism both on Earth and the afterlife.

Morning celebrations by Emerson and Wordsworth likely influenced Dickinson’s. Farr notes that “Romantic exaltation in the morning, of course, is the heir of scriptural tradition in which each new day is like the Resurrection,”

⁵⁹ Manning, *Poetics of Character*, 7. According to Manning, “the documented connectedness of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world is substantial and significant across intellectual, religious, educational, commercial and medical contexts.”

⁶⁰ Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

⁶¹ David Simpson, “Romanticism, Criticism and Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9.

⁶² Keane, *Approving God*, 3.

⁶³ L404 (1873).

⁶⁴ L282 (1863).

⁶⁵ Keane, *Approving God*, 3.

provided that “the real morning or break of day occurs when the soul enters eternal life.”⁶⁶ While Dickinson participated in this tradition since, as Farr points out, morning in her cosmology stands as “the archetype of inspiration, immortality, revelation;”⁶⁷ she also adapted it to suit her own premises. For instance, in the previously mentioned poems “‘Morning’ means ‘milking to the farmer’” and “Morning is due to all,” Dickinson’s speakers associate morning with chance and possibility in this life, rather than eternity in the afterlife. According to Farr, however, reading Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* most likely enhanced “Dickinson’s preoccupation with the visionary gleam of eternity in time, with solitude, and with morning as a fresh contemplative hour for artistic reverie and composition.”⁶⁸ Certainly, Dickinson’s Eternal Now, or eternity in time, strengthens the notion that each morning brings forth, using Dickinson’s formulation, its “impregnable chances.”⁶⁹ To some extent, both morning and literature were sources of knowledge for Dickinson, and British authors such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Thomas Carlyle, whose portraits were hung in her bedroom, impacted Dickinson’s approach to living a meaningful life.

There is no doubt that Dickinson’s work and cultural inheritance were influenced by the romantic literary tradition and imagination, as well as her attitude toward happiness. Thus, some key aspects of the romantics’ approach to the concept must be noted. Abrams’ *Natural Supernaturalism* provides an accurate framework for this purpose by identifying and examining the romantics’ concerns with both the secularisation of religious teachings and notions of happiness.⁷⁰ Although McGann suggests that Abrams has been a major advocate of the romantic ideology as “a good and happy place,” I argue that Abrams’ account also depicts the romantics’ struggle with happiness. According to McGann, “this happiness is brought about by the substitution of imaginary for political satisfaction and of a secular ethics of imagination for the ungenerous restrictions of particular religious doctrines.”⁷¹ One of the goals of the romantic

⁶⁶ Farr, *Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 54.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁹ L750 (1882).

⁷⁰ This foundational book is also cited in both McMahon’s and Soni’s accounts.

⁷¹ Cited in Simpson, “Romanticism, Criticism and Theory,” 18. Quoted from Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

quest, according to Abrams, was to live on a new earth with “a renewed humanity” capable of reconstituting “the grounds of hope” and announcing “the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth” of inherited notions and ways of thinking.⁷²

Nonetheless, the new hopes induced by the French and American revolutions in terms of the promise of happiness for all eventually led to “the new mood of disillusionment,” or melancholy.⁷³ This disillusionment could also be felt in the United States, as Emerson’s meditation attested:

History gave no intimation of any society in which despondency came so readily to heart as we see it and feel it in ours.... Indian, Saxons, and other ‘primitive’ peoples, he alleged, were immune to this affliction despite lower levels of ‘external prosperity’ and ‘general well-being’.... ‘Yet we are sad & they were not... Why should it be?’⁷⁴

For Emerson, the degree to which individuals’ expectations to pursue and attain happiness were inversely proportional to the actual fulfilment of the promise created space for this melancholy. According to Kenneth Burke’s essay, “Emerson’s scheme for transcendence,” as well as Whitman’s alternative, was a project meant to renew a promise in a pursuit “before his fellow-townsmen had lost their sense of a happy, predestined future;”⁷⁵ by moving from “the doom of civilization” to the “unspoiled nature.”⁷⁶ According to McMahon, through the secularisation of theological ideas by the romantics and transcendentalists “Christianity as a whole retained both cultural vitality and intellectual resonance well into the twentieth century,” since “the flowerings of Romanticism took root in this soil.”⁷⁷ Given that Dickinson’s work and thought arose from this soil, it is necessary to investigate the grounds on which

⁷² Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 12.

⁷³ McMahon, *Happiness*, 277. In line with McMahon, what Abrams suggests is that “at the formative period of their lives, major Romantic poets – including Wordsworth, Blake, Southey, Coleridge, and later, after his own fashion, Shelley – shared this hope in the French Revolution as the portent of universal felicity.” Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 64.

⁷⁴ McMahon, *Happiness*, 278. Emerson cited in Delbanco’s *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Harvard University Press, 1999)

⁷⁵ Kenneth Burke, “I, Eye, Ay – Emerson’s Early Essay ‘Nature’: Thoughts on the Machinery of Transcendence,” in *Transcendentalism and its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), 11.

⁷⁶ McMahon, *Happiness*, 279. For McMahon, this was clearly a Romantic and Transcendentalist tendency as they moved “from the Gothic revival churches of nineteenth-century England and America to the mysticism of an Emerson or a Blake.”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

theological, sentimental, romantic, and transcendental interpretations of happiness converged, as well as their impact on the possibility of making “life go about as you want it to,” to use the poet’s formulation.

In light of the romantic conflict, the paradox of happiness became fully visible. On the one hand, romantics retained the Enlightenment’s motto, which stated that all individuals have the right to pursue happiness because they were created to be happy. On the other hand, they also inherited the toil to attain a happiness that seems unattainable, or nearly a miracle:⁷⁸

But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us, the place where, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all.⁷⁹

Faced with the uncertainty of eternal happiness in heaven, Wordsworth locates earthly happiness – or its absence – in this world, as illustrated in this fragment from his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. The word “happiness” appears 22 times in *The Prelude*’s fourteen books, while “happy” appears 32 times. These numbers may not seem significant given the length of the poem; however, when combined with “joy” (86 times) and “delight” (73 times), they do provide an indication of Wordsworth’s undertaking in terms of the possibility of happiness in this life.⁸⁰ For several reasons, Abrams considers Wordsworth to be “the great and exemplary poet of the age and his *Prospectus* stands as the manifesto of a central Romantic enterprise.”⁸¹

This chapter is primarily concerned with two of Wordsworth’s ideas that greatly influenced romantic philosophy of happiness and, to a lesser extent, Dickinson’s views on it: his claim that “the mind of man is a terra incognita which surpasses in its terrors and sublimities;” and his declaration of “the possibility of an earthly paradise which would be a simple produce of the common day.”⁸² Furthermore, Wordsworth’s views will resonate with Emerson’s transcendental idea of an earthly paradise by attempting to create a paradise on Earth at the

⁷⁸ Ibid., 274. As McMahon suggests, this conflict can be observed in the Romantic’s “odes to melancholy.”

⁷⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* (New York: Norton, 1979), lines 729-31.

⁸⁰ These numbers are relevant if we set them in contrast with the word “sorrow” (23 times), “pain” (30 times), and “suffer / suffering” (21 times).

⁸¹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 14.

⁸² Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 25, 65. Quoted from Wordsworth’s *Prospectus*.

confluence of his personal God, the sublimity of nature, and the powers of the human mind.⁸³ Following the romantic zeitgeist, it is Keats who, in McMahon's words, "scarcely remembers counting upon any Happiness."⁸⁴ In his effort to appreciate "the common lot of humanity," Keats, who saw suffering and pain as necessary conditions (due to their transformative qualities), echoes Wordsworth.⁸⁵ Shelley, another major romantic poet, believed that "the hope and failure of the Revolution" triggered "the master theme of the epoch in which we live."⁸⁶ He claimed in *A Defence of Poetry* that "the literature of England has arisen as it were from a new birth" sharing the romantic "spirit of the age."⁸⁷ In Shelley's words:

Where is the beauty, love, and truth we seek,
But in our minds!⁸⁸

These Shelley verses were cited in Edward Trelawny's *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, which was a Christmas gift Dickinson gave to her sister-in-law Susan on December 25th, 1859, as mentioned in Leyda's account.⁸⁹ It is unclear whether Dickinson's attention was focused on Shelley, Byron, or both; however, the fact that she gave it to Susan may indicate Dickinson's admiration for their lives and poetry.

Dickinson's and Shelley's views about happiness may share some similarities. Diehl's *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* suggests a link between certain images in Shelley's "Epipsychidion" – such as his concept of circumference and mutuality – and Dickinson's poetic images that she explores in light of the following couplet:

Possessing and possessed by all that is
Within that calm circumference of bliss.⁹⁰

⁸³ Ibid., 139-45.

⁸⁴ McMahon, *Happiness*, 277.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 283-4.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 278.

⁸⁷ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 11

⁸⁸ Cited in Edward J. Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Moxon, 1858), 90.

⁸⁹ Leyda, *The Years and Hours*, vol. 1, 376.

⁹⁰ Cited in Diehl, *Romantic Imagination*, 138. Quoted from Shelley's "Epipsychidion," lines 549-50.

Diehl muses over Dickinson's response to discovering a new definition of circumference after reading Shelley's poem. For Shelley, it alludes to "a reciprocal love fulfilled in an earthly sphere, a literal island of bliss;" drawing on Shelley's circumference, Dickinson incorporated his concept of reciprocity, of possessing and being possessed, into "a circumference of her own."⁹¹ Feit Diehl examines the context for Dickinson's poem "Circumference thou Bride of Awe," which was enclosed in a letter to Mr. French in 1884, in which the poet also wrote: "success is dust, but an aim forever touched with dew. God keep you fundamental!"⁹² According to Diehl's analysis, success crumbles when it is reached because "it is impossible to secure;" however, the possibility of attaining it is "refreshing" and thus "tempts the artist."⁹³ Therefore, in Dickinson's letter, it is the potentiality of it that is powerful – while being within the process – provided that, once the goal or end is achieved, it will rapidly become dust because, as stated in the opening of another poem, "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed."⁹⁴ Bennett, like Diehl, stresses how processes are emphasised and prized in some of Dickinson's poems since "it is in the aim that possibility lies, and in the process that we discover meaning. What is finished is also dead ('dust')."⁹⁵ Here the idea of possibility inherent in the process itself, as well as the notion that nothing is finished or complete while individuals are still alive, resonates well with Solonian happiness.

One could argue that happiness, like success, is dust or dead when attained because the possibility of it, as the following Dickinson poem implies, nurtures and stimulates individuals' existence:

Circumference
thou Bride
of Awe
Possessing
thou shalt

⁹¹ Ibid., 138.

⁹² L898 (1884).

⁹³ Diehl, *Romantic Imagination*, 139.

⁹⁴ "F112D - Success is counted sweetest" (1859).

⁹⁵ Cited in Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 48. Dickinson's emphasis in processes has been considered in chapter two in light of her poem opening "The Service without hope." Additionally, this topic will be examined in conversation with Emerson's writings.

be
Possessed by
every hallowed
Knight
That fears -
dares - to
Covet thee⁹⁶

As previously stated by Diehl, when reading this poem as echoing Shelley's poem and in the context of the letter to Mr. French, Dickinson's speaker suggests that "circumference, the unattainable bliss, can be achieved through an implied distance at the moment of longing when the knight 'dares' desire it;" thus, only in the act of accepting it as a possibility "can one approach the impossible," or near impossible bliss.⁹⁷ So there is no sense of completion in this life for Dickinson's speaker. Although the possibility should be kept in mind at all times, "possession" will only come when individuals are no longer present. In this light, Dickinson's and Solon's insistence on the multiplicity and wholeness of experience until the moment of death is well-exemplified in the image of her circumference. Furthermore, the circumference of life – as defined by the experience of the unknown and the boundaries of death – is the one that, in Dickinson's words, postulates the "privilege of finiteness" as both necessary and terrifying, as well as containing and contained within happiness.

Following the conflict with happiness ingrained in romantic imagination, some shifts in perspective opened up new ways of thinking about reality and of deconstructing and reinterpreting traditional moral values. The romantics pioneered a new relationship between the individual with oneself and others, nature, and history.⁹⁸ However, what Abrams' study highlights is how certain "religious formulas" are implicitly "woven into the fabric of our language," and thus have the ability to control "the articulation of our thinking," as well as individuals' expectations about the substance of a happy life.⁹⁹ These religious formulas, for

⁹⁶ "F1636A - Circumference thou bride of awe" (1884).

⁹⁷ Diehl, *Romantic Imagination*, 139.

⁹⁸ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

example, can be deduced from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's paradox of civilization. Abrams transcribed it as follows:

Human progress in intellection and in the sciences, arts, and social institutions, after an early optimal stage, involves a correlative decline in human happiness by imposing a growing burden of complication, conflict, and instinctual renunciation; because of a nostalgia for a unified life in which man is in complete harmony with himself and with other men.¹⁰⁰

Rousseau condemned human happiness on earth *a priori* due to, on the one hand, the burden of human progress and, on the other hand, the impossibility of recapturing Eden's original and unified happiness.¹⁰¹

Concerning the impossibility of a unified happiness "in complete harmony," Dickinson's poetic enterprise seeks to bridge the gap left by the theological inability to develop an idea suitable for mortal beings. Likewise, it offers an unconventional approach to the fact of being alive *per se*, without the need for further completion, redemption, or unification,

I sometimes drop it, for a
Quick -
The Thought to be alive -
Anonymous Delight to know -
And madder - to conceive -¹⁰² (first stanza)

Dickinson's speaker begins this poem with irony, because a thought of such magnitude as "to be alive" – a thought that is "madder to conceive" as well as "delight to know" – cannot be dropped so casually.¹⁰³ Thus, the value of being

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 199. Rousseau was a French-speaking philosopher, writer, and political theorist who was born in Switzerland. His treatises and novels had a significant impact on both the French Revolution and the Romantic era.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 199. To some extent, Rousseau's paradox resonates well with St. Augustine's happiness of hope, and Aquinas' distinction between the perfect happiness in heaven and the imperfect one on earth. Besides, Rousseau's statement, as Abrams observes, is linked with Kant's ethics and the idea of individuals "as belonging to two worlds" – the noumenal and the phenomenal – which, in the same breath, can resemble Thomas Carlyle's distinction between ME and NOT ME that was assimilated by Emerson's "angle of vision."

¹⁰² "F784A - I sometimes drop it for a quick" (1863).

¹⁰³ To some extent, this ironic start parallels the poem that opens this chapter, "Is Bliss then, such Abyss-," in which the speaker is urged to make one of her most important decisions in life: to strive for an indeterminate, incomplete, and imperfect earthly happiness rather than conforming to an absolute, complete, and perfect heavenly blessedness.

alive must be cherished and valued. Nonetheless, as Abrams demonstrates, some romantic thinkers – as well as transcendentalists – found “their philosophical truth embodied in the image-thinking of religion,” where “the providential design may have been not merely an illustrative, but a constitutive analogue” that helped “to give a distinctive shape to Romantic philosophies of history,” by “representing man's fall from happy unity into the evil of increasing division and suffering” as an indispensable state to “his route back toward the lost unity and happiness of his origin [in Eden].”¹⁰⁴ Dickinson's writings widely questioned this absolute happiness, which was also doubted by her contemporary William James in this reflection: “the stagnant felicity of the absolute's own perfection moves me as little as I move it.”¹⁰⁵ With few exceptions, religious image-thinking embodied not only philosophical truth, but also the idea of happiness, which was framed within and determined by religious faith and principles. According to Lears, the need to organise life's chaos into an ordered scheme – what William James referred to as “the sentiment of rationality” – remained constant throughout the Protestant tradition. Furthermore, “ideals of order and system, productivity and predictability, dominate our daily lives” in modern America.¹⁰⁶

Dickinson's writings resisted sharing the guidance of religious faith that many romantics accepted as the way towards (complete) happiness by attempting to discover more appropriate approaches to a life worth living. As the following poem declares, Dickinson's persona believes that the unknown triumphs over religious certainty:

We do not know the time
we lose -
The awful moment is
And takes its fundamental
place
Among the certainties -

¹⁰⁴ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 200-1. This privilege of suffering, or negative emotions, ingrained in theological interpretations of happiness has also been highlighted in sentimental approaches due to the trial narrative form – the greater the suffering, the better the reward.

¹⁰⁵ cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 185. Quoted from William James' *Essays*.

¹⁰⁶ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 18, 22.

A firm appearance still
inflates
The card - the chance -
the friend -
The spectre of solidities
Whose substances are sand -¹⁰⁷

As in “How many schemes may die,” Dickinson's speaker reinforces the nature of chance by stating that one day, a person's presence – or the presence of a friend, for example – appears to be well grounded on this earth and, the next day, this person may be simply gone. “We do not know the time we lose” since people do not know how much time they have left to live until death, the only thing that is guaranteed. In contrast to this certainty, what appears to be “firm” and “solid,” such as religious belief, is actually made of “sand.” This idea is consistent with Dickinson's assertion that “success is dust” in her letter to Mr. French. Similarly, the speaker encourages readers to be aware of their own frailty, as Dickinson's niece Martha recalls her aunt saying: “who knows but the world may end tonight?”.¹⁰⁸ In other words, who knows what chances individuals may still have before they die?

Rather than prioritising the concept of eternity when discussing happiness, Dickinson's speakers frequently assert that the evanescence and temporality of finitude is what gives people's lives meaning. Like Dickinson, Hägglund's *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* contends that eternity is what renders life meaningless. “The question of what I ought to do with my life – a question that is at issue in everything I do – presupposes that I understand my time to be finite,” he says.¹⁰⁹ In terms of happiness, Hägglund's question resembles Socrates's “how should we live?,” and Dickinson's “can you make life go about as you want it to these days?.” Nonetheless, Hägglund's account ignores the issue of happiness entirely. Although one of his goals is “to show that any life worth living must be finite and requires secular faith,” Hägglund's definition of a life worth living equates “spiritual freedom” and has nothing to do with happiness,

¹⁰⁷ “F1139A - We do not know the time we lose” (1867).

¹⁰⁸ Dickinson citing Robert Browning's line in Martha Dickinson Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 46. Dickinson's tragic view will be further examined in Chapter 4 in conversation with Nietzsche's and Solon's tragic perspective.

¹⁰⁹ Hägglund, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 5.

considering that the term is not even mentioned in his book.¹¹⁰ Conjecturally, this decision may refer to the devaluation of the question as well as the concept of happiness as a result of theological and sentimental interpretations of it. Another reason, according to Soni's account, could be the transformation of the concern for happiness into the concern for freedom in modernity's story by granting individuals the freedom to pursue happiness. In any case, Dickinson's views on happiness as a possibility, as opposed to the "happiness of hope" that dominates romantic accounts, resonate well with Hägglund's concept of a life worth living in the face of finitude and mortality.

Unlike romantic assumptions – and transcendentalist ones – about the need for religious faith to sustain complete and unified happiness, Dickinson's writings suggest that only through secular faith can individuals achieve a life worth living. Secular faith entails being entrusted with a life that ends, as well as being aware that projects may fail or unfold unexpectedly, because "only in the light of risk – only in the light of possible failure or loss – can we be committed to sustaining the life of what we value."¹¹¹ Similarly, Hägglund's perspective is echoed in this short poem by Dickinson:

Soul, take thy risk,
With Death to be
Were better than be not
with thee ¹¹²

In this case, love appears to be the most valuable thing to the speaker, as being dead appears to be a better option "than be not with thee." For this reason, the speaker must take the risk of confessing this love at the expense of possible failure, since failing to take that risk is more regrettable than trying and failing.

Another example of Dickinson's thoughts on the gift of finitude and the fact that projects can fail or break down unexpectedly is the following poem:

The Admirations - and
Contempts - of time -
Show justest - through

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹¹² "F1136A - Soul, take thy risk" (1867).

an Open Tomb -
The Dying - as it were
a Hight
Reorganizes Estimate
And what We saw
not
We distinguish clear -
And mostly - see not
What We saw before -

'Tis Compound Vision -
Light - enabling Light -
The Finite - furnished
With the Infinite -
Convex - and Concave Witness -
Back - toward Time -
And forward -
Toward the God of Him -¹¹³

This earthly existence, according to Dickinson's speaker, fuses people's current lives as well as their expectations of an afterlife. To some extent, both awe and disdain can be better judged from the vantage point of death's "Open Tomb." People's finitude is "furnished with the Infinite" within this "Compound Vision" and vice versa. As thinking about one's own death can help people reconsider their mortal lives, thinking about the deaths of others will also change people's prior relationship to them. In Linda Freedman's interpretation, the event of a funeral may cause a shift in perspective as well as estimation. According to Freedman, "the open tomb is the reification of the gap in Christological thinking, the literal rendering of the space in between humanity and divinity or the corruptible and incorruptible body;" in the poem, this duality "cannot be reconciled," and this is "fundamental to Dickinson's poetic texture," which enlarges "the poetic experience."¹¹⁴

A duality – or gap – that in religious faith calls for the devaluation of individuals' finite lives in favour of eternal ones, in Dickinson's poetic experience

¹¹³ "F830A - The admirations and contempts of time" (1864).

¹¹⁴ Linda Freedman, "Touching the Wounds," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 78.

calls for an opening to possibility. As a result, confronting death may provide an opportunity to reconsider our finite nature.¹¹⁵ According to Hägglund, “all world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) hold that the highest form of existence or the most desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite,” because “our finitude is a restriction” and “we suffer from a lack of eternal life;” from a religious standpoint, thus, individuals’ finitude is understood as a constraint or limitation in the path to eternal life, as “a lamentable condition that ideally should be overcome.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, “our lives as finite beings are not seen as ends in themselves but rather as means to reach the end of human history” in religious doctrines.¹¹⁷ As with the sentimental reification of happiness as a reward, people’s finite lives are viewed as a time of trial, a condition to be endured on the path to heaven.

Regarding finitude as a “lamentable condition,” Emerson grieves in his essay “Experience” that “it is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Even afterwards we suspect our instruments.”¹¹⁸ Emerson, echoing Rousseau, lamented the discovery that without the final satisfaction of heavenly happiness that religious dogma guarantees to the elected or saved by grace, individuals were at the mercy of the workings of their minds, of what befalls them; given that, as Manning points out, “such freedom blesses and curses in a breath.”¹¹⁹ Although religious faith pervaded Dickinson’s life and context, her approach to living a life worth living was not guided by this faith or, as McIntosh put it, her faith was “not a matter of ‘doctrines.’”¹²⁰ “Dickinson’s intuitive faith is her belief in the human capacity to imagine a paradise, in our life on Earth and sometimes beyond it,” McIntosh writes, considering that “By intuition, Mightiest Things / Assert themselves – and not by terms –”.¹²¹ These verses, in fact, echo Emerson’s

¹¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15. According to Derrida, “conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom.”

¹¹⁶ Hägglund, *This Life*, 6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9. For Hägglund, “if you are aiming for eternal life, finite life does not matter for its own sake but serves as a vehicle to attain salvation.”

¹¹⁸ Emerson, “Experience,” in *Prose and Poetry*, 209.

¹¹⁹ Manning, “How Conscious,” 311.

¹²⁰ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 50. This idea is also highlighted in the poet’s obituary written by Susan Dickinson.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

remark in "Experience" that "the great gifts are not got by analysis."¹²² However, the poet's "intuitive faith," which was secular rather than religious, differed from Emerson's.

Hägglund's view of secular faith as a condition of spiritual freedom assumes that individuals are entitled to choose how they spend their time.¹²³ Regarding Dickinson's disposal of her time, the poet's niece Martha depicts an incident in which the poet's appreciation for her limited time is well illustrated:

Once in that happy place [Dickinson's room] I repeated to Aunt Emily what a neighbor had said – that time must pass very slowly to her, who never went anywhere – and she flashed back Browning's line: 'Time, why, Time was all I wanted!'.¹²⁴

Time was both what she wanted and what she needed. According to Gelpi, "time was preferable to eternity for Dickinson, 'for the one is still, but the other moves'."¹²⁵ For the poet, the stillness of eternity is meaningless; similarly, the fluidity and precariousness of time adds meaning to existence. "Dickinson entertains the unpredictability of experience as an enabling condition for her life of her mind," McIntosh writes.¹²⁶ Furthermore, as Adrienne Rich claimed, Dickinson's "self-imposed restrictions" paradoxically granted her and "ensure[d] that freedom" in this life.¹²⁷ For this reason, the freedom to choose what to do with your own time holds people accountable for their actions and allows them to question what they want to do with their lives. For Hägglund, secular faith, like human existence, is precarious and fragile; however, these are the necessary conditions for estimating the range of possibilities that individuals' finite lives may offer here and now, because "to own your life is to expose yourself."¹²⁸ Death, according to Hägglund and Soni, is a "the necessary horizon" of existence.¹²⁹ In

¹²² Emerson, "Experience," in *Prose and Poetry*, 294.

¹²³ Hägglund, *This Life*, 11. Hägglund remarks that to be in control of "the disposal of our time," that is to say, to have the freedom to ask ourselves what we should do with our time is the basis of spiritual life which, simultaneously, is the condition of "spiritual freedom."

¹²⁴ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 46.

¹²⁵ Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 82.

¹²⁶ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 7.

¹²⁷ Cited in Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 21. Quoted from Rich's "Vesuvius at Home."

¹²⁸ Hägglund, *This Life*, 94.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 200. Additionally, Hägglund remarks that "the risk of tragic loss – the loss of your own life and the loss of what you love – is not a prospect that can be eliminated but an intrinsic part of why it matters what you do with your life." *Ibid.*, 43. In chapter four, this research will examine the possibility of tragedy

a similar vein, Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law Susan two years before her death, “tell the Susan who never forgets to be subtle, every Spark is numbered.”¹³⁰ Given that every minute is numbered, individuals should strive to make the most of each one.

The most perplexing aspect of Dickinson's poetic enterprise was its lack of a centre. Hägglund's first reflection in his book focuses on the ephemeral nature of life and projects, asking his readers what will happen to these “unfinished” projects when they die. Hägglund's concern could be applied to Dickinson's unique situation: what happened to “Dickinson's project” when she died? Given that Dickinson's poems were published posthumously, one could argue that when she died, her poetry had just begun to live.¹³¹

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say -
I say it just begins to live
That day¹³²

When she died, then, her words came to life. Nonetheless, did Dickinson have a project? According to Porter:

Emily Dickinson is the only major American poet without a project. That vacancy at the heart of her consciousness provided a tragic freedom that constitutes her identity. It is the circumstance in which she was free to enact that peculiar human attitude that makes her unique in our literature.¹³³

Given Porter's terminology, it is legitimate to wonder whether Hägglund's concept of “spiritual freedom” is equivalent to Dickinson's concept of “tragic freedom,” or whether spiritual freedom leads to a tragic understanding of the world. Unlike Porter, Farr assures that Dickinson's task (or project) was “the universal one of poets,” which was “to realize her vision in single poems as completely as she

as necessary in order to appreciate and estimate our finite life. Likewise, it will put in conversation Solon's, Nietzsche's, and Dickinson's tragic perspectives.

¹³⁰ Cited in Leyda, *The Years and Hours*, vol. 2, 430.

¹³¹ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 180. Ten of Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime, apparently despite her wishes. Dickinson's fascicles, on the other hand, demonstrated how she self-preserved nearly a thousand of her poems during her lifetime. As Miller points out, “Dickinson preserved over eleven hundred poems in forty bound fascicles and fifteen unbound sets.”

¹³² “F278A - A word is dead when it is said” (1862).

¹³³ Porter, *Modern Idiom*, 152.

could.”¹³⁴ Thus, Dickinson had a poetic “project” in which she attempted to illustrate an “Eternity in Time.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, in light of “circumference” as being her business, Farr implies that this term frequently alluded to “either poetry itself or the significance of all that exists, on earth and in heaven.”¹³⁶ Farr’s interpretation of Dickinson’s term circumference echoes Solonian happiness in that it is a concept that encompasses everything. Dickinson’s speaker attempts to depict this totality in the following poem:

Perhaps I asked too large -
I take - no less than skies -
For Earths, grow thick as
Berries, in my native Town -

My Basket holds - just -
Firmaments -
Those - dangle easy - on my
arm,
But smaller bundles - Cram.¹³⁷

One could argue that the “skies” refer to Dickinson’s business of becoming a poet, whereas the “Earths” depict a more common – like berries in Amherst – and traditional lifestyle for women in the nineteenth century, namely a housewife. As a result, the speaker’s goal is to pursue her inner ambition regardless of convention. What Farr’s analyses implies is that “she desired much: what she called the honor of an artist, the shortest route to immortality. To attain it, she led her productive life, leaving us the poems that disclose her vision of time in eternity and eternity in time.”¹³⁸

Dickinson’s ability to enact her own will – albeit nimbly – puts her in a unique position to assess the conditions that make earthly life worthwhile, and her writings should be regarded as exemplary in this regard. This vacancy, or “absent centre,” motivated by her “lack of a structure of belief,” according to

¹³⁴ Farr, *Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 246.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 247.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 319.

¹³⁷ “F358A - Perhaps I asked too large” (1862).

¹³⁸ Farr, *Passion of Emily Dickinson*, 333.

Porter, is reflected in her refusal to yield to any religious, philosophical, or poetical scheme – but to use them all.¹³⁹ Overall, the one project she might have had in this life, or “supreme need,” as Porter puts it, “was to bisect certainty from uncertainty.”¹⁴⁰ Bennett, like Porter, assures that “being unfinishable was the poetic ‘program’” for Dickinson because “this program best reflected the state of human knowledge and, perhaps, the human condition.”¹⁴¹ Dickinson's project was simply to assess her human finitude in light of the chance – “too gigantic to comprehend” – of being alive, or “the commitment to living on,” which Hägglund characterises as not being “an aspiration to live forever but to live longer and to live better, not to overcome death but to extend the duration and improve the quality of a form of life;” thus, the commitment to living on “must be finite and requires secular faith.”¹⁴² Considering the fragility of mortal existence, Miller points out that the poet “was concerned about the lasting quality of her verse, its fame rather than hers.”¹⁴³ For Wolosky, Dickinson’s “deadline was not publication but immortality.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, Dickinson's writings provide a unique perspective on mortality as an essential component within the scope of life's experiences, going far beyond the representation of a life worth living in religious faith.

Nowadays, half of the American population believes that religious faith is required to live an ethical, moral, and well-lived life.¹⁴⁵ Analogously, in the early twentieth century, sociologist Max Weber famously claimed that “secular faith suffers from a ‘disenchantment’ of the world” and, as a result, “a society without religious faith is hopelessly lacking,” because there is no “sense of final satisfaction or completion” as promised in the eternal blessedness of heaven.¹⁴⁶ Weber's speculation can also be applied to the goal established by the determinations of happiness as a reward discussed in chapter two, or the idea of a “happy ending” prevalent in sentimental literature. In either case, for Hägglund,

¹³⁹ Porter, *Modern Idiom*, 153.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴¹ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 48.

¹⁴² Hägglund, *This Life*, 6.

¹⁴³ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 183.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Miller, *Reading in Time*, 176.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14. Furthermore, this assumption, in Hägglund’s words, “is part of a more general revival of political theology, among both prominent philosophers and the general public.” For more info on this, see Hägglund’s analyses on the historiography of religious faith as a necessary condition for moral activity.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-7.

it is actually religious belief that reveals itself “as empty or meaningless.” In contrast to religious dogma, Hägglund sees life as a process that cannot strive for ultimate fulfilment because it is about continuation rather than completion; in his words, “as long as my life is mine – as long as I lead my life – the book of my life is still open.”¹⁴⁷ Certainly, Hägglund's views parallel Dickinson's, who said: “‘It is finished’ can never be said of us;” while the story is still unfolding.

Catherine's dream from Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* appears as an epigraph in Hägglund's examination of why an eternal life is both uncertain and undesirable. “To live in relation to death,” for Hägglund, means that “nothing is guaranteed;”¹⁴⁸ an idea shared by Dickinson's speaker in “We do not know the time we lose.” Drawing on Dickinson's idea of a life worth living based on secular faith as a necessary condition, the following sections focus on the poet's writings in light of some romantic fundamental themes – such as the power of imagination, the notion of perceiving anew, the gamble of approaching joy and suffering, and the need of blending nature and divinity. They also look at how these themes relate to American transcendentalism in order to understand how these contexts transformed the most rigorous theological approaches to happiness, as well as Dickinson's responses to the challenges and ambiguities that these traditions revealed.

Dickinson's Writings Adapting Romantic and Transcendental Approaches to Happiness

I was thinking, today, as I noticed, that the ‘Supernatural,’ was only the Natural, disclosed.

Not ‘Revelation’ ‘tis, that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes.¹⁴⁹

Dickinson's use of Thomas Carlyle's terminology is easily recognised in this prose fragment sent to T.W. Higginson in 1863. Carlyle illuminated some of the religious traits inherited by romanticism in *Sartor Resartus*.¹⁵⁰ Carlyle's novel:

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 17-8.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁴⁹ L280 (1863) to Higginson.

¹⁵⁰ Abrams, *Natural Supernatural*, 384.

Recapitulates the endeavor of a generation to sustain the hope for New Jerusalem in this very world of all of us, but to bring it about not by changing the world, but by changing our world view.¹⁵¹

Creating this New Jerusalem – in the world of all of us, as Wordsworth declared – by changing the ways people perceive reality was part of the romantics' quest for happiness. Happiness, according to Carlyle, is a “shadow of ourselves,” while “it is not the dark place that hinders, but the dim eye.”¹⁵² In fact, Abrams' book title is a play on Carlyle's term “Natural Supernaturalism,” which he defines as a widespread tendency “to naturalise the supernatural and to humanize the divine.”¹⁵³ According to Abrams, the primary goal of Carlyle's book is to illustrate the wonder of everyday life “by means of an unassisted transaction between the ordinary object and the dishabituated eye.”¹⁵⁴ Given Carlyle's standpoint, one interpretation of Dickinson's prose fragment is that revelation or miracles are not “supernatural” events for the poet. They are not waiting to be seen or perceived by us; rather, by preparing and developing their ability to see and perceive differently, individuals can reveal meaning from what previously appeared meaningless or incomprehensible. In “Poetry in an Age of Revolution,” Dawson argues that romantic poets had “the power of imaginative vision to transform the world” by providing “a sense of alternate possibilities” in “a society whose practises and beliefs constituted a denial of human imagination and creativity.”¹⁵⁵ By disseminating their ideas, the romantics believed they might change people's perspectives.

Referring back to Darwin's claim that miracles became more unbelievable as he learned more about nature's fixed laws, Dickinson's and Carlyle's statements appeared to acknowledge the same idea: there are no miracles here, only people's inability to comprehend, or impossibility to know, the natural causes that induced them. Furthermore, habit and routine blind people and prevent them from seeing the wonders of everyday life. According to Bennett, “Dickinson's

¹⁵¹ McMahon, *Happiness*, xv. Additionally, Carlyle claims that “the Mythos of the Christian Religion look[ed] not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth century.” Ibid., 280.

¹⁵² Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 524.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 67-8.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵⁵ P.M.S. Dawson, “Poetry in an age of revolution,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, 71, 73.

genius lay as much in her ability to turn common everyday events into art.... as in her use of indeterminacy to complicate and deepen her poems.”¹⁵⁶ Dickinson's role, like that of romantic poets, was to open the doors of perception to readers willing to dissect the natural wonders that occur every hour without going unnoticed. It is through this process that glimpses of beauty may be perceived on a daily basis, and the value of the moment may produce an Eternal Now in which individuals may (forever) reside. Given that “God must be clothed anew,” the challenge for romantics and transcendentalists was to “find new forms to accommodate the spiritual yearning of humanity” in this world of all of us.¹⁵⁷

For centuries, people's views on how to live a meaningful life have been pervaded by the privilege of suffering. Heine's insight on Christian tradition is as follows:

For eighteenth centuries this religion ‘had been a blessing for a suffering humanity’; that the ‘blood of the crucified Christ’ had served as a ‘soothing balm flowing down into the wound of mankind’; and that the ‘gruesome attraction’ of the faith, just like the sickly-sweet scent of the passion flower, was its ability to make an ‘ecstasy of suffering’, to transform pain and putrefaction into ‘uncanny pleasure’.¹⁵⁸

According to McMahon, while it is difficult to determine the extent to which romantic authors were consciously committed to Christian religion, it is not surprising that some of them participated in, or continued with, this ongoing cult of melancholy, pain, and suffering.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the romantic myth's emphasis on the suffering nature of genius, or true artist, echoes in the pervasive attention to negative emotions in, for example, American sentimentalism and the poetics of misery. In Lord Byron's words, “who would willingly possess genius?.... None, I am persuaded, who knew the misery it entails... destructive alike to health and happiness.”¹⁶⁰ Suffering, according to Byron, is endemic to the human condition and must be openly acknowledged as such. Similarly, as Keats pointed out, the

¹⁵⁶ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, xxiv.

¹⁵⁷ McMahon, *Happiness*, 281.

¹⁵⁸ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, 281. Quoted from Heine's “Concerning the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 281. Some examples that McMahon provides are: Wordsworth's *The Prelude* in Book 6 (lines 483-8), and Keats' “Ode to Melancholy” in which the poet underlines “the pleasures of dejection.”

¹⁶⁰ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, 282.

concept of suffering, or pain, as both transformative and necessary justified, with notable exceptions, “a delight in suffering for the sake of suffering.”¹⁶¹

Although chapter two examines how Dickinson's writings did not prioritise negative emotions, the poet's speakers also believed in the transformative power of pain and danger, as illustrated below:

The Soul's distinct
connection
With immortality
Is best disclosed by
Danger
Or quick Calamity -

As Lightning on a
Landscape
Exhibits Sheets of Place -
Not yet suspected - but
for Flash -
And Click - and Suddenness.¹⁶²

Unexpected misfortune or danger, “as Lightning on a Landscape,” best reveals an individual's inner being. Given mortals' frailty, an intimacy with immortality (or death), as in “The Admirations and Contempts of Time,” may yield a new perspective. In a letter to Higginson fifteen years after writing this poem, Dickinson used the lightning analogy again: “these sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse – not Peace – as Lightning at our feet, instils a Foreign Landscape.”¹⁶³ As a result, while “intimacies with Immortality” can broaden people's understanding of the world around them, some of Dickinson's speakers do not justify a delight in suffering for suffering's sake – as sentimental and

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 283. Earlier in this research, it has already been mentioned the privilege of suffering in Kant's and Hegel's philosophy who also supported the idea that suggests the more intelligent or the more aware an artist or individual is, the more miserable.

¹⁶² “F901A - The soul's distinct connection” (1865). In the second stanza, Dickinson provides some word-variants: “still unsuspected” instead of “Not yet suspected,” “Fork” instead of “Flash,” and “Bolt” instead of “Click.”

¹⁶³ L641 (1880). In that same letter, Dickinson also wrote: “Most of our Moments are Moments of Preface – ‘Seven Weeks’ is a long Life – if it is all lived –.”

theological interpretations of happiness do. Rather, it would be a delight in suffering for delight's sake, as shown in the following poem:

I can wade Grief -
Whole Pools of it -
I'm used to that -
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet -
And I tip - drunken -
Let no Pebble - smile -
'Twas the New Liquor -
That was all!

Power is only Pain -
Stranded - thro' Discipline,
Till Weights - will hang -
Give Balm - to Giants -
And they'll wilt, like Men -
Give Himmaleh -
They'll carry - Him!¹⁶⁴

The speaker's familiarity with joy, like "lightning at our feet" illuminating the landscape in front of us, enables her to endure instances of sorrow or suffering. By increasing one's capacity to withstand and transform the experience of pain, individuals can empower themselves as if they were giants. Therefore, the "push of joy" allows the speaker to bear "pools of grief." Even if the experience of grief or suffering appears to be more durable and a heavier burden, according to Zapedowska's formulation, the thought of amplitude (in whatever quantity) is what helps the speaker through those periods of lack. The light of joy and delight is what permits people to cope with the abyss of existence, or to see in darker times, as Dickinson wrote in a letter to Samuel Bowles in 1858: "confidence in Daybreak modifies Dusk."¹⁶⁵ Similarly, as Abrams points out, when the romantics "descended into the valley of darkness, they did so with the hope, the faith, that they would find sunshine on the other side," a sunshine they called "Joy."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ "F312A - I can wade grief" (1862).

¹⁶⁵ L193 (1858).

¹⁶⁶ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 276.

"Odes to Joy" are central to Dickinson's oeuvre as well as romantic discourse. Typically, the words "joy" and "despair" are diametrically opposed as well as closely related. People who are joyful can overcome loneliness by fusing with something larger than themselves. Each person possesses joy, and it is only through joy that suffering can be overcome. Walt Whitman, who McMahon portrays as a "Romantic in Spirit," defines happiness in this excerpt from *Song of Myself*:

There is that in me – I do not know what it is – but
I know it is in me
(...)
It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life –
It is Happiness¹⁶⁷

In these verses, the speaker considers happiness to be a mysterious, subjective, and private phenomenon whose realisation lies within the individual. To some extent, one could argue that Whitman's speaker is referring to the experience of happiness here; it is active and ordered – as opposed to chaos – and it is not death, or it does not relate to death – in contrast to Soni's account, which emphasises the experience of mourning in close relation to the possibility of happiness. Whitman's views differ from sentimental approaches to happiness as something that can be obtained externally, since "there is that in me." However, if Whitman defines happiness as "eternal life," it is unclear whether this includes mortal beings' mortality or experiences of loss and grief.

Returning to Solonian happiness, it has been discussed that it cannot be an "uncontaminated positive emotion" because it must consider the totality of experience and only its possibility, along with its conditions, is experienced while alive. Instead, McMahon describes Whitman's happiness as "a partially secularised dream of experiencing heaven on earth;" moreover, he associates Whitman's concept with "ephemeral glimpse," "passing feeling," and a "recovery of the lost child."¹⁶⁸ For Dickinson's persona in the following poem, some things will never return:

¹⁶⁷ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, 288. Quoted from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

The Things
that never can
come back, are
several -
Childhood - some
forms of Hope - the
Dead -
Though Joys - like
Men - may sometimes
make a Journey -
And still abide -
We do not mourn
for Traveler, or
Sailor,
Their Routes are fair -

But think enlarged
of all that they
will tell us
Returning here -
"Here"! There are
typic "Heres" -
Foretold Locations -
The Spirit does
not stand -
Himself - at whatsoever
Fathom
His Native Land - ¹⁶⁹

Certainly, the dead do not return to earth; they may live in other foreign lands, but individuals' inability to know for certain, as well as the impossibility of "visiting" them wherever they are, may cause a sense of permanent displacement.

Although some things may have happened in the past without the possibility of them returning, it is through joy, a joy that travels and transforms, comes and goes, that individuals may return to their "native land," allowing them

¹⁶⁹ "F1564B - The things that never can come back are several" (1881).

to be, if only temporarily, at home again. Miller's analysis implies that the poem "circle[s] around the conception of 'Here,' a word repeated three times and emphasized further through rhyme and off-rhyme;" this "Here" is seen "as a questionable location," provided that all is "relative to perception."¹⁷⁰ The repetition of "here" emphasises the importance of the current location – albeit relative – and present time – albeit finite. According to Deppman's reading, "we have always been connected to so much – our loved ones, people who had died already, our childhoods, our past and future selves, our past and future places – that we can always think about new ways to belong to them."¹⁷¹ Dickinson had sent four letters to Elizabeth Holland by the end of October 1881, following the death of Dr. Holland, and the aforementioned poem was the full content of the poet's fifth letter to her mourning friend. Dickinson wrote in her third letter:

After a while, dear, you will remember that there is a heaven – but you can't now.... I shall never forget the Doctor's prayer, my first morning with you – so simple, so believing. That God must be a friend – that was a different God – and I almost felt warmer myself, in the midst of a tie so sunshiny.¹⁷²

Dickinson suggested to Elizabeth Holland in this fragment that the promise of heaven in the face of a recent and painful loss does not immediately compensate for the parting.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, it will do it in due course. Rather than the fearlessness of God emphasised by Calvinist doctrine, Dickinson's observation on the necessity of seeing God as a friend resonates well with the romantics' and transcendentalists' efforts to adjust and update the image of God.

Another romantic compelling assumption concerning the human mind, which is also a salient metaphor in Dickinson's writings, is its ability to shape reality – instead of being passively shaped by it. Correspondingly, Juhasz's analysis in *The Undiscovered Continent* shows how the mind, for Dickinson, becomes "a place in which to live."¹⁷⁴ According to Juhasz, the mind is the most important aspect of Dickinson's inner exploration, and thus her mind becomes a

¹⁷⁰ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 143.

¹⁷¹ Deppman, "Living and Dying with Emily Dickinson," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, 604.

¹⁷² L731 (1881).

¹⁷³ Despite her scepticism about the promise of heaven, Dickinson's condolence letters were always tailored to assist the mourners in the best way possible.

¹⁷⁴ Suzanne Juhasz, *Undiscovered Continent*, 1.

tangible inner space. In other words, what occurs in the mind may be as real as what occurs in the outside world. "The mind can expand," Juhasz says, "can grow wider and wider, under the demands of experience."¹⁷⁵ Mental experience also embodies imagination, and imagination turns into possibility, which Dickinson's society denied her to some extent. Indeed, her socio-contextual background aided her in developing her own poetic persona beyond the traditional values of her time. By reorienting mental processes, it was agreed that, in Abrams' words, "there was more to the world than first met the eye."¹⁷⁶ Dickinson's speaker reveals, "The Poets light but / Lamps -." For this reason, the power of art, particularly poetry, is highly valued during the romantic period. In Shelley's words:

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds ... All art is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher and no more serious undertaking than to make man happy.¹⁷⁷

Individuals' minds engage with their surroundings in the act of perceiving, and it is the power of imagination that allows poets to perceive and see in a particular way. William Blake, for example, claimed that "As the Eye - So the Object" and "the Eye altering alters all."¹⁷⁸ These two statements are reminiscent of Dickinson's poem:

Perception of an
object costs
Precise the Object's
loss -
Perception in itself
a Gain
Replying to its
Price -
The Object absolute -
is nought -

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷⁶ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, 286. Quoted from Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic theory and Critical tradition* (Oxford, 1953). According to Abrams, the Romantics rejected the idea of the human mind as a "passive recipient" of experience (as in Locke's tabula rasa) in favour of "the mind as an active force, responsible for giving shape to experience, for ordering, categorizing, and combining our impressions of the world."

¹⁷⁷ Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 434.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 383. Quoted from William Blake's *Poetry and Prose*.

Perception sets it
fair
And then upbraids
a Perfectness
That situates
so far - ¹⁷⁹

For Dickinson's speaker, when individuals begin perceiving a certain object, they lose contact with the actual object. That is to say, while perception is a benefit in and of itself (since it is required in order to truly see), it also undermines the object's reality. People's perceptions may enhance and perfect the image of the thing, but the illusion created by this perfection will actually distance the person from the real object. Following McIntosh's interpretation, this poem depicts Dickinson's suspicion "that our perceptions do not put us directly in touch with the world we perceive."¹⁸⁰ There can be no absolute perception of an object or experience because perception is the one modelling individuals' cognition of it.

Another Dickinson's poem begins with a similar thought: "To hear an Oriole sing / May be a common thing - / Or only a divine."¹⁸¹ It is not the act of singing itself that is important here, but how a listener perceives it, as well as the type of reaction that it may elicit. As a result, it is within the mind that the processes of individuals' inner reality, such as the act of perceiving anew and the ability to imagine, are reflected in their outer world, provided that, in terms of human beings' inner capacity, "The Brain - is wider than the / Sky -."¹⁸² William Blake's *Jerusalem* 77 implies, by juxtaposing the power of imagination and divinity, that "I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination.... All deities reside in the human breast."¹⁸³ Blake's idea echoes Dickinson's "Who has not found /

¹⁷⁹ "F1103A - Perception of an object costs" (1865). Dickinson sent this poem to Susan in 1865.

¹⁸⁰ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 126. Perception, or the act of perceiving, will be further analysed in the context of Emerson's and Thoreau's writings.

¹⁸¹ "F402A - To hear an oriole sing" (1862).

¹⁸² "F598A - The brain is wider than the sky" (1863).

¹⁸³ Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 54. Quoted from William Blake's *Jerusalem* 77. Abrams defines Blake as a poet "for whom heaven, hell, and paradise were not outward places but states of mind."

the Heaven - below - / Will fail of it above -," implying that our true home is within our minds.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, the mind generates the possibility of a life worth living.

According to Rich, Dickinson believed that "a life worth living could be found within the mind and against the grain of external circumstance."¹⁸⁵ Although those circumstances, which are beyond our control and are a result of chance, will have an impact on how people lead their lives, the ability to model their initial perception, as well as the awareness that that same perception is fluid and may evolve over time, is required to cope with unforeseen or disagreeable occurrences. It is not about well-crafted plots, but about adaptable perceptions and reactions to them via the minds' internal dynamics. However, the romantics' and transcendentalists' minds needed to find a new home for God, and they did so by placing this divinity in nature. As with Paley's *Natural Theology* and his search for divine evidence in the ecosystem, romantics sought to fully integrate divinity and nature in order to comprehend God's workings through the natural world. According to Abrams, "redemption through nature" was "a cardinal concern" for Wordsworth and Coleridge in their quest "to help redeem man by fostering a reconciliation with nature, which, because man has severed himself from his earlier unity with it, has become alien and inimical to him;" to a greater extent, this idea or design "explained where civilization had gone wrong, provided the sanction for a workable rule of life, and pointed the way toward possible redemption."¹⁸⁶ In contrast to Dickinson's perception of the mere fact of being alive as redemptive enough, the romantics and transcendentalists continued to seek redemption, albeit in a natural rather than a divine setting.

Dickinson's sensitivity to shifts in her own perception is central to her poetry and stems from her Protestant upbringing. Jonathan Edwards' account in "Personal Narrative," which draws on the power of nature, the need for redemption, and the act of perceiving anew, stresses his mind's inner change in perception "the instant he accepted fully the doctrine of God's justice in prelection:"

¹⁸⁴ "F1609B - Who has not found the heaven below" (1883).

¹⁸⁵ Rich, "Vesuvius at Home," 178.

¹⁸⁶ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 145-6.

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be.... [an] appearance of divine glory, in almost everything.... in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature.¹⁸⁷

As discussed in chapter two, Edwards' experience is similar to Dickinson's change in sight after reading Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which felt like a religious conversion to the poet. "I think I was enchanted," Dickinson's tribute poem for Browning, can be read as a "declaration of heresy," according to McIntosh, because the poet "reinforces the point that the change that comes with poetic inspiration happily distorts the perceived world.... Dickinson's desire for mysterious spiritual transformation is a central empowering impulse in her writing."¹⁸⁸ In other words, it is individuals' responsibility to devise and create strategies, through whatever means, that enable them to see and perceive differently, more intensely, and to experience the full potentiality of their surroundings. For Abrams, "the theological prototype of fall, redemption, and the creation of a new earth manifests itself, metaphorically, in almost all Romantic statements about freshness of visual experience."¹⁸⁹ Similarly, this fall-redemption-creation prototype pervades sentimental notions of happiness; the idea of deferring happiness (fall) until the end of the trial (redemption), when individuals will allegedly achieve a new perfect happiness (creation). The sections that follow question Dickinson's perspective on America's antebellum and religious prototype regarding the concept of happiness, as well as her relationship with theological, sentimental, and romantic interpretations of it. Likewise, I investigate how romantic concerns about, and conflict with, happiness were reconstructed on the other side of the Atlantic, as well as the ways in which Dickinson's work converses with the works of her contemporaries.

Due to its exceptionalism, several critics consider the period preceding the Civil War to be one of the most prosperous in American literary history. Emerson claimed in *Representative Men*, a work Dickinson admired and treasured, that

¹⁸⁷ Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 383. Quoted from Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Representative Selections*, ed. Faust, Johnson (New York, 1935), 59-61.

¹⁸⁸ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 133-5.

¹⁸⁹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 384-5. Additionally, "many Romantic writers testified to a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment seems to arrest what is passing, and is often described as an intersection of eternity in time."

"[t]he ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it..."¹⁹⁰ When Dickinson wrote for the first time to T.W. Higginson (enclosing four poems) and enquiring if her verse was "alive" in 1862,¹⁹¹ Higginson called Dickinson's verse "spasmodic." According to Miller, this was "the name given to a group of radical and controversial poets Dickinson admired – including Keats, Shelley, Byron, Barrett Browning, the young Tennyson, De Quincy, Alexander Smith, and Emily Brontë;" Dickinson's contemporaries thus offered helpful examples for adapting popular tropes as well as for "experimenting with ways of understanding the relation of language, thought, and patterned form."¹⁹² With regards to "the ideas of the time," Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* perceived "a fresh efflorescence of American sensibility" in Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman.

Nonetheless, Dickinson is only mentioned in a short paragraph in this classic literary history, which states that the "compressed form" of her poems "resulted from her need to resolve conflicts," which the author does not specify.¹⁹³ According to Howe, not only Dickinson but also other women writers were excluded from this literary history. "An intellectual and poetic Renaissance minus Emily Dickinson," Howe says in an interview with Edward Foster, "minus Harriet Beecher Stowe. Minus Margaret Fuller. Of course, minus Frederick Douglass as well. Women weren't the only ones subtracted. It's the kind of contradictions that get me."¹⁹⁴ Because of these factors, Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* guides this discussion, as his goal was to show "the ways in which the social and literary environment became riddled with moral mixtures and ambiguities that prompted various literary responses."¹⁹⁵ This ambiguous, indeterminate, and mysterious atmosphere prompted imaginative

¹⁹⁰ Cited in David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5. Quoted from Emerson's *Representative Men*.

¹⁹¹ L260 (1862).

¹⁹² Miller, *Reading in Time*, 22.

¹⁹³ Eliot Weinberger, "Preface," in *My Emily Dickinson*, ix.

¹⁹⁴ Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 159.

¹⁹⁵ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 8-9. In his account, Reynolds divides these responses in three categories: "Conventional literature," the one that attempted "to avoid or defeat these ambiguities," "Romantic Adventure" that "either evaded or objectified them," and "Subversive literature" that allowed these ambiguities "to erupt volcanically in often chaotic, fragmented fashion."

and unique responses in authors like Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Dickinson, as Reynolds asserts, “to experimental developments on the popular religious scene;”¹⁹⁶ which, in turn, led to new perceptions and redefinitions of the idea of happiness, which had been prominently shaped and influenced by religious dogma for centuries.

In line with British romantics, a strong emphasis on the art of perceiving anew pervades the period's literary and philosophical transatlantic culture. According to Abrams, the “freshness of sensation” associated with children's innocent way of sensing and perceiving the world was overemphasised in American literature at the time.¹⁹⁷ “We distrust and deny inwardly.... our sympathy with nature,” Emerson wrote, but “infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads them to return to paradise.”¹⁹⁸ Emerson also stated that “few adult persons can see nature... The lover of nature is he... who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.”¹⁹⁹ In some ways, custom and habit, as well as the fact that people take the commonality of the present for granted in favour of the exceptionality of the future, make people forget to see “the miraculous in the common,” as Emerson claimed.²⁰⁰ He proclaimed, echoing Carlyle's everyday marvels, “give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.”²⁰¹ Emerson's presentist interpretation may conflict with (his) religious faith, as theological interpretations of a meaningful life tend to favour “tomorrow” over “today.”

One of the most significant consequences of the Christianisation of happiness – in literary and philosophical contexts – was the dismissal of

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹⁷ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 411. Cited in Abrams, in Tony Tanner's *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature*, the author demonstrated this persistence – from the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Henry James to the ones of J.D. Salinger – on “freeing perception from habit and prejudice and sustaining the sense of wonder” in order to transform “the old world into a new Eden.” Additionally, Abrams observes that one of the historical reasons for this concern is “the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in the 1840's and later decades [that] derived its impetus from the continuing myth of America as the elected theatre for the fulfillment of eschatological prophecy.” As an example, the figure of Jonathan Edwards.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 412-3. Quoted from Emerson's *The Complete Works* (“Centenary Edition”).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 413.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 413.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 413. Emerson's emphasis in the present moment will be further explored along with his interpretation of the idea of happiness.

individuals' present time, which was assumed to be a trial. In the following poem, Dickinson's speaker, like Emerson, expresses the need to cherish the present moment:

How much the
present moment
means
To those who've
nothing more -
The Fop - the
Carp - the Atheist -
Stake an
entire store
Upon a moment's
shallow Rim

While their
commuted Feet
The waters Torrents of
Eternity
Do almost - all but
inundate ⁻²⁰²

For Dickinson's speaker, having nothing more than the present moment is a condition that can only be estimated by those who deny the existence of eternity, such as atheists – or by those who recognise that “every spark is numbered.” However, a shift in perspective is required to appreciate the truthfulness of this notion. Similar to Dickinson's assumption that the supernatural is simply the natural revealed, one could argue that the extraordinary is simply the ordinary revealed, given that “No other can reduce / Our mortal Consequence.”²⁰³ According to Porter, Dickinson's “incidents” – as everyday miracles – “became parables; the implications, revelatory.”²⁰⁴ In line with Emerson's “we animate

²⁰² “F1420A - How much the present moment means” (1877). Dickinson proposes a word-choice here: “fickle” instead of “shallow.”

²⁰³ “F738C - No other can reduce” (1863).

²⁰⁴ Porter, *Modern Idiom*, 70.

what we can, and we see only what we animate,"²⁰⁵ Dickinson's poetry constantly reminds her readers that the mind's vision shapes perception and that wonders will be there if people prepare their eyes to notice them.

Thoreau, who "defined the primary values of life in terms of the relation between the eye and its objects," was another supporter of the revelatory art of perceiving anew.²⁰⁶ "We are as much as we see," Thoreau said, and "to perceive freshly, with fresh senses, is to be inspired.... The age of miracles is each moment thus returned."²⁰⁷ Thoreau, like Emerson and Dickinson, recognised that people's perceptions of their surroundings are relative since differences in appreciation change the meaning and value of any given object or experience. Dickinson captures this relativism beautifully in the following poem:

The Voice that
stands for Floods
to me
Is sterile borne
to some -

The Face that
makes the
Morning mean
Glow impotent
on them -

What difference
in Substance lies
That what is
Sum to me
By other Financiers
be deemed
Exclusive Poverty!²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Cited in Diehl, "Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss," 684. Quoted from Emerson's "Experience."

²⁰⁶ Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 413-4. Quoted from *The Writings of H.D. Thoreau*.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 414. To some extent, "each moment thus returned" resonates well with Nietzsche's eternal recurrence.

²⁰⁸ "F1207A - The voice that stands for floods to me" (1871).

Dickinson's persona wonders why the message conveyed by the "Voice," which means so much to her, means so little to others. To some, the "Face" that gives her morning meaning only "glows impotent." Similarly, she is perplexed as to how something she clearly values and admires can be considered "Poverty" by some. As in "Is Bliss then, such Abyss -," where Dickinson's use of the exclamation mark at the end of the poem may ironically point to rushing the Lady to make an important decision that should not be taken lightly, one can argue that the exclamation mark in this poem may hint that, while it may appear inaccurate or exaggerated, relative perspectivism is actually quite certain and frequently operates in people's minds. This subjectivity captivates Dickinson's speaker, who muses on the possibility that a thought or circumstance that is overwhelming and significant for some can be completely sterile and irrelevant for others.

According to Emerson, "thus inevitably does the universe wear our color," and it is this colour that dyes people's realities.²⁰⁹ Bringing "this subjective / objective opposition into question, to argue a greater intimacy with the world," according to Christopher Benfey, is a common denominator among Dickinson, Emerson, and Thoreau.²¹⁰ In Thoreau's view, this intimacy with the world allowed him to share his thoughts on what it means to live a life worth living in *Walden's* conclusion:

In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.²¹¹

Thoreau's "volatile truth of our words" may evoke Dickinson's nimble believing. When pondering "how should we live?" he employs adjectives such as laxly, undefined, dim, and misty. Thoreau promotes a way of life that embraces indeterminacy and contingency, where "the possible" cannot be defined in advance since, as Dickinson's persona asserts, "The Future - never spoke -."²¹² Thoreau's *Walden* experiment, according to Albert Gilman and Roger Brown's

²⁰⁹ cited in Christopher E.G. Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 22. Quoted from Emerson's "Experience."

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹¹ Cited in Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 45. Quoted from Thoreau's *Walden*.

²¹² "F638A - The future never spoke" (1863).

“Personality and Style in Concord,” was willing to demonstrate that “a man can live as he wants to live, that he can have what he truly values if he will find out what that is and single-heartedly insist upon it.”²¹³

Like Thoreau, who thought that to find out was the first step towards happiness, one of Dickinson’s speakers claimed that “Finding is the first Act.”²¹⁴ Therefore, it is in the act of discovering, the process of becoming, and the imperfection of being that individuals’ current actions can guide them to wherever they want to go.²¹⁵ Dickinson’s speaker thus celebrates “the gift of life:”

For Death - or rather
For the Things 'twould buy -
This - put away
Life's Opportunity -

The Things that Death will
buy
Are Room -
Escape from Circumstances -
And a Name -

With Gifts of Life
How Death's Gifts may compare -
We know not -
For the Rates - lie Here -²¹⁶

Dickinson’s speaker is sceptical of trading opportunities and possibilities in life for the “Things” that death may bring. Death, in her opinion, will undoubtedly bring “room,” “escape from circumstances,” and a “name;” i.e., a tomb. Death’s gift, however, cannot compete with “gifts of life,” because it is only through life, or by being alive here on Earth, that people can assess value and compare its fare. According to McIntosh’s analysis, Dickinson shared with Thoreau “an anger at

²¹³ Albert Gilman and Roger Brown, “Personality and Style in Concord,” in *Transcendentalism and its Legacy*, 90.

²¹⁴ “F910A - Finding is the first act” (1865).

²¹⁵ This idea also connects with both Emerson’s insistence in “processes” and Nietzsche’s emphasis on the never-ending act of “becoming.”

²¹⁶ “F644B - For death - or rather” (1863).

institutional religion that denies this life, and harbored on her own an anger at the God of Calvinism for taking life from us;" Dickinson's attachment to this life "gets expressed as early as 1859, in a poem where she discounts the idea of 'going to Heaven':"²¹⁷

I'm glad I dont believe it
For it w'd stop my breath -
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth!²¹⁸ (Last stanza)

Dickinson's speaker's scepticism about heaven is bolstered in the preceding stanza by the realisation that if it were true, she would stop breathing. In any case, staying here on this "curious Earth" is preferable to going to heaven. The poet's attachment to this world, or, to use McIntosh's phrase, her perception of "the heavenliness of earth," shaped both her poetics and her living practices.

Dickinson's curiosity for this life, language, and consciousness is rooted in her religious, literary, and philosophical milieu. William James, whose relationship with Dickinson is "one of confluence rather than influence,"²¹⁹ as Manning suggests, and his reflections on happiness shed light on both Dickinson's interpretations and representations of the idea in the late nineteenth century. Happiness, according to James, "is, was, and ever shall be the ultimate human end in every time and place."²²⁰ Thus, his statement restores the idea's privilege in classical approaches, where happiness – albeit a near-miracle – was regarded as the ultimate goal of all human beings. James asserts in *Pragmatism* that "all 'homes' are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies."²²¹ In this fragment, James underlines the finitude and fragility of experience, as well as its fluidity and uncertainty; nothing can be secured in this life – except death – and it is in search of those promises of security that humans sometimes rely on what St. Augustine referred to as "a

²¹⁷ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 66.

²¹⁸ "J79 - Going to Heaven!" (1859).

²¹⁹ Manning, "How Conscious," 309.

²²⁰ Cited in McMahon, *Happiness*, xiii. Quoted from William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1994), 78. For Williams, "how to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure."

²²¹ Cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 198.

happiness of hope.” In his “Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man,” Thomas Reid asserted that “where the Word of God conferred the fixities and unalterable doom of predestination – focused, that is, on ends – human words told process, continuity, the experience of living rather than the point toward which it tended.”²²² Therefore, it is in the means rather than the ends, in the processes rather than the goals, in the continuation rather than the completion, that the experience and experiment of living is shaped and reshaped hour after hour, not knowing which of those hours will be the last, or rather which second, as Dickinson's poem claims:

Each Second is the
last
Perhaps, recalls the Man
Just measuring uncon -
sciousness
The Sea and Spar
between -

To fail within a
chance -
How terribler a thing
Than perish from
the chance's list
Before the Perishing!²²³

The speaker implies that each moment should be experienced as if it were the last, on the assumption that it might be. Individuals can estimate the chances that each day brings by being aware of the fluidity of experience. The speaker's true tragedy in life would be to be denied of possibility, or chance, even before that possibility is actually eliminated in “Perishing.” In other words, it is our own fixed and determined perception of reality, or future reality, that may limit individuals' ability to act today. Referencing the Bible to express her own views, Dickinson wrote in a letter to Susan in 1880: “boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest

²²² Cited in Manning, “How Conscious,” 310. Quoted from Thomas Reid’s “Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man.”

²²³ “F927A - Each second is the last” (1865).

not what a day may bring forth.”²²⁴ Dickinson's poem can be read in this context as an allegory for the value of the present moment and the need to be perceptively open and receptive to the flux of consciousness, thought, and experience.

To sum up, the preceding sections have focused on some themes that were important not only to the romantic tradition but also to literary figures on the other side of the Atlantic, and influenced Dickinson's views on happiness – such as the active nature of the mind, the importance of perceiving anew, and the connection between nature and divinity. In order to understand the role of the romantic quest in transforming the most rigorous theological approaches to happiness into more appropriate ones, I investigated how the romantic concern for how to adequately connect God and happiness is linked to a similar transcendentalist apprehension. However, some of Dickinson's American contemporaries shared her concerns about the inadequacies revealed by the romantic and transcendental traditions in their approach to happiness from a religious standpoint.

Dickinson's Work and Thought in Conversation with Some of Her Contemporaries' Perspectives on Happiness

Time feels so vast that were it not
For an Eternity -
I fear me this Circumference
Engross my Finitude -

To His exclusion, who prepare
By Processes of Size
For the Stupendous Vision
Of His Diameters -²²⁵

For Dickinson's persona, time on earth feels boundless, and her mortal state outlasts her hopes, or yearning, for eternity. In the context of the poet's remark to her niece Martha about time being all she wanted, one could argue that the only time that matters is the time included within life's circumference – or the totality of experience. In terms of “the uncertain / certainty -” of eternity, or “Paradise'

²²⁴ OMC 225 in “Correspondence with Susan” in *Dickinson Electronic Archives*. It references Proverbs 27:1.

²²⁵ “F858A - Time feels so vast that were it not” (1864).

existence,” the assurance of her present time on earth is most appreciated and expanded by the possibility of its stoppage. Similarly, it “feels so vast” because of its potential, and the opportunities that her limited life may provide. According to Gudrun M. Grabher’s essay, Dickinson’s speaker implies that “the amplitude of the moment measures the meaning of lives.”²²⁶ Several Dickinson poems, such as “How much the present moment means,” focus on the relevance of the present moment, as well as the significance of each particular now. It is today that matters and “here and now” is the place where past and future have fused in an everlasting moment, which is also the only temporality that individuals experience during their mortal lives. By reconstructing her cultural and reading context, this section examines Dickinson’s presentist interpretation in light of Emerson’s views – and other similarities and differences within their respective meditations – as well as other writers who may have permeated Dickinson’s notion of the Eternal Now in her approach to happiness.

The nineteenth-century American literary and philosophical tradition is indebted to Emerson’s teachings.²²⁷ As David Bromwich’s “Literary Radicalism in America” points out:

The great practical effect of Emerson’s teaching was that it gave an idea of originality to a generation that included Whitman, Dickinson, Melville, along with others who seem minor talents only in that company. He accomplished this in a society where a shapeless conformity of opinion appeared to have taken hold forever.²²⁸

Not only was there “conformity of opinion,” but also compliance with a system that degraded people’s lives and capabilities by forcing them to adjust to the strictness and suffering inherent in Calvinism, which was justified by the privilege

²²⁶ Gudrun M. Grabher’s “‘Forever – is composed of Nows –’: ED’s Conception of Time,” in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, 258.

²²⁷ Cited in Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, note 5 in the “Introduction.” For Poirier, “Emerson’s contribution to American philosophy, much less to poetry and to literary and linguistic theory, has been scandalously neglected.” *Ibid.*, 6. In Stanley Cavell’s words, “working within an aspiration of philosophy that feeds, and is fed by, a desire to inherit Emerson and Thoreau as thinkers, I take it for granted that their thinking is unknown to the culture whose thinking they worked to found.” Cavell, “Emerson, Coleridge, Kant,” in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 27.

²²⁸ Cited in Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 33. Quoted from David Bromwich, “Literary Radicalism in America,” in *A Choice of Inheritance*.

and redemption of an afterlife in heaven. And yet, according to Keane, “Dickinson, like Melville, out-Emersons Emerson in the rebellious, sometimes blasphemous audacity of her critique.”²²⁹ Furthermore, Roger Lundin’s *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* claims that “in her moments of deepest uncertainty,” Dickinson “registered her doubts with a vehemence as blunt as any oath of Melville’s Ahab and a defiance as sharp as any hurled at the heavens by Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.”²³⁰ In their pursuit of truth, most Dickinson’s speakers do not succumb to any ideal, doctrine, or authority. However, new perspectives were applied to religious teachings in order to adapt them to the needs of the times.

A shift in sermon style in the nineteenth century in the United States, influenced by romanticism and common sense philosophy, resulted in “a humanization and secularisation of religious discourse.”²³¹ Emerson’s mature style, according to Reynolds, demonstrates an adaptation and expansion of “the new religious idiom,” which is “combined with sophisticated philosophical ideas” as well as “imagery from the natural world.”²³² Emerson’s concern for “The Nature of God” led him to portray nature as “an exhibition of God’s benevolence.”²³³

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.²³⁴

Unlike Dickinson and Darwin, Emerson found comfort in the idea of nature as a miracle of God, even though it is the self, or “soul,” or “Me,” that represents “the final authority for being,” provided that Emerson’s transcendentalism is “not a systematic philosophy,” but an “angle of vision.”²³⁵ Emerson believed that the “law of compensation” in nature and in this life, rather than the Calvinist system of rewards and penalties, deals with “the riches of the future.”²³⁶ In his words, “the

²²⁹ Keane, *Approving God*, 33.

²³⁰ Cited in Keane, *Approving God*, 38.

²³¹ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 21. For instance, Reynolds asserts that “popular preachers like Taylor, Dow, and Summerfield were above all human in delivery and message.”

²³² *Ibid.*, 22-3.

²³³ Emerson, “Sermons,” *Prose and Poetry*, 11.

²³⁴ Emerson, “Transcendentalist,” *Prose and Poetry*, 95.

²³⁵ Robert E. Spiller, “Introduction,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971), xxii.

²³⁶ Emerson, “Sermons,” *Prose and Poetry*, 8.

perfect compensation of the universe” reveals that “the world must be just.”²³⁷ Emerson's perspective challenges and readapts theological interpretations of happiness as a reward in heaven by transforming this future temporality, or postponement, into the value of a life worth living in the present moment.²³⁸

Although Emerson's presentist interpretation paralleled Dickinson's, her writings questioned his law of compensation. For Dickinson, equality or a fair world may exist, but only in the tomb:

Color - Caste - Denomination -
These - are Time's Affair -
Death's diviner Classifying
Does not know they are -

As in sleep - all Hue
forgotten -
Tenets - put behind -
Death's large - Democratic
fingers
Rub away the Brand -

If Circassian - He is careless -
If He put away
Chrysalis of Blonde - or Umber -
Equal Butterfly -

They emerge from His Obscuring -
What Death - knows so well -
Our minuter intuitions -
Deem unplausible²³⁹

Dickinson's persona asserts that the only places where “all men are equal” are death and sleep. Death does not care about the location of its victims since such

²³⁷ Emerson, “Compensation,” *Prose and Poetry*, 145, 157.

²³⁸ To some extent, Emerson's views on the possibility of happiness in this life might resemble St. Augustine's and Aquinas' emphasis on the potentiality of an “imperfect happiness” on earth.

²³⁹ “F836A - Color - caste - denomination” (1864). Another example is “F1214A - Not any higher stands the grave” (1871).

“Democratic fingers” will take them all away from this life. Dickinson's speaker's awareness of life's tragedies – and of death as the only equaliser – contrasts sharply with Emersonian idealism and compensatory theory. In fact, “our minuter intuitions,” as Keller points out, “prevents Emersonian presumptuousness,” and Dickinson “with her darker eye.... goes beyond the Transcendentalist.”²⁴⁰ Although Emerson claimed that “nature and books belong to the eyes that see them,” Dickinson's poetics assert that “no matter how well one reads or imagines, nature as text withdraws and guards its final lesson;” for this reason, “morality departs from the natural world to depend solely upon the individual.”²⁴¹ Dickinson rejected the solace of a compensatory philosophy in life and a moral law in nature – which Emerson used to cope with unfortunate circumstances – and her poems, according to Feit Diehl, “face the barrier of mortality.”²⁴²

Like Emerson, other American literary figures influencing Dickinson's thought, such as Longfellow, Fanny Fern, and Ik Marvel, dramatised the collapse of Calvinist rigidity in their writings in an attempt to bridge the gap between the secular experience of the present and the religious hopes of the future. In her struggle with theistic dogma, Dickinson frequently refers to these writers in her letters. For example, when Austin Dickinson brought Longfellow's *Kavanagh* home, he signalled Dickinson and hid the book inside the piano so their father would not notice.²⁴³ Reynolds compared Sara Willis Parton (“Fanny Fern”) and Donald Grant Mitchell (“Ik Marvel”) to Dickinson in terms of style. They were all raised in conservative households and rebelled “against this stylistic orthodoxy in works filled with completely secularized use of religious imagery.”²⁴⁴ In terms of the Christianisation of happiness, Mitchell's critique in *Reveries of a Bachelor* may be analogous to Catherine's dream in *Wuthering Heights*, when she considered the possibility of “our souls” wandering in eternity:

²⁴⁰ Keller, *Only Kangaroo*, 161.

²⁴¹ Cited in Diehl, “Emerson, Dickinson, and the Abyss,” 684. Quoted from Emerson's “Experience.”

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 686.

²⁴³ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 31. Longfellow's *Kavanagh* “dramatizes the collapse of theological preaching, represented by the departing Rev. Pendexter, and the ascendancy of imaginative religion, embodied in the handsome young preacher Arthur Kavanagh.”

²⁴⁴ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 33-4.

Beyond time and space, beyond planets and suns, beyond far-off suns and comets, until, like blind flies, they are lost in the blaze of immensity, and can grope their way back to our earth and time by the cunning of instinct.²⁴⁵

In Reynolds' views, Dickinson's awareness of "the momentousness of the Present" – surpassing all her contemporaries' – may have been triggered by Mitchell's engagement with the Eternal Now, as evidenced by the lines "Thought alone is delicate to tell the breath of the Present" and "If you bring such thought to measure the Present, the Present will seem broad; and it will be sultry as Noon, and make a fever of Now."²⁴⁶ One could argue that the first statement is similar to Dickinson's opening "Tell all the truth / but tell it slant -," if "the breath of the Present" refers to "truth."²⁴⁷ The broadness of the present as a never-ending now in the second statement may echo Dickinson's letter to Susan in 1864, which stated: "There is no first, or last, in Forever - It is Centre, there, all the time -."²⁴⁸ Moreover, according to Reynolds, Dickinson wrote that "when Mitchell died she would want to die too, since there would be no one left on earth to interpret her life for her."²⁴⁹ Martin interprets Dickinson's concept of "eternity in time" as "the unfolding present as infinite."²⁵⁰

Dickinson's poems, as Grabher observes, were constantly emphasising the importance of valuing and appreciating the Now – or present moment – since these moments could "supersede the Heaven -."²⁵¹ In contrast to religious dogma and the notion of eternity as "the promise of heaven," Juhasz believes that Dickinson's Eternal Now embraces "a consciousness of eternity now," which translates into "an eternity experienced in life, and situated in the space of the mind."²⁵² In light of Solonian happiness, Dickinson's treasuring of each moment, hour, and incident resonates well with his views of the uniqueness of each day because none of them can be predicted. As a result, Dickinson's awareness of

²⁴⁵ Cited in Reynolds, *Beneath*, 34. Quoted from Ik Marvel's *Reveries of a Bachelor*.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴⁷ "F1263A - Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (1872).

²⁴⁸ H B56 A (1864).

²⁴⁹ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 34. Dickinson's notion of the Eternal Now will be placed in the context of Dickinson's circumference and of a life worth living – as well as in the context of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence.

²⁵⁰ Martin, *American Triptych*, 123.

²⁵¹ Grabher, "Forever," 258. "F560A - Did our best moment last" (1863).

²⁵² Juhasz, *Undiscovered Continent*, 134.

“the momentousness of the Present” stands in stark contrast to its depreciation in both theological and modern interpretations of happiness, where the reward of happiness is assumed to belong to the future.

Despite the ongoing persuasive power of orthodox belief, figures such as Wadsworth, Emerson, and Mitchell, in their efforts to humanise the divine, provided a necessary soil for Dickinson's writings to experiment and blend “the sacred and the secular, the Christian and the pagan,”²⁵³ as in the poem below:

Some - keep the Sabbath - going to church -
I - keep it - staying at Home -
With a Bobolink - for a Chorister -
And an Orchard - for a Dome -

Some - keep the Sabbath, in Surplice -
I - just wear my wings -
And instead of tolling the bell, for church -
Our little Sexton - sings -

"God" - preaches - a noted Clergyman -
And the sermon is never long,
So - instead of getting to Heaven -
- at last -
I'm - going - all along!²⁵⁴

Dickinson's speaker transfers religious reverence of God to adoration of nature in this poem by blending the sacred and the secular; her garden replaces the church, the birds replace the bells, and heaven, rather than being a potential destination, becomes an integral part of the journey. Dickinson's holistic “angle of vision,” to use Emerson's terminology, enabled her to perceive and imagine “beyond the boundaries of doctrine toward stylistic freedom.”²⁵⁵ Emerson's

²⁵³ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 36.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 36. “F236B - Some keep the Sabbath going to church” (1861). As Reynold suggests, some other examples blending the sacred and the secular are: “F402A - To hear an oriole sing” (1862), “F122A - These are the days when birds come back” (1859), “F320A - There's a certain slant of light” (1862), and “F411A - Mine by the right of the white election!” (1862).

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

unusual fusion of subversive and conservative traits served as a model for several American Renaissance writers.

Emerson's and Whitman's optimism contrasts with Melville's and Dickinson's scepticism. For McIntosh, Melville and Dickinson are acutely aware of what Dickinson's speaker referred to as "the abdication of Belief," which is also expressed in *Moby Dick* as "a never-ending dialectic of doubt and intuition."²⁵⁶ Bennett, like McIntosh, remarks that both writers "took the same gamble" in terms of risks, which entailed gains and losses, by resisting the metaphysics of their time.²⁵⁷ Some critics argue that by cultivating "the chance to be unsettled," Thoreau, Melville, Emerson, and Dickinson accepted – to varying degrees – the contingency of this world.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, they all shared an inexhaustible willingness to question well-established beliefs and common sense principles, while accepting "the instability of thought" as well as "the flow of consciousness;" according to McIntosh, "all four writers take advantage of liberal currents in religion to liberalize their own sensibilities," and "without subscribing to Puritan doctrines, they inherit Puritan imaginations."²⁵⁹ Poirier affirms that Emerson's work influenced James's pragmatism, and he finds evidence to support his claim at the end of the sixth section of Emerson's "Experience," where the philosopher highlights three ideas that will eventually be central to James's theory.²⁶⁰

The attraction of Emerson and James to the concept of "vagueness" – against the determinism of fixed categories and common sense – in order to liberate their experiences and allow their thinking to remain open, is also well-applied in Dickinson's poetics.²⁶¹ Hence, indeterminism is central to their approaches to the concept of happiness, as well as Dickinson's, whose speaker claimed that "The Life that tied too tight Escapes."²⁶² Dickinson's idea is strikingly

²⁵⁶ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 22-3.

²⁵⁷ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 40.

²⁵⁸ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 20-1. Dickinson, then, "as she shares the cultural dilemmas of feminine respectability with other women writers, so she shares a consciousness of metaphysical uncertainty with Emerson and his successors, however uniquely she remains herself."

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁶⁰ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 40-1. Those three ideas are: "that life is not so much present as prospective," that new ideas "must in their articulation pay deference to old beliefs or 'previous truth'," and "that any belief should be tolerated."

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶² "J1535 - The Life that tied too tight escapes" (1881).

similar to Emerson's need to be unsettled, as revealed in "Circles:" "nothing is secure but life, transition, the energising spirit;" nevertheless, "people wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them."²⁶³ Dickinson's indeterminacy may thus be linked to Emerson's unsettlement.

Despite the shift in happiness's temporality prompted by theological and sentimental representations of happiness, this section focused on Dickinson's presentist interpretation and her concept of the Eternal Now in her approach to happiness. Following a discussion of some of the major literary figures in her intellectual milieu, I will examine Dickinson's views on happiness – and the significance of the present moment – in conversation with Emerson's.

Dickinson's and Emerson's Views on Happiness and their Focus on the Present Moment

Oh Sumptuous
moment
Slower go
That I
may gloat on
thee - ²⁶⁴ (first stanza)

Unlike theological, sentimental, and modern interpretations of happiness, Dickinson's speaker here values the blissfulness of the (present) moment with great satisfaction. Dickinson's presentist bent parallels Emerson's. As previously stated, Emerson's insistence on the significance and revealing nature of each "to-day" in "The American Scholar" fuses past and future temporality by considering that "things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote" since "the near explains the far."²⁶⁵ Since people can only experience the present, which is surrounded by memories of the past and expectations of the future, Emerson's perspective is in line with Dickinson's understanding of "the now" explaining "the forever."²⁶⁶ Dickinson's speaker said: "Elysium is as far as to the

²⁶³ Emerson, "Circles," *Prose and Poetry*, 181.

²⁶⁴ "F1186A - Oh sumptuous moment" (1870).

²⁶⁵ Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Prose and Poetry*, 67.

²⁶⁶ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Prose and Poetry*, 128-9. Emerson claims that "man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future."

very nearest room;" in this juxtaposition of imagery, the current day or nearest hour stands in for the axis of people's daily activities dictating their assessment of happiness at the end.²⁶⁷ Individuals will have endless opportunities to venture if they avoid postponing life and live it now, as expressed in Dickinson's letter to Judge Otis P. Lord in 1882: "momentousness is ripening. I hope that all is firm. Could we yield each other to the impregnable Chances till we had met once more?." ²⁶⁸ Similarly, Dickinson referred to each morning's "impregnable chances" in a letter to Susan that same year. In this interplay between the one and the many, Emerson's "History" reminds us that "there is a relation between the hours of our life and the centuries of time," since "the creation of a thousand forests is in *one acorn*."²⁶⁹ Dickinson's second stanza of "To venerate the simple days" highlights this image of the acorn for her readers:

To invest existence with a stately air -
Needs but to remember
That the Acorn there
Is the egg of forests
For the upper Air!²⁷⁰

This one acorn allows Dickinson's speaker to consider the interaction between the hours and years of an individual's life, between incidents and events, as well as the merging of every single experience within that bright total called happiness.

Dickinson's writings, like Emerson's, are frequently caught up in the process itself. As Bennett points out, "Dickinson's decision not to provide incontestably correct versions of her poems even in fair copy lets them live in ways 'finished' poems do not;" assuming her verse as ever-changing, it resists completion; it is always hooked within the process.²⁷¹ Dickinson's processes, as a result, allow for an infinite number of interpretations as well as possibilities. In terms of "the value of life," Emerson stated that it is found "in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual,

²⁶⁷ "F1590A - Elysium is as far as to" (1882). This poem will be analysed in chapter four.

²⁶⁸ L750 (1882).

²⁶⁹ Emerson, "History," *Prose and Poetry*, 105.

²⁷⁰ "F55A - To venerate the simple days" (1859).

²⁷¹ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, xx.

what may befall me."²⁷² In addition, he believed that "we thrive by casualties."²⁷³ Despite the fact that Lears considers Emerson to be a major proponent of the culture of control (perhaps due to his belief in transcendental Providence and compensatory law in nature), Emerson also believed that life's contingency – at least partially – is the motivating force in the never-ending process of finding oneself. Likewise, Dickinson stated in a letter to Katie S. Turner in 1860: "finding is slow, facilities for losing so frequent in a world like this."²⁷⁴ Therefore, finding is conceived as the "first act," and it proceeds slowly; and there is a chance of gaining for every chance of losing.

Dickinson's compositions, as illustrated in the poem below, approximate and validate what McIntosh refers to as "a Hermeneutics of Possibility:"²⁷⁵

I dwell in Possibility -
A fairer House than Prose -
More numerous of Windows -
Superior - for Doors -

Of Chambers as the Cedars -
Impregnable of eye -
And for an everlasting
Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky -

Of Visitors - the fairest -
For Occupation - This -
The spreading wide my
narrow Hands
To gather Paradise -²⁷⁶

²⁷² Emerson, "Experience," *Prose and Poetry*, 201. Emerson's "what may befall me" parallels Solonian "what befall us."

²⁷³ Ibid., 206-7. Additionally, Emerson assures that "the ancients, struck with this irreducibleness of the elements of human life to calculation, exalted Chance into a divinity, but that is to say too long at the spark, - which glitters truly at one point, - but the universe is warm with the latency of the same fire."

²⁷⁴ L222 (1860).

²⁷⁵ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 8.

²⁷⁶ "F466A - I dwell in possibility" (1862).

Given that poetry is a house of possibility, Dickinson's speaker considers it to be more equitable than prose. Prose, to some extent, is restrictive and expresses dogmatic opinions or normalcy standards. On the contrary, the house of poetry provides more opportunities and possibilities for questioning the truths that prose takes for granted. She suggests in the second stanza that by residing in the house of poetry, her doubts and uncertainties can reach "the Gambrels of the Sky." The third stanza conveys that in the house of poetry, as claimed in another poem, she "selects her own society;"²⁷⁷ and persuades her vocation and occupation, which is to be a poet and spread her words, which may gather an earthly paradise in this house. Martha Nell Smith observes in *Rowing in Eden* that Dickinson's poems after 1875 are "often briefer and sometimes less finished than her earlier poems, more subject to the whims of process;" similarly, "the writing of poetry is no longer confined to verse and becomes an on-going, never-ending process of self-expression."²⁷⁸ Dickinson's writings become entangled in the continuous appreciation of life as a series of unpredictable possibilities as a result of this never-ending process of self-expression. It is no coincidence, then, that Dickinson's writings embrace this contingency and acknowledge the reciprocal need and mutual demand of joy and grief, suffering and bliss; a perspective that will set her apart from Emerson's philosophy.

Although Dickinson's writings do not grant suffering (or negative affects) any special status, they do acknowledge the transformative power that pain, sorrow, and danger can provide for humans. Emerson's views, on the other hand, do not succumb to the teachings of grief and suffering:

There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature.²⁷⁹

Following his son's death, Emerson's reflection in "Experience" could be interpreted as a statement of principles, in which grief has no place in his "angle

²⁷⁷ "F409A - The soul selects her own society" (1862).

²⁷⁸ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 8. For instance, see Martha Nell Smith's *Rowing in Eden* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 79-86.

²⁷⁹ Emerson, "Experience," *Prose and Poetry*, 199-200.

of vision,” because, in his words, “I cannot get it nearer to me.”²⁸⁰ In contrast to the theological, sentimental, and romantic tendency to extol the redeeming virtues of negative emotions, Emerson emphasised the superficiality of grief’s teachings and, to some extent, the inadequacy of those teachings when combined with his notion of happiness. Similarly, in Emerson’s philosophy, it is not grief that helps people appreciate joy – or learning by opposites – because it is his law of compensation that applies to his transcendental viewpoint.

In Dickinson’s cosmology, however, grief and bliss, loss and gain, are completely assimilated to and merged within the totality of experience, as depicted in this short poem:

Of so divine
a Loss
We enter but
the Gain,
Indemnity for
Loneliness
That such a
Bliss has been.²⁸¹

For Dickinson’s speaker, the greater the loss, the greater the confirmation of the value of the gain itself, even if this gain is no longer present. The intensity of emotion and its recollection should serve as a reference point. Given that this poem ends with a period, one could argue that Dickinson’s speaker concludes the poem definitively; there is nothing else to be added. Dickinson’s depolarisation of experience, as in “Water, is taught by thirst,” expresses the need to accept that opposites bring each other into existence.²⁸² In his reading, Whicher argues that “all that could be known at all was known by antithesis. There could be no experience without the eternal interplay of contradiction. As a result, whatever was negative became a contribution to the positive.”²⁸³ Furthermore, Dickinson believed that the fact that opposites “entice” each other does not imply

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 199-200.

²⁸¹ “F1202A - Of so divine a loss” (1871).

²⁸² “F93A - Water is taught by thirst” (1859).

²⁸³ Cited in Sherwood, *Circumstance and Circumference: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* (Columbia University Press, 1968), 61. Quoted from George F. Whicher, *This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 304-5.

that they compensate, or that there is a fairness of distribution, as Emerson suggests; they are attracted or drawn towards each other in both excess and deficiency. Dickinson's circumference, thus, can be seen as a reminder that everything contributes to the wholeness of experience.

To unpack Dickinson's concept of circumference and its connection to happiness, a closer look at Emerson's "Circles" and how this essay might shed light on the process of grasping Dickinson's metaphorical journey is needed. To begin, the following poem may provide some helpful guidelines:

When Bells stop ringing -
Church - begins -
The Positive - of Bells -
When Cogs - stop - that's
Circumference -
The Ultimate - of Wheels -²⁸⁴

Although Dickinson's writings advocate for the depolarisation of experience and the simultaneity of emotion, the persona in this poem also confirms that certain activities cannot be performed or developed concurrently. The sound of bells, in particular, draws devotees to mass; however, the ceremony does not begin until the sound stops. Circumference – or the unattainable bliss (considering Shelley's poem) – completes its cycle when mortality ends.

In light of Solonian happiness, Dickinson's circumference may be interpreted as the ultimate boundary in people's lives in these verses. In W. R. Sherwood's analysis, the sound of bells represents "the motion of mortal man," and it is only when this motion ceases that individuals are led toward that "greater circumference."²⁸⁵ This greater circumference of an absent, or fluid, centre confirms or disproves whether or not a flourishing life has been attained. Dickinson declared in this prose fragment: "To have lived is a Bliss so powerful - we must die - to adjust it -."²⁸⁶ According to Sherwood, "beyond and giving shape to the limits of human judgment lay the larger consciousness or circumference one could not have until the line between dead and living, time and eternity, was

²⁸⁴ "F601A - When bells stop ringing -" (1863).

²⁸⁵ Sherwood, *Circumstance*, 222.

²⁸⁶ L523 (1877).

crossed.”²⁸⁷ Death thus “adjusts” life, and it is not until death that bliss can be appropriately estimated.

Dickinson's circumference could be interpreted as the threshold, or edge, of life's abyss, shaping the limits of both human judgement and happiness. In “Emily Dickinson and the Crisis of Self-reliance,” Glauco Cambon suggests that the poet 's circumference represents “a merely glimpsed completeness” that, in comparison to Emerson's “spiritual Everywhere,” becomes “a menacing Nowhere” in her experience.²⁸⁸ This key concept in Dickinson's vocabulary, according to Martin, refers to “the perception of the universe as an eternal and cyclic whole;” it also reveals Dickinson's poetic philosophy and commitment “to rendering experience as continuous movement rather than categorical classification.”²⁸⁹ In the context of Dickinson's letter to Higginson stating her business as circumference, Porter claims that “it reflects need without a definable goal” and, essentially, “unfinishedness.”²⁹⁰ Dickinson's circumference, given this lack of finality and definite project, remains fluid, in motion, adapting to the whims of contingency until mortality ends. Nonetheless, Emerson declared in “Circles” that “there is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us His only redress is forthwith to draw a circle of his antagonist.”²⁹¹

Life, according to Emerson's “Circles,” is a “self-evolving circle” that endlessly enlarges to form new concentric circles.²⁹² Because “there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning,” according to Emerson, “every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series,” and this particular shape thus represents “the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying Perfect.”²⁹³ In a universe in constant

²⁸⁷ Sherwood, *Circumstance*, 220. Likewise, in the context of the poem “F890B - A coffin is a small domain” (1864), Sherwood suggests that death might be described as “Circumference without Relief - / Or Estimate - or End -.”

²⁸⁸ Glauco Cambon, “Emily Dickinson and the Crisis of Self-reliance,” in *Transcendentalism and its Legacy*, 126.

²⁸⁹ Martin, *American Tryptic*, 123.

²⁹⁰ Porter, *Modern Idiom*, 105.

²⁹¹ Emerson, “Circles,” *Prose and Poetry*, 175. According to Cambon, “‘Circles’ in particular must have fostered in Emily Dickinson her predilection for the germane writings of Sir Thomas Browne and her addiction to that protean key word, Circumference.” Cambon, “Crisis of Self-reliance,” 123.

²⁹² Emerson, “Circles,” *Prose and Poetry*, 175. It is interesting to note that Emerson uses the term “circle” and not “circumference.” For Nell Smith, “at a time when Emerson claimed there was no circumference (see ‘Circles’), Dickinson declared circumference – her own terms and premises – her ‘Business’ (L268).” Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, 60.

²⁹³ Emerson, “Circles,” *Prose and Poetry*, 174-5.

motion, where nothing is permanent and the only constant condition is change, completion and perfection are impossible to achieve. Nature, like the universe, is constantly changing, and what McIntosh states is that “human nature cannot afford fixations and fixed ideas, lest it go dead or permanently inert.”²⁹⁴ By considering Emerson's notion in the context of happiness, and in contrast to theological and sentimental tendencies to reify and fix this idea, it appears reasonable to affirm that if human nature cannot stand fixations, neither can happiness.

Predetermining happiness – or the conditions under which a life may be perceived as well lived – means the end of its potentiality and the beginning of its devaluation. Fixing is limiting, and this idea is central to Dickinson's cosmology: “the idea that belief, thought, and feeling are transient, that one's mental life is continually in flux.”²⁹⁵ It is this liveliness and mutability, this resistance to fixation, that Dickinson's work emphasises in content and form. For example, in the poem below, she expresses her inability to fix motion by using the image and movement of a hummingbird:

A Route
of Evanescence,
With a revolving
Wheel -
A Resonance
of Emerald
A Rush of
Cochineal -
And every
Blossom on the
Bush
Adjusts its
tumbled Head -
The Mail
from Tunis - prob -
ably,

²⁹⁴ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 170.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

An easy
Morning's Ride ²⁹⁶

In this poem, the speaker is able to recreate the hummingbird's wings vibration, fast-moving flight, and rushing speed. The fact that this poem was sent to at least six correspondents reinforces the notion that neither the hummingbird's nor life's motion can be fixed.²⁹⁷ Furthermore, Dickinson's dashes and limited use of periods at the end of her poems underline the ongoing work-in-progress, or, in Poirier's words, "the thought-in-action," since "like the soul, words can reveal the parameters of fate and limitation; just as surely, they open spaces beyond these, horizons of new, barely apprehended possibility."²⁹⁸ Assuming that happiness' reification can be interpreted as "needed and dreadful," its translation into language can both open up possibilities and limit capabilities.

Both Dickinson's and Emerson's works warn their readers that it is only through "the fluidity of virtue and the instability of human life that people can be continually renewed."²⁹⁹ People can aspire to be newer every day by moving through the conditions of happiness on a daily basis, as well as by forming new circles, or rather circumferences. Despite our natural tendency to settle down, Dickinson and Emerson expressed concern about remaining "unsettled." This idea resonates well with Locke's "uneasiness," which suspects that in the pursuit of ease and comfort, or the habituation to it, individuals lose their capacity for renewal and motion, which enables them to perceive life's infinite possibilities. "I unsettle all things," Emerson wrote in "Circles," adding that "no facts are sacred to me; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back."³⁰⁰ Emerson's never-ending experimentation with the sacred and profane echoes romantic consciousness. Regarding his intention to "unsettle all things," one could argue that Dickinson's writings truly master this endeavour.

²⁹⁶ "F1489G - A route of evanescence" (1879).

²⁹⁷ According to the Emily Dickinson's archive, the correspondents were: Helen Hunt Jackson, Louise and Frances Norcross, Sarah Tuckerman, T. W. Higginson, Mabel Todd, and Thomas Niles.

²⁹⁸ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 30.

²⁹⁹ Reynolds, *Beneath*, 96.

³⁰⁰ Emerson, "Circles," *Prose and Poetry*, 180.

Emerson's writings advocate for constant unsettling, questioning, and experimentation by blurring the boundaries between religious and secular. Similarly, Dickinson's brief poem captures this concept well:

Experiment escorts us last -
His pungent company
Will not allow an Axiom
An Opportunity -³⁰¹

Experimentation allows people's experiences to remain "unsettled," as well as open to variation and stimulus, by deconstructing established principles rather than providing them with an "opportunity." Here is another example:

Experience is the Angled
Road
Preferred against the
Mind
By - Paradox - the
Mind itself -
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite - How
complicate
The Discipline of
Man -
Compelling Him to
choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -³⁰²

More than any dictums or assumptions of the mind, Dickinson's speaker values experience, however twisted and difficult. Even when the mind's maxim appears to point in the opposite direction, the mind should listen to experience. Living is an extremely difficult task, and it may appear more painful at times to follow your experience rather than the predetermined path suggested by an established order.

³⁰¹ "F1181A - Experiment escorts us last" (1870). For a detailed analyses of this poem, see Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, 169.

³⁰² "F899A - Experience is the angled road" (1865).

Dickinson's speaker expresses the complex relationship between the teachings of experience – the outcomes of which cannot be predicted – and mental projections. According to Cambon's analysis of this poem, Dickinson's "unknowing has become deeper knowledge."³⁰³ This unknown is required to remain "unsettled," and it is likely that Emerson was thinking of this uncertainty when he wrote in "Experience": "life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep ... Thy life is a flitting state."³⁰⁴ In this passage embedded in a Shakespearean tone, Emerson recognised the importance of remembering that life is unpredictable, constantly changing, and generally deceptive; a knowledge well displayed in Dickinson's poem:

Sweet skepticism
of the Heart -
That knows - and
does not know -
And tosses like
a Fleet of Balm -
Affronted by the
snow -
Invites and then
retards the truth
Lest Certainty
be sere
Compared with
the delicious
throe
Of transport
thrilled with Fear -³⁰⁵

For Dickinson's speaker, the thrill of the possibility of knowing, but not the certainty, is sweeter than knowledge itself. This scepticism, along with Dickinson's nimble believing, is at the heart of the poet's work. What we think we know today may be denied tomorrow by the same mind that brought it to our

³⁰³ Cambon, "Crisis of Self-reliance," 131. Other poems that he uses to support his arguments are: "F531A - We learned the whole of love" (1863) and "F714A - No man can compass a despair" (1863).

³⁰⁴ Emerson, "Experience," *Prose and Poetry*, 205.

³⁰⁵ "F1438A - Sweet skepticism of the heart" (1877).

attention. This concept, to some extent, connects the possibility of daily renewal with the unpredictability of daily events.

As in Dickinson's work, chance is central to Solonian happiness, as is the need to place life in the context of tragic interpretations of the concept. Emerson's strategy to "live in the Soul" in order to isolate himself from tragedy is revealed in Whicher's "Emerson's Tragic Sense." Although W.B. Yeats claimed, in Whicher's words, "that we begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy;" Emerson advocated for the opposite, stating that only by refusing "to conceive life as tragedy could he find the courage to live."³⁰⁶ Unlike Emerson, who found no solace in tragedy's teachings, Dickinson's poetic philosophy in her approach to happiness – like Solon's and Nietzsche's – is rooted in a tragic perspective that, precisely, learns to better estimate life in light of death.³⁰⁷ In Trelawny's *Recollections*, he tragically expresses Shelley and William's deaths after their boat sank by recalling a gathering they and their families had a few days before the tragedy:

Loath to part from what I verily believed to have been at that time the most united, and happiest, set of human beings in the whole world. And now by the blow of an idle puff of wind the scene was changed. Such is human happiness.³⁰⁸

And by concluding his remembrances with Shelley's poem:

All things that we love and cherish,
Like ourselves, must fade and perish;
Such is our rude mortal lot,
Love itself would, did they not.³⁰⁹

The paradox of mortality is that the more we have, the more we may lose; the more we love, the more we may mourn. This is the happiness paradox.

This chapter has argued that Dickinson's writings have a proclivity toward an idea of a life worth living that is rooted in finitude, mortality, and death. Similarly, her work highlights people's finite condition as strictly necessary in

³⁰⁶ Stephen E. Whicher, "Emerson's Tragic Sense," in "Criticism," *Prose and Poetry*, 664.

³⁰⁷ Abrams, *Natural Supernatural*, 444. For Abrams, "the tragic paradox is that the values of life are valuable precisely because they are limited and defined by death."

³⁰⁸ Trelawny, *Recollections*, 123.

³⁰⁹ Cited in Trelawny, *Recollections*, 126.

assessing the possibility of happiness in this life. It examined a number of Dickinson's poems and letters in the context of British romantic thought and its relationship with transcendentalist views of happiness in nineteenth-century America, in order to approach her writings as a response to the ambiguities and inadequacies of these doctrines. Following an examination of possible interpretations of both the term circumference and the notion of the Eternal Now in Dickinson's cosmology, as well as how the poet absorbed, challenged, and reacted to Emerson's transcendentalist certainties, the next chapter investigates how Dickinson's poetic philosophy resonates well with Nietzsche's and Albert Camus's views on life as a tragedy, and how their work may clarify Dickinson's views on a life worth living.

Chapter 4: The Power of Existence in Dickinson's Views of Happiness

To be alive - is Power -
Existence - in itself -
Without a further
function -
Omnipotence - Enough -

To be alive - and
will! -
'Tis able as a God -
The Maker - of Our -
selves - be what -
Such being Finitude!¹

Dickinson's speaker claims that the mere fact of being alive is powerful enough, which means that existence does not require any additional function or cause, neither aim nor goal. Existence itself is valuable, and this poem emphasises the intrinsic value of being alive. The divine attribute of "omnipotence" provides unlimited power, and it is this divine attribute that makes individuals as "able as God." Although being alive is power for all, Dickinson's persona emphasises the individuality of each self in particular by separating and enclosing the pronoun "Our - selves" between dashes. Furthermore, this metaphor of the will as a maker translates the abstract into concrete experience. It is worth noting that Dickinson only uses one verb, to be – either uninflected or in the present tense – which gives the poem both an atemporal quality and a presentist temporality. Dickinson emphasises the value of the process itself by using infinitive and uninflected forms; thus, the act of being alive represents a continuous course of action. Given its disjunctive and compressed form, as well as the lack of linear progression, this poem implies that those processes occur simultaneously. When the endings of both stanzas are compared, it is clear that, on the one hand, the first stanza ends with a stressed syllable that conveys a sense of conclusion because being alive

¹ "F876B - To be alive is power" (1864). Another earlier example of the privilege of being alive is "F605A - I am alive - I guess."

is omnipotence “enough” and nothing else is required. The second stanza, on the other hand, offers an open-ended cadence with the polysyllabic word “Finitude,” which may imply that there is no sense of completion for individuals while they are alive, while they are still finite. Further, the exclamation mark at the end of the poem could indicate a surprising event or disruptive impression. In this case, the surprise comes when divine attributes are combined with the word “Finitude,” which paradoxically offers infinite possibilities in a finite amount of time. The change in verb tense in the last verse – from be to being – alerts the reader to the peculiarity and importance of this final statement. Individuals are empowered by their mortality; the intrinsic value of being alive is given to us by our mortal condition.

In line with Solonian happiness, Dickinson's speaker implies that the mere fact of being alive, as well as awareness of one's own frailty, bestows greater value on existence in the absence of a higher purpose. Scholars like Shira Wolosky have connected this existential idea with the philosophy of the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche. Wolosky claims that this poem is “strikingly Nietzschean” for embracing “the world of phenomena as the true and exhilarating arena;” thus, life on earth, while limited, provides individuals with unbounded possibilities.² Other scholars align Dickinson's work with the later philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger. According to Deppman's essay, Dickinson's work, like Heidegger's maxim that “all being is in Being,” restores the privilege granted to the mere fact of existing by Greek thinkers. Noble cites Deppman in *Rethinking Sympathy* when she claims that “the result of Dickinson's thought experiments is an invigorated awareness of the astonishment of being itself.”³ Furthermore, Deppman believes that “Heidegger asks a question Dickinson faced her whole life: what kind of thinking about Being is possible for those who are not Christian?.”⁴ Dickinson's writings, as previously demonstrated, persistently challenged religious teachings, and her poems enabled her to think beyond deistic constraints.

² Wolosky, “Truth and Lie in Emily Dickinson and Nietzsche,” in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 132. According to Wolosky, both Dickinson and Nietzsche seek “to transfer value from the next world to this one, from eternity to time, being to becoming.”

³ Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy*, 236.

⁴ Deppman, “Astonished Thinking: Dickinson and Heidegger,” in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 227-8.

After examining Dickinson's work in light of, and in contrast to, theological, sentimental, and transcendental interpretations of happiness, this chapter focuses on the poet's late writings and the ways in which they reinforce the views on happiness that she held throughout her life – an idea rooted in finitude, mortality, contingency, and possibility. Although this study does not assume that some writing periods were more important than others, since it is the entirety of Dickinson's existence that informs both her poetic practices and views on happiness, it does argue that her late writings – due to both the experiences she had already gathered and the approaching of death – are crucial to better comprehend and assess the poet's perspective. Besides that, the poems Dickinson chose to share with her loved ones will be given special attention. Therefore, the majority of the poems, letter-poems, and prose fragments in this chapter were included in Dickinson's letters and circulated to friends and family during the final ten years before her death in 1886.⁵

Despite the fact that Dickinson's circumference had not yet been “completed” (or, in the poet's words, since “wholes are not below”), the deaths of several loved ones during those years allowed her to engage in further and deeper meditations on the fragility of existence. According to Keane, “while Dickinson's attitudes do not radically change in the course of her career, her work develops aesthetically and spiritually.”⁶ Martin points out that “the final decade of Dickinson's life was marred by the death of many of her beloved friends and family members.... Although each death severely taxed her emotional resources, Dickinson never relinquished her belief in the sanctity of this life.”⁷ In, “Living and Dying with Emily Dickinson,” Deppman claims that in Dickinson's late work “life owes its sweetness to its brevity and to the fact that there is no other or next life,” as the poem below implies:⁸

Did life's penurious length
Italicize its sweetness,

⁵ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 11. Miller affirms that “over the course of her lifetime, we have a record of 530 poems that Dickinson sent to friends, family, and acquaintances. Of these, she sent 90 to more than one person, some to several people.” The fact that she send the same poem to several people suggests that Dickinson “regarded her poems as isolatable from a particular personal or epistolary context.”

⁶ Keane, *Approving God*, 39.

⁷ Martin, *American Triptych*, 111.

⁸ Deppman, “Living and Dying,” 599.

The men that daily live
Would stand so deep in joy
That it would clog the cogs
Of that revolving reason
Whose esoteric belt
Protects our sanity.⁹

Although the concept of an afterlife may help people cope with mortality, Dickinson's speaker seems to be inferring that the fact that there is no life after this one should enlighten people's perception of their current existence, making it sweeter due to its briefness.

Dickinson's mourning experience is explicated and rehearsed in numerous poems and letters, as is her astounding interest in the deceased's final moments.¹⁰ Unlike Emerson, expressing grief allowed her speakers to reflect on human vulnerability. According to Freedman's essay, "it is only through the animating and poetic power of a felt absence that Dickinson's poetry can begin to compass the unknown from the human and experiential boundaries of living life and, perhaps, change it."¹¹ Given this circumstance, the event of death (which may be understood as the limit of circumference) has a privileged position in Dickinson's approach to happiness, surpassing the experience and figure of God. I have demonstrated how several Dickinson's speakers refused to find comfort in the promise of an afterlife by reconstructing her cultural and reading context. Her writings called into question the sentimental prerogative of negative emotions, as well as the ethics of life as a trial, because, as Bennett points out, the poet was "fully aware of the inadequacies of sentimentalised religion," as shown in the verses below:¹²

Those - dying
then,
Knew where they

⁹ "F1751A - Did life's penurious length."

¹⁰ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 163. Miller points out that "Dickinson's expressions of concern over several decades about the manner of dying indicate her familiarity with this cultural mode." For instance, in letters L263, L826, L827, and L1018; and poems "F1100A - The last night that she lived" and "F688A - To know just how he suffered would be dear."

¹¹ Linda Freedman, "Touching the Wounds," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 84.

¹² Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 53.

went -
They went to
God's Right Hand -
That Hand is
amputated now
And God cannot
be found -¹³ (first stanza)

Dated 1882, this poem implies that there has been a shift in perception. There was no doubt about where the “dying” went before, but now “God cannot be found.” To some extent, the “uncertain certainty” of heaven as a reward is increasingly seen as inadequate and inaccurate. That same year, in a previously mentioned letter to Otis P. Lord, Dickinson referred to Darwin as the one who might have thrown “‘the Redeemer’ away.”¹⁴ Bennett's interpretation of this poem contends that “the combined forces of Darwinism, higher biblical criticism and social revolution had undermined the foundations of religious faith, and sentimentalism, for all its efforts, had not been able to patch it together. In a very real sense, God was dead;” however, “Dickinson could not let Him die.”¹⁵ Whether or not God was partially or completely dead in Dickinson's cosmology, it is no coincidence that the poet was not persuaded by the renunciation of earthly life – and the possibility of happiness within it – in exchange for heavenly blessedness. Regarding the metaphysical death of God, this chapter seeks to place Dickinson's late writings in conversation with existential interpretations of happiness in order to identify some key themes – such as the absurdity of this world, the tragic viewpoint, and the significance of death for finite beings – shared by both Dickinson's speakers and philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus. This study considers the tragic tradition to be fundamental when examining, on the one hand, Dickinson's views on a well-lived life and, on the other hand, the openness to indeterminacy and possibility that her writings – in form and content – offer in their approach to happiness.

Before proceeding, we should (re)consider some of the factors that distanced Dickinson from transcendental approaches to happiness, as well as

¹³ “F1581A - Those dying then” (1882).

¹⁴ L750 (1882).

¹⁵ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 79. For example, in “F1603A - To the bright east she flies” (1883).

Emerson's impact on Nietzsche's "angle of vision." Although I stated in the previous chapter, citing Porter's account, that Dickinson was "the only major American poet without a project," one could argue that one of her primary endeavours was to uplift the value of mortality. According to Margaret Dickie's essay, Dickinson's speakers "are always in process, moving, and struck by the discontinuity of experience" within this scheme.¹⁶ This idea is well depicted in the aforementioned letter, immediately following her comment on Darwin, which may imply a link between processes and finitude in contrast to deity and eternity: "the spirit never twice alike, but every time another – that other more divine. Oh, had I found it sooner!."¹⁷ The individual is already endowed with divinity and sublimity, and experience as a process is everlasting and changeable until death.

Although Emerson's philosophy highlights the fluidity of experience, some of Dickinson's speakers did not feel "at home" in a transcendental world; rather, they valued the uncertainty and unpredictability of their mortal existence. Although Emerson's "Nature" "calls for an original relation to the universe," according to Deppman, Emerson's neo-Platonism in his "rhetoric of perfection" differs from Dickinson's.¹⁸ Certainly, her speakers' emphasis on life's processes eluding completeness and perfection is well represented by the fact that her work, even today, resists final interpretation. Similarly, in contrast to Revelation's "And I saw the Heavens opened,"¹⁹ Dickinson's poem opening "I saw no way - The heavens were stitched" depicts a reality in which a transcendental God – or any kind of God – cannot be found:

I saw no Way - The
Heavens were stitched -
I felt the Columns close -
The Earth reversed her
Hemispheres -
I touched the Universe -

¹⁶ Margaret Dickie, "Reperiodization: The Example of Emily Dickinson." *College English* 52, no. 4 (April 1990): 399.

¹⁷ L750 (1882).

¹⁸ Deppman, "Astonished Thinking," 230.

¹⁹ In 1883, this phrase is referenced in L804 after Dickinson received as a gift Charles Wadsworth's posthumous book of sermons.

And back it slid -
and I alone -
A speck upon a Ball -
Went out upon Circum -
ference -
Beyond the Dip of Bell -²⁰

Dickinson's speaker suggests that, like truth moving in a circuit, life's circumference is also a circuit, with God's spiritual realm beyond its limits. She is, however, trapped in this belief because the "Heavens were stitched" for her. In light of Dickinson's depiction of hope as a "pinnacle," the columns here may also allude to the tenuous support that religious belief provides. As a result, she found herself walking on the edge or abyss of circumference in order to perceive beyond religious dictum, provided that those beliefs were merely speculative.

Several Dickinson's speakers must forge a new meaning in a world devoid of meaning, where neither the Calvinist, sentimental, nor transcendental God appeared to be a true path to happiness. In a letter to Elizabeth Holland in 1884, the poet declared, "the Bible dealt with the Centre, not the Circumference -."²¹ However, "the centre cannot hold," as Yeats stated a few years later.²² "In a world where God is hidden and the earth is shut," Bennett writes, "the individual must make what meaning she can out of the emptiness surrounding her."²³ Fred D. White's interpretation of this poem, like Bennett's, asserts that learning to "accept it [life] for what it really is – the prime existential directive – is to liberate oneself from such inflexible directives as church dogma ('the Dip of Bell') that present themselves as the sole path to salvation."²⁴ The idea of accepting life on its own terms stands out at the heart of Dickinson's poetic philosophy, as well as interpretations of a life worth living based on the value of existence in and of itself.

Other characteristics that distinguish Dickinson's speakers from transcendental views of happiness are, first, their awareness of the inability to

²⁰ "F633A - I saw no way - The heavens were stitched" (1863).

²¹ L950 (1884).

²² Cited in Gelpi, *Mind of the Poet*, 72. Quoted from W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming." What Yeats also pointed out in his autobiography is that "we begin to live when we have conceived life as a tragedy."

²³ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 37.

²⁴ Fred D. White, "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.

provide a reified definition of nature, which resonates with the cultural demand for a clear definition of happiness, and second, their rejection of Emerson's compensatory and moral attributions to nature.²⁵ Apart from religious dogma, Dickinson's poems typically depict nature as a source of comfort and consolation. For example, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Thomas P. Field in 1878 after receiving a gift of flowers: "expulsion from Eden grows indistinct in the presence of flowers so blissful, and with no disrespect to Genesis, Paradise remains."²⁶ The beauty of nature and all of its elements, in a way, allows Dickinson's personae to inhabit an earthly paradise. Nonetheless, the strangeness of nature, as well as the separation between nature and self, and between each individual self, is a recurrent theme in her poetry. One variation of her poem "What mystery pervades a well!" dated 1877 is a good example of this. In one of the versions, one of the stanzas reads:

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.²⁷

In another version of the poem, however, the word "nature" is replaced by "Susan:"

But Susan is
a stranger yet -
The ones who
cite her most
Have never scaled
her Haunted House
Nor compromised
her Ghost -²⁸

²⁵ See Diehl's *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* for a detailed account of Emerson's law of compensation in nature.

²⁶ L610 (1878). Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 84. According to Bennett, "when in need of healing, it was not the consolation of religion that Emily Dickinson turned but to the consolations of nature."

²⁷ "F1433A - What mystery pervades a well!" (1877).

²⁸ "F1433C - What mystery pervades a well!" (1877).

When comparing the two versions, it is clear that Dickinson's speaker regards nature as unknown, and as foreign as other humans. As a result, providing a definition of nature, as well as other people, is unattainable.

Dickinson's goal, according to Crumbley's essay, was not "to offer a new definition of nature but to propose the impossibility of arriving at any definition of nature."²⁹ Besides, Dickinson wrote a few years earlier in 1864 that "the Definition of Beauty is That Definition is None -."³⁰ Dickinson's poems, according to Daniel Fineman, strive to illustrate that "the quotidian in its diversity and mobility will always escape exhaustive description" by depicting "the interplay between the immediate sensory demands of language as object and the always-frustrated desire for final meaning."³¹ Individuals can only create meaning from experience through language; however, language has limitations provided that, as Dickinson's poem begins, "your thoughts dont have words every day."³² Wolosky, like Fineman, observes that Dickinson's poems sustain that "the inadequacy of language to experience means that no depiction is ever final: ultimate finality is not attainable or even desirable."³³ Expanding on this, this study argues for a similar treatment of the futility of defining happiness in the same way that Dickinson's speakers consider the limitations of language to depict experience, nature, and beauty: that the definition of happiness is that definition is none. Therefore, Dickinson's writings, like Nietzsche's, assert that this indeterminacy should remain at the core of these concepts in order to ensure their limitless possibilities.³⁴

Aside from contextual factors like Darwin's theory of evolution, the similarities in Dickinson's and Nietzsche's approaches to the indeterminate

²⁹ Crumbley, "Dickinson's Uses of Spiritualism: The 'Nature' of Democratic Belief," in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, 236.

³⁰ "F797B - The definition of beauty is" (1864).

³¹ Fineman, "Against Mastery: Dickinson contra Hegel and Schlegel," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 87-90. For instance, in "F1715A - A word made flesh is seldom."

³² "F1476A - Your thoughts dont have words every day" (1878).

³³ Wolosky, "Truth and Lie," 137-8. This argument corresponds to Wolosky's reading of "F1655A - Talk not to me of summer trees" since, in her own words, the poem "appeals to Romantic notions of imagination's grandeur" and the ways in which "language acts as interpretive frame or grid for experience."

³⁴ Fineman, "Against Mastery," 87. In Fineman's analyses of "F721A - 'Nature' is what we see" (1863), another poem depicting nature sent to Susan a few years before, he suggests that "the universal and insuperable condition of man is to never be able to overcome this incommensurability between our address to occasions and their infinite potentiality."

possibility of happiness in this life may have been triggered by a common denominator: Emerson's writings. Although Dickinson rethought and adapted, questioned and challenged most transcendental ideas, Emerson's influence can be seen throughout Dickinson's poetic philosophy. Similarly, Emerson's work was frequently mentioned during Nietzsche's career. Walter Kaufmann writes in the introduction to *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche not only read Emerson but "copied dozens of passages into notebooks and wrote extensively on the margins and flyleaves of his copy of the *Essays*."³⁵ In fact, the epigraph to *The Gay Science*'s first edition was a quote from Emerson: "to the poet and sage, all things are friendly and hallowed, all experiences profitable, all days holy, all men divine."³⁶ According to Kaufmann, "all experiences were useful for Nietzsche, and he turned his torments into his later book."³⁷ Wolosky suggests in "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body" that her power was to turn the negation of "the negation of experience.... into the ground for poetic creativity."³⁸ If all of Emerson's experiences were profitable, the same can be said of Nietzsche and Dickinson.

In his journals, Emerson described himself as "a professor of the Joyous Science," and this Joyous Science was linked to Zarathustra.³⁹ Nietzsche scribbled in his notes while working on *The Gay Science*: "*Emerson*. – Never have I felt so much at home in a book, and in *my* home, as – I may not praise it, it is too close to me;" as well as "the author who has been richest in ideas in this century so far has been an American (unfortunately made obscure by German philosophy – frosted glass)."⁴⁰ Considering this, it is no surprise that there are points of convergence between Dickinson's and Nietzsche's views on happiness or the affirmation of existence in and of itself. Thus, this chapter examines Dickinson's late writings and their approach to a life worth living based on death

³⁵ Walter Kaufmann, "Introduction," in *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 7.

³⁶ Cited in Kaufmann, "Introduction," *The Gay Science*, 8. The quotation was in German and here it is translated into English.

³⁷ Ibid., 8. Footnotes.

³⁸ Wolosky, "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, 133.

³⁹ Cited in Kaufmann, "Introduction," *The Gay Science*, 8-9. The date of Emerson's journal that Kaufmann refers to is July 6, 1841. Zarathustra or *Zoroaster*, as Kaufmann points out, was "the Greek name of the Persian prophet whom the Persians called Zarathustra." Besides, "Zoroaster is also mentioned in the *Essays*, which Nietzsche read so many times."

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

and a tragic perception of the world, which bring her views, unlike Emerson's, closer to existential interpretations of the idea. I will examine Dickinson's Eternal Now in light of Nietzsche's Eternal Return, arguing that both concepts epitomise Solonian happiness as the chosen possibility of (eternally) living your life again.

Dickinson's, Nietzsche's, and Camus's Commonalities in their Approaches to a Life Worth Living

We never know we go
when we are going -
We jest and shut the
Door -
Fate - following - behind us
bolts it -

And we accost
no more -⁴¹

The moment of death, according to Dickinson's speaker, can never be predicted or expected; it simply occurs. A person may simply be going about her daily routine when death unexpectedly closes the door, preventing those casual meetings and encounters from ever happening again. However, being aware of this fact may help people to better appreciate their lives. This poem was enclosed in a letter sent to the Norcross sisters in 1881. Dickinson wrote at the end of the letter, just before the poem: "I must leave you, dear, to come perhaps again, -;" and after the poem, "it is startling to think that the lips, which are keepers of thoughts so magical, yet at any moment are subject to the seclusion of death."⁴² By acknowledging the possibility of coming or writing, "perhaps again," the poet recognises that this chance should not be taken for granted and, as such, should be valued. Existence as we know it may come to an end at any time. Dickinson asked Charles H. Clark in 1883: "are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed by the desire to know, I fear that few are sure."⁴³ The inability to know for certain whether "there is another life" carried some of the poet's speakers closer to appreciating the certainty of their existence on Earth. Farhang

⁴¹ "F1546A - We never know we go when we are going" (1881).

⁴² L691 (1881).

⁴³ L827 (1883).

Erfani's "Dickinson and Sartre on Facing the Brutality of Brute Existence" examines how Sartre's philosophy resembles Dickinson's, whose writings promote an existentialist view of reality, provided that the "world's inherent meaning" cannot be determined and, on this basis, "all meanings derive from us."⁴⁴ Therefore, possibility is at the heart of existential thought.

Like Erfani, White suggests that most Dickinson's personae "regard the individual self, and not any divine agency, as solely responsible for the events that shape their lives, which are intrinsically limited, flawed, and separate from nature." Likewise, her writings cherished "longing over gratification, the journey over the destination, the creative process over its finished products."⁴⁵ Dickinson "came back" to her cousins in 1885, a year before her death, announcing: "that we are permanent temporarily, it is warm to know, though we know no more."⁴⁶ Dickinson's poetic philosophy - and the ways in which her writings approached life (or the phenomenon of existence) - is rooted in the uncertainty of her finite condition, which is also linked to temporality and contingency. Thus, the next sections examine Dickinson's views on happiness in light of interpretations such as Camus's and Nietzsche's that place existence at the heart of their reasoning, as well as its meaninglessness and absurdity.⁴⁷

Dickinson's meditations on the absurdity of existence as the foundation of any life worth living can be traced throughout her career. According to Hagenbüchle, Dickinson's nimble believing, mutability of spirit, and the momentousness of existence in the aforementioned letter to Otis P. Lord are clear examples of "the absurdity and senselessness of human life."⁴⁸ This concept is well depicted in the poem below:

Four Trees - upon a solitary

⁴⁴ Farhang Erfani, "Dickinson and Sartre on Facing the Brutality of Brute Existence," in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, 176-7. Similarly, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard believed "that systems fail to do justice to the singularity of existence, the particularity of the lived experience."

⁴⁵ White, "Existential Dramas," 91.

⁴⁶ L962 (1885).

⁴⁷ See White's "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas" for Dickinson's connection with existential thought. In this article, White identifies six major themes in Existentialism. Drawing on T.Z. Lavine's *From Socrates to Sartre*, White examines Dickinson's writings in light of those themes and concludes that "for all her metaphoric brilliance, her thematic and stylistic complexity, she is most of all a poet of the deliberately lived moment, of physical presence, of life's unstoppable movement." White, "Existential Dramas," 104.

⁴⁸ L750 (1882). Referenced in Hagenbüchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," in *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1974): 55.

Acre -
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent
Action -
Maintain -

The Sun - upon a Morning
meets them -
The Wind -
No nearer Neighbor - have
they -
But God -

The Acre gives them -
Place -
They - Him - Attention of
Passer by -
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel,
haply -
Or Boy -

What Deed is Their's
unto the General Nature -
What Plan
They severally - retard - or
further -
Unknown - ⁴⁹

Four trees stand alone on an acre, seemingly “without design or order,” minding their own business. The only visible neighbours are the Sun, the wind, and God. They cast shadow and attract the attention of anyone walking nearby, a squirrel, or a boy in exchange for the space provided by the acre. It is not clear why those trees are there or if they play any role in nature's providential design. According to Dickinson's speaker, these trees do not provide evidence for God's existence

⁴⁹ “F778A - Four trees - upon a solitary” (1863). Dickinson offers some alternative words in this poem. In the first stanza, “Do reign” instead of “Maintain.” And in the last stanza, “they bear” instead of “What Deed,” and “promote,” “or hinder” instead of “retard.”

or an apparent divine design in this world. In fact, she simply recognises and accepts the randomness of nature's processes. The four trees are just standing there by accident, neither by design nor higher purpose. Similarly, existence is accidental, and it is up to each individual to create the conditions necessary to cope with this needed and dreadful reality. According to Bennett's interpretation, "there is no connection between events," because "the connections we assert are merely the order we artificially impose upon the void that God – or nature – deals us."⁵⁰ In Miller's reading, the poem asserts that there is "no natural or divine plan of things keeping meaning safe from the threat of incipient chaos."⁵¹ There is no natural or divine scheme that can predict or foretell events or people's reactions to them; similarly, happiness cannot be reified in advance or associated with a predetermined course of events. Dickinson's poem, according to Mayer, is "a declaration of the absurdity of the human habit of making meaning out of nothing, or rather, out of something that does not speak to us;" however, "the cadence of the poem, the short open lines with their amplitude of dashes, invites, in this particular poem, not breathlessness but calm."⁵² The absurdity of human existence in this poem, then, is not as dreadful as it is needed.

In line with Dickinson, the absurdist writer *par excellence* Albert Camus refuses the idea of suicide and embraces life in all its absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as shown in his chosen epigraph by the previously mentioned Greek poet Pindar:

O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but
exhaust the limits of the possible.⁵³

Echoing Dickinson's "finite to fail but infinite to venture," Camus, influenced by Nietzsche and Greek tragic philosophy, stresses in this epigraph the infinite possibilities ingrained within the limits of (albeit absurd) mortality. For Camus,

⁵⁰ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 31. To some extent, this idea resembles Solonian happiness and the ways in which events and circumstances may "befall us."

⁵¹ Cited in Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 30-1. Quoted from Miller's *A Poets Grammar*. Regarding the chaotic nature of existence, Joanne Dobson's *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* implies that Dickinson "intensifies and exploits to the fullest the potential of disorder." Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xvi.

⁵² Nancy Mayer, "God's Place in Dickinson's Ecology," in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, 275.

⁵³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955, repr. 1961), epigraph.

“judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy;” thus, “all the rest... comes afterwards.”⁵⁴ The French philosopher assures that “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions,” as in classical interpretations of happiness – and in contrast to theological and sentimental interpretations, in which happiness loses its privileged position and becomes a concept among other concepts.⁵⁵ The realisation that determining or defining this meaning is impossible due to the inherent meaninglessness of existence (or life itself) is at the heart of the absurd. Accordingly, Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland in 1877: “there is not so much Life as talk of Life, as a general thing. Had we the first intimation of the Definition of Life, the calmest of us would be Lunatics.”⁵⁶ In the context of this fragment, one could argue that there is more talk of happiness than actual happiness. Likewise, while an approximation to its definition may entice people, it is preferable to recognise that – as in the case of beauty – the definition is none.

Death and the absurd may assist individuals, using Dickinson's formulation, to perform services “without hope” in this life. In this way, individuals can dwell in a continuous and ongoing Now by appreciating the intrinsic and momentary value of a specific action or experience. “How sweet the ‘Life that now is,’ and how rugged to leave it - and rugged to stay behind when our Dear go -,” Dickinson wrote in 1881.⁵⁷ As mentioned in chapter one, the shift in the temporality of happiness – from present to future – had a massive effect on nineteenth-century and modern interpretations of the concept. In contrast, Dickinson's writings actively seek and consider the value of the present moment. Camus, like Dickinson, believed that “a man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future.”⁵⁸ Before discovering the absurd, then, “the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification;” afterwards, “everything is upset.”⁵⁹ The unsustained value of existence – without a rational meaning or further purpose – and the knowledge

⁵⁴ Camus, “Preface,” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, ii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.

⁵⁶ L492 (1877).

⁵⁷ L685 (1881).

⁵⁸ Camus, *Sisyphus*, 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

of its fleeting condition, due to the unpredictability of death, must constantly confront each other in order to belong to the present. In Camus's views:

Man stands face to face with the irrational...He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world...The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to.⁶⁰

Camus's viewpoint is centred on the human desire to know what happiness is – or the meaning of life – as well as the impossibility of determining it beforehand. The absurd, like happiness, has “meaning only insofar as it is not agreed to.” In line with Camus, Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland in 1870 that “life is the finest secret. So long as that remains, we must all whisper.”⁶¹ Three years later, the poet told her cousins Norcross that “life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it.”⁶² Therefore, accepting the indeterminate nature of happiness – realising the futility of wishing to know what cannot be known – is the first step toward a possibility of happiness without hope.

Dickinson's writings place being alive – which means to exist and to will – at the (omitted) centre, rather than God. The ecstasy of living, the ecstasy of existing, became more prominent and noticeable as Dickinson's speakers approached death. According to Zapadowska's essay, several variations of the following poem (also adapted as prose) were circulated among at least five correspondents during her final ten years of life:⁶³

Take all away
from me, but
leave me Ecstasy,
And I am
richer then
Than all my
Fellow Men -
Ill it becometh

⁶⁰ Ibid., 29-31.

⁶¹ L354.

⁶² L389.

⁶³ Those recipients were: T.W. Higginson, Helen Hunt Jackson, Elizabeth Bowles, Samuel Bowles Jr, and Eben Jenks Loomis.

me to dwell so
wealthily
When at my very
Door are those
possessing more,
In abject
poverty -⁶⁴

Whereas some people consider themselves to be fortunate, Dickinson's speaker suggests that those riches are unreal when compared to the true riches of "Ecstasy" that she possesses. Given that we do not really know what causes her ecstasy and that Dickinson sent it to multiple correspondents, each of whom caused her to experience a different kind of ecstasy, one could argue that she found her own ecstasy in poetry.⁶⁵ In this poem, only ecstasy is deemed necessary. Dickinson's speaker feels richer and wealthier than anyone else on the planet as a result of this intense emotion. In the copy she sent to the Loomis' family in 1885, the poet also added:

And what is Ecstasy but Affection and what is Affection but the Gem of the little
note?

A Letter is a joy of Earth -
It is denied the Gods -⁶⁶

Dickinson provides a reason for ecstasy here in the form of affection, which she feels when she receives a letter from a loved one. Receiving a letter is a joy that will not be available in heaven, and her mortality brings an ecstasy that divine beings will not have. Dickinson had previously told Higginson that "a Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without a corporeal friend."⁶⁷ To some extent, the hints of immortality that Dickinson received in letters are both grounded in mortality and pointing beyond it. Furthermore, in a version of "Take all away from me" copied to Helen Hunt Jackson after she had injured her foot, Dickinson added: "knew I how to pray, to intercede for your Foot

⁶⁴ "F1671B - Take all away from me but leave me ecstasy" (1885).

⁶⁵ In Dickinson's lexicon, ecstasy might be defined as "intense emotion," "delight that arrests the whole mind," "elevation of mind," "poetry," etc.

⁶⁶ L960 (1885).

⁶⁷ L330 (1869).

were intuitive, but I am but a Pagan.”⁶⁸ Hence, it is the ecstasy of earthly existence, rather than the blessing of God's grace in heaven, that ranks highest in Dickinson's speakers' accounts. Camus, like Dickinson, claimed that “the absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God.”⁶⁹ Instead, in Nietzsche's words, “to kill God is to become god oneself.”⁷⁰ Dickinson's speakers, in their journey towards the “privilege of finiteness,” became the makers of their own lives, enabling them to discover those ecstatic instants, even if for each “must an anguish pay.”⁷¹ As a result, the ambiguity and plurality of experience present in each moment is part of the absurdity of existence.

Camus's absurd philosophy, like Dickinson's strangeness towards nature, oneself, and other selves, implies that he is “a stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts,” because “to will is to stir up paradoxes.”⁷² Accordingly, Camus's thought that contradicts itself immediately after being articulated resembles Dickinson's experience of nimble believing. Besides, echoing Dickinson's *Circumference*, he claimed that “the absurd is lucid reason noting its limits,” while also extending “awareness to the whole of experience.”⁷³ Dickinson's circumference and Camus's absurdism, like Solonian happiness, expand the limits and worth of life throughout the entirety of life's experience. While Dickinson contended that “the incidents of love are more than its events;”⁷⁴ Camus claimed that “what counts is not the best living [Events] but the most living [Incidents].”⁷⁵ Every day, hour, and minute counts in this economy of existence (and in this approach to happiness). However, in *The Gay*

⁶⁸ L976 (1885). In this letter, Dickinson also included a copy of the poem “F1675B - Of God we ask one favor” (1885), which has been previously referred to in chapter two.

⁶⁹ Camus, *Sisyphus*, 38.

⁷⁰ Cited in Camus, *Sisyphus*, 92. Besides, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche states that “the meaning of our cheerfulness. – The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead,’ that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe.” *The Gay Science*, point 343, 279. However, Dickinson's account proves that those shadows were already over America.

⁷¹ “F109A - For each extatic instant” (1859).

⁷² Camus, *Sisyphus*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 44-7. In addition, for Camus, the absurd is “that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together.”

⁷⁴ “F1172A - The incidents of love” (1870).

⁷⁵ Camus, *Sisyphus*, 48. For Camus, this way of living stands as “the contrary of renunciation.”

Science, Nietzsche declared that this perspective is also “the most dangerous point of view” provided that:

What I do or do not do now is as important for everything that is yet to come as is the greatest event of the past: in this tremendous perspective of effectiveness all actions appear equally great and small.⁷⁶

One could argue that Nietzsche's effectiveness could indeed drive people insane if they realised, paradoxically, how equally meaningful and meaningless any decision could be. Nonetheless, as expressed in “How many schemes may die,” people's ignorance is both a shield and a constraint.

According to Nietzsche and Dickinson, the “life that now is” should be the measure – the term in between – of past and future. What people do now determines their chances of happiness later in life. Likewise, for Camus, “the present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man.”⁷⁷ As discussed in chapter three, this is the foundation of Dickinson's Eternal Now, of that Forever that is “composed of Nows,” since living, most of the time, “is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations,” as Dickinson wrote to Higginson in 1872.⁷⁸ For this reason, the possibility of “This” – their poetry, life, and circumference – fulfils Dickinson's speakers' business and occupation. Nonetheless, opposites enticed each other in this endeavour and, in Camus's words, “there is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night,” because, like Sisyphus, “one always finds one's burden again,” provided that “happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth.”⁷⁹ In line with Camus, Dickinson wrote to Adelaide Dole in 1879: “only recall the sickness, as a bad Dream – Night's capacity varies, but Morning, is inevitable –.”⁸⁰ Although any burden or pain may appear to fill all space and breathe all air, the morning light – or some form of relief – eventually emerges. On the one hand, the unpredictable, absurd, and chaotic nature of existence guided and burdened Dickinson's speakers in their lifetime journey. On the other hand, it is precisely

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, point 233, 212-3.

⁷⁷ Camus, *Sisyphus*, 55.

⁷⁸ L381 (1872).

⁷⁹ Camus, *Sisyphus*, 98-9. Besides, for Camus, happiness and the absurd “are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness.”

⁸⁰ L616 (1879).

this indeterminacy in light of the gift of mortality that creates the conditions for a life worth living to germinate, as Pindar's vine tree.⁸¹ Given that all experiences are profitable for these writers, Dickinson's speaker conveys in an early poem:

The Zeroes - taught
us - Phosphorus -
We learned to like
the Fire
By playing Glaciers -
when a Boy -
And Tinder - guessed - by
power
Of Opposite - to balance
Odd -
If White - a Red - must be!
Paralysis - our Primer - dumb -
Unto Vitality!⁸²

Not only are all experiences profitable, but they are also known through their polar opposites. For example, flammable phosphorus is known from absolute zero, fire from ice, dry tinder from its potential to spark, read from white, and vitality from paralysis. As a result, the things that truly matter in life are best learned through contrast.

Dickinson's work investigates the limits of possibility and the potentiality of the unknown in everyday life, as well as its impact on the acceptance of mortality. In comparison, both Dickinson's and Nietzsche's approaches to happiness, on the one hand, offer an alternative to nineteenth-century major interpretations of the notion and, on the other, restore the privilege granted to the idea in classical interpretations of it through their tragic standpoint. Wolosky's essay delves into the parallels between these two thinkers.⁸³ According to Wolosky, "the

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 222. Echoing Pindar's poem, Nietzsche's Zarathustra claims: "O my soul, I poured every sun out on you, and every night and every silence and every longing: then you grew up like a vine."

⁸² "F284B - The zeros taught us phosphorus" (1862).

⁸³ See Wolosky, "Truth and Lie in Emily Dickinson and Nietzsche." Some of those similarities in Dickinson's and Nietzsche's work explored in Wolosky's essay are: the idea that possibilities are "centrally tied to language," "the power of perspective to frame understanding," the multiplicity and indeterminacy of life's experiences, the power of art, and the circularity of language.

phenomenal world of change and time, materiality and multiplicity, was pressing to displace metaphysical worlds of eternal, immutable truths;" consequently, both writers believed that life on earth emerges "as the first realm, both in its displacements and instability, but also in its productivity and invention."⁸⁴ For Dickinson, it is the abyss of earthly existence that gathers the (needed) mysteries of happiness, both in its possibilities and its precariousness, absurdity, and meaninglessness. Gilles Deleuze's "Nomad Thought" in *The New Nietzsche* draws attention to Nietzsche's insistence "on the impossibility of a definitive interpretation that would exhaust the richness of reality," because chaos "designates the fluid and unbounded power of life."⁸⁵ Certainly, both Dickinson and Nietzsche emphasised the power of life, or the affirmation and value of existence, in this world because of the multiplicity, ambiguity, and contingency of experience.

Wolosky's reading of Dickinson's "To be alive is power" acknowledges the poem's Nietzschean nature, as "omnipotence" is associated with the human rather than the divine. Similarly, the speaker's will is what allows her to become a maker, a creator, here on Earth.⁸⁶ According to Wolosky, "it is the creative power that comes alive in Dickinson, in both its impulse to order and its refusal of final shape or absolute claim. If experience is to be conceived as a continuing creative venture, it also resists final formulation."⁸⁷ This logic should be applied to the concept of happiness; if life's experiences are part of a "continuing creative venture," happiness, too, resists final definition until death. As Soni's account indicates, Nietzsche's Eternal Return is the closest concept to the Solonian's assessment of happiness, or the affirmation of life, which is based on the possibility of willing to live your life again:

The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this [life] once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the heaviest burden.

⁸⁴ Wolosky, "Truth and Lie," 132.

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 197-8.

⁸⁶ Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 34-5. Howe's reading of "F764A - My life had stood a loaded gun" implies that this poem "delineates and declines all aspects of the *Will to Power* nearly twenty years before Nietzsche's metaphysical rebellion. Emily Dickinson's intellectual vigilance allowed very little to escape her without notice."

⁸⁷ Wolosky, "Truth and Lie," 146.

Or, how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal.⁸⁸

In other words, would reliving your life be a gift or a curse? For Nietzsche, to choose and accept the possibility of living your life over and over again, the Eternal Return to it, represents “the highest expression of the will to live.”⁸⁹ With this in mind, the next section analyses Dickinson's Eternal Now in light of Nietzsche's Eternal Return.

Some of Dickinson's Speakers Echoing Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Vice Versa

In order to shed light on the conditions of what a life worth living might be through Dickinson's Eternal Now and Nietzsche's Eternal Return (or Eternal Recurrence), it is necessary to briefly examine some of their common ideas, for example, the inherent blending of pain and pleasure, the contradictory nature of the human mind, and the ability to learn by opposites. Furthermore, both thinkers perceived existence as an abyss and resisted doctrines; recognised the fluidity of experience and the circularity of processes; and saw God's metaphysical death as an opening for chance's affirmation. The theorist Jacques Derrida writes in “Acts of Literature” that Nietzsche is “the philosopher who speaks in the first person while multiplying proper names, masks, and signatures.”⁹⁰ Analogously, Dickinson is the poet-thinker who also spoke in the first person while juggling multiple voices, roles, and personae. In his last book, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* “stands by itself” as the most “profound” and truthful of his works. Therefore, the upcoming discussion on living immortality in the context of happiness will be framed by Dickinson's speakers in conversation with the character of Zarathustra.

Although Nietzsche's Eternal Return is mentioned in *The Gay Science* and *The Will to Power*, it is fully developed and endorsed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as “the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained.”⁹¹ It is “the affirmative pathos par excellence,” which Nietzsche calls “the tragic pathos;”

⁸⁸ Cited in Allison, “Introduction,” in *The New Nietzsche*,” xxiv. Quoted from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xxv-xxvi.

⁹⁰ Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 35.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How one Becomes What one is* (London: Penguin, 2004), 99.

where “pain does *not* count as an objection to life: ‘Have you no more happiness to give me, well then! *still do you have your pain...*’”⁹² For Nietzsche, the experience of pain is as inevitable as it is necessary in life, and it should be understood as part of the process of affirmation rather than dismissed or condemned. Similarly, vice and virtue are permeated and infused with one another; in Zarathustra's words, “out of your poisons you brewed your balsam.”⁹³ Dickinson's writings, as discussed in chapter two, are well informed about the redeeming power of negative affects embedded within a lifetime that, at the same time, aids individuals in their appreciation of positive ones.

Echoing Nietzsche's assertion, Dickinson wrote in 1880, “there are sweets of Pathos, when sweets of Mirth have passed away –.”⁹⁴ Hence, it is in contradiction that the affirmation of life finds its pure expression; as Zarathustra asserts, “deeply I love only life - and verily, most of all when I hate life.”⁹⁵ When the time comes, thus, an instance of revulsion may serve as a remainder of the opposite. It may have taken some time for some of Dickinson's speakers to fully accept this contradiction. For example, in 1863, one of Dickinson's long-term friends, Samuel Bowles wrote to the poet's brother, Austin Dickinson: “I have been in a savage, turbulent state for some time - indulging in a sort of disgust at everything & everybody - I guess a good deal as Emily [Dickinson] feels.”⁹⁶ Although Dickinson undoubtedly felt disgust at times, because such emotions are unavoidable and will be felt by individuals at some point in their lives, they do not represent an impediment to the affirmation of existence for Nietzsche's Zarathustra and some of Dickinson's speakers; rather, those instances are an intrinsic part of life and contribute, in Dickinson's words, “to some bright total.” Zarathustra declares referring to the intertwining of joy and pain:

For joy, even if woe is deep, *joy is deeper yet than agony* Joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same Have

⁹² Ibid., 100. For Nietzsche, “to regard states of distress in general as an objection, as something that must be abolished, is the *niaiserie par excellence*, in a general sense a real disaster in its consequences, a fatality of stupidity – almost as stupid as would be the will to abolish bad weather.” Ibid., 129.

⁹³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 37.

⁹⁴ L668. Apart from the instances of learning by opposites examined in chapter two, other examples are “F966A - A death blow is a life blow to some” (1865) and “F1789A - The saddest noise, the sweetest noise.”

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 109.

⁹⁶ Leyda, *The Years and Hours*, vol. 2, 77.

you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, 'You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted *all* back For all joy wants itself, hence it also wants agony. O happiness, O pain!⁹⁷

In this fragment, Zarathustra underlines the indivisible nature of all experiences – whether of joy or grief – within a lifetime, and how, as a result, happiness cannot be perceived as episodic; more specifically, it is not possible to annul or dismiss what are assumed to be unpleasant circumstances, since all incidents inform and enhance individuals' existence.

In a similar vein, several Dickinson's personae constantly refer to the simultaneity of experience in which gains entail losses, joy pain, and happiness suffering, as the following verses suggest:

How happy I was if
I could forget
To remember how sad
I am⁹⁸ (first stanza)

These happy and sad occurrences inform Dickinson's speaker in their life's journey; however, it is individuals' appreciation and confrontation with them – as well as their awareness of their fluidity – that will bear an influence in their own judgement of a life worth living at the end. Another example:

How happy is the
little Stone
That rambles in
the Road alone -
And does'nt care
about careers
And Exigencies
never fears -
Whose Coat of

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 322-4.

⁹⁸ "F1080A - How happy I was if I could forget" (1865). Other examples of the simultaneity of experience are: "F312A - I can wade grief" (1862), "F739A - Joy to have merited the pain" (1863), and "F1450A - One joy of so much anguish" (1877).

elemental Brown
A passing Universe
put on
And independent
as the Sun

Associates or
glows alone -
Fulfilling absolute
Decree
In casual
simplicity -⁹⁹

Dickinson's speaker suggests that perhaps individuals would be happier if they were a "little stone," which is not required to fulfil any decree other than being a stone. On the contrary, people's "Careers" and "Exigencies" make their lives much more complicated and multi-layered. Despite the sense of irony contained in this poem – since the concept of happiness would not exist if we were a stone without consciousness – one could argue that sometimes circumstances completely external and outside of people's control (circumstances that this stone is not subjected to) determine how they experience life. Dickinson enclosed this poem in a letter to the editor Thomas Niles in 1882 when he asked the poet if she could be persuaded to have some of her poems published. According to Miller, the poem "itself strongly implied she was not interested in publication."¹⁰⁰ Given that the poet already "fulfilled" her vocation without "career," Miller suggests that Dickinson "can imagine a life of apparent 'little'-ness and 'simplicity' as 'happy'." ¹⁰¹ Including Thomas Niles, this poem was sent to at least four correspondents in different versions. As with "Take all away from me," the poems she most frequently exchanged in her later career deal with happiness as both an experience and a theme.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ "F1570B - How happy is the little stone" (1882).

¹⁰⁰ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 185.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰² According to the Emily Dickinson's archive, the recipients were: Susan Dickinson, Louise and Frances Norcross, Thomas Niles, and T. W. Higginson.

In Nietzsche's views, Zarathustra "contradicts with every word, this most affirmative of all spirits; all opposites are in him bound together into a new unity."¹⁰³ This unity, like Dickinson's nimble believing, encompasses the multiplicity of thought and experience, as her niece recalls in *Face to Face*: "there is no accounting for Aunt Emily's countless contradictions and inconsistencies."¹⁰⁴ As an example, one of Dickinson's late poems:

I do not care -
why should I care
And yet I fear
I'm caring
To rock a fretting
truth to sleep -
Is short security
The terror it will
wake
persistent as perdition
Is harder than to face
the frank adversity -¹⁰⁵

Dickinson's speaker wavers between thinking that she does not care about something and realising that whatever the concern may be is important, or disturbing, to her. She contends that putting this "truth to sleep" while convincing herself that it is unimportant does not guarantee that "the terror" will be gone by morning; rather, it may persist until this misfortune is confronted, if at all possible. However, in any type of mental conflict, people's minds can act as both their best friend and their worst enemy. In Zarathustra's words, "terrible it is to be alone with the judge and avenger of one's own law.... But the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself."¹⁰⁶ This idea echoes Dickinson's poem "The soul into itself," which was discussed in chapter two, and it suggested that an individual's inner being can be "an imperial friend" or "the most agonising Spy

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ "F1534A - I do not care - why should I care" (1880). Dickinson proposes some alternative words in this poem: in the fifth verse, "crying" and "wailing" instead of fretting; and in the seventh verse, "no," "frail," and "poor" instead of "short."

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 63-4.

/ An Enemy could send.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Dickinson’s speaker assures in “One need not be a chamber to be haunted” that meeting a ghost is worse than facing oneself “in lonesome place.”¹⁰⁸

Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and most of Dickinson’s speakers recognise the inherent capacity of individuals to both create and destroy themselves in their approaches to the contradictory nature of existence. However, to affirm is to doubt, and to create is to take a chance by staring into the abyss of life; a metaphor that both thinkers used frequently in their approaches to happiness. In Zarathustra’s words:

To you, the bold venturers and adventurers, and whoever has embarked with
cunning sails upon dreadful seas,
to you who are intoxicated with riddles, who take pleasure in twilight, whose soul
is lured with flutes to every treacherous abyss –¹⁰⁹

There are some interesting parallels between Zarathustra’s words and some of Dickinson’s personae statements. First, Dickinson’s aphorism “finite to fail but infinite to venture” echoes “bold venturers and adventurers.” Second, sailing on “dreadful seas” resonates with Dickinson’s early letter to Abiah Root about wanting to “buffet the sea,” and this inclination is reinforced by Dickinson’s assurance in 1884 that “against the peril of ocean steamers I am sweetly provided.”¹¹⁰ Third, the poet’s writings value astonishment the most since:

The Riddle that we guess
We speedily despise -
Not anything is stale so long
As Yesterday’s Surprise.¹¹¹

Dickinson sent these verses to Higginson in a letter, to which she added: “the Risks of Immortality are perhaps its charm – A secure Delight suffers in enchantment.”¹¹² What is secure or certain, such as a solved riddle or a secure delight, is undoubtedly less appealing. For both Dickinson’s speakers and

¹⁰⁷ “F579A - The soul unto itself” (1863).

¹⁰⁸ “F407A - One need not be a chamber to be haunted” (1862).

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 74.

¹¹⁰ L879.

¹¹¹ “F1180A - The riddle that we guess” (1870).

¹¹² L353.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra, while mystery – or the unknown – prevails, there are chances to continue guessing into that “treacherous abyss.”

Dickinson viewed life as a never-ending descent and ascent into the abyss. Analogously, Nietzsche saw the abyss as the concept of eternal return, which Zarathustra regards as the “most abysmal thought.” However, he “finds in it no objection to existence, nor even to the eternal recurrence of existence –” because Zarathustra brings “the blessing of [his] affirmation into every abyss.”¹¹³

I walk among means among fragments of the future – that future I envisage. And this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident. And how could I bear to be a man if man were not also a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accidents? To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’ – that alone should I call redemption.¹¹⁴

Zarathustra's intention is to create a multiple and entangled web in which all incidents and events – past, present, and future – are both meaningful and meaningless by bringing those fragments, mysteries, and possibilities together within the wholeness of existence. Consequently, it is individuals' responsibility to make sense of these events and inner reactions. Similarly, they should be aware of the fluidity of whatever meaning they have created, on the assumption that it will never be final. Zarathustra declares that “everything is in flux,” echoing Emerson's statement about always being in the process.¹¹⁵ According to David B. Allison, Nietzsche's aphorisms and metaphors are “perpetually active, incomplete, manifold, and alive.”¹¹⁶ In related terms, Dickinson's poems are open to numerous interpretations and, as a consequence, are infinite since, as Bennett asserts, “no poet was ever more fluid.”¹¹⁷ Zarathustra, echoing Dickinson's believing and disbelieving a hundred times an hour, points out that “ten times a day you must overcome yourself.... Ten times you must reconcile yourself again with yourself.”¹¹⁸ For both Dickinson's speakers and Nietzsche's Zarathustra,

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 108.

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 139.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹⁶ Allison, “Introduction,” *The New Nietzsche*, xvi.

¹¹⁷ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 41. Dickinson's strategies for achieving this openness and fluidity in her poems will be further examined at the end of this chapter.

¹¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 28.

there is no completion or fixed determination in this life; individuals always find themselves in the process of becoming and, besides, the impossibility of knowing for certain the course of future happenings – as well as the inference of chance in them – accompanies human beings in this cyclical development that is irremediably, and fortunately, filled with mystery.

Unlike post-Socratic interpretations of happiness, which emphasise reason and virtue, or theological interpretations, which emphasise grace, Zarathustra – or “the redeemer of chance” – places contingency and possibility at the heart of his experience, and what he calls redemption is the will to accept life as it was, is, and will be, without a further, or added, purpose – a concept reminiscent of Dickinson's “Service without Hope.” By challenging previous religious notions, Nietzsche's speaker is able to assert: “I am Zarathustra the godless: I still cook every chance in my pot.”¹¹⁹ He also claims:

Here there speaks no fanatic, here there is no ‘preaching’, here faith is not demanded: out of an abundance of light and depth of happiness there falls drop after drop, word after word – a tender slowness of pace is the tempo of these discourses.¹²⁰

Nietzsche's speaker does not believe in fixed ideals or religious dogma; his faith is rooted in “an abundance of light and depth of happiness” – as Dickinson's amplitude is rooted in delight – and there is an ease in his words given that life, though brief, is expansive enough. Like Zarathustra, Nietzsche is constantly scrutinising and willing to “overthrow idols” and reified doctrines; he refers to this as his business.¹²¹ By analogy, in a letter to Mary Haven in 1859, Dickinson admitted: “Mr S. preached in our church last Sabbath upon ‘predestination,’ but I do not respect ‘doctrines,’ and did not listen to him, so I can neither praise, nor blame.”¹²² A year later, in “I cautious scanned my little life,” Dickinson's speaker claimed that her business was “to find.”¹²³ Several scholars believe Dickinson's distrust of absolute ideals and doctrines continued throughout her poetic

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

¹²⁰ Cited in Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 35. Quoted from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

¹²¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 34.

¹²² L200 (1859).

¹²³ “F175A - I cautious scanned my little” (1860).

career.¹²⁴ Within this circuit, as her niece Martha points out, “her essential rebellion was against Life defrauded of the truth about Death. It was her Tyrant need-to-know that shut her in and left her knocking – ‘knocking everywhere’.”¹²⁵ Dickinson defined redemption as action.¹²⁶ For her speakers, it was critical to distinguish between what is up to us and what is up to the world – between agency and contingency – since, as previously stated, individuals are unable to know how much and how little is within their power.

Most Dickinson's speakers were also “redeemers of chance,” placing a high value on life as it was, assuming that the “life that now is” was all they had. Certainly, the “life that now is” is what brings meaning to life itself. Likewise, she wrote to Elizabeth Holland in 1881: “You and I can content ourselves with only ‘Bliss’ itself. What a parsimony!.”¹²⁷ In other words, they would be satisfied with only life itself, since “that it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.”¹²⁸ Echoing Dickinson’s frugal approach to happiness (as well as the lack of causation and hope in her endeavour), Zarathustra declares: “O happiness, how little is sufficient for happiness! It is little that makes the best happiness.”¹²⁹ For Dickinson's speakers and Nietzsche's Zarathustra, thus, the possibility of happiness only exists here on Earth and, for this reason, while Zarathustra reminds himself (perhaps ten times a day) to “remain faithful to the earth;”¹³⁰ Dickinson proclaims (perhaps a hundred times an hour), “Oh Matchless Earth – We underrate the chance to dwell in Thee.”¹³¹ However, what if the opportunity to live your life again was presented to Dickinson? Would Dickinson's speakers choose it? As a mental experiment, Nietzsche's Eternal Return – or, in Zarathustra's words, “circumference of circumferences”¹³² – reflects on the

¹²⁴ For instance, Hagenbüchle claims that Dickinson “is no respecter of doctrines.” Hagenbüchle, “Precision and Indeterminacy,” 55. In *The Line's Eye: Poetic Experience, American Sight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9, Elisa New notes that “Dickinson participates in an anti-idealist and even anti-theoretical tradition.” Cited in Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, 183.

¹²⁵ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 70.

¹²⁶ In letter L726 in 1881, Dickinson wrote that “Action is Redemption.”

¹²⁷ L689 (1881).

¹²⁸ “F1761A - That it will never come again.”

¹²⁹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 277.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³¹ H B49 (1870s). Keane, *Approving God*, 147. Keane observes that this statement echoes Wordsworth’s prologue to *Peter Bell* (lines 46-56).

¹³² Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 222.

implications of such abysmal thought, and Dickinson's Eternal Now might simulate that eventuality.

Dickinson's Eternal Now and Nietzsche's Eternal Return

Although I have already looked at Dickinson's Eternal Now in the context of some of her American contemporaries, this section argues that Dickinson's eternity in time within her circumference may resemble Nietzsche's Eternal Return as the highest affirmation of life in the present moment. In response to Dickinson's concern about this idea, the poet embraces the classical motto of the possibility of happiness for a "happy few" when she writes that "so few that live – have life" in a letter to Samuel Bowles.¹³³ One could argue that living without a life translates to a life that is not worth living, and thus all of its potential value is reduced to an existence that is not desirable to be lived again, as indicated in this 1879 poem:

Those not live
yet
Who doubt to
live again -
"Again" is of
a twice
But this - is one -
The Ship beneath
the Draw
Aground - is he?
Death - so - the Hyphen
of the Sea -
Deep is the
Schedule

Of the Disk
to be -
Costumeless Consciousness,
That is he -¹³⁴

¹³³ L275 (1862).

¹³⁴ "F1486A - Those not live yet" (1879).

In light of Dickinson's letter to Bowles, the speaker appears to share some of the same concerns. To live without a life implies that life has not been lived properly or that it is not valued as such, which may lead to doubting whether or not to live it again given the chance.

In the context of Nietzsche's Eternal Return as the chosen possibility of living again, which could also be interpreted as an affirmation of the Solonian judgement of happiness, Dickinson's speaker suggests that hesitating about the feasibility of living again implies that life, or existence, has not been adequately experienced. There is only one life to be lived before death – or before the Disk, or circumference, is complete – since an afterlife, if it exists, cannot be an “again,” and may not even be desirable, in the absence of consciousness. In McIntosh's analysis, the speaker conveys “that the afterlife is a mystery best evoked mysteriously;” additionally, she “asserts that the life that spans present existence and whatever comes afterward ‘is one’,” and “suggests human ignorance” of “the transition between life now and life ‘again’,” and “of the afterlife itself.”¹³⁵ For Dickinson, according to Martin, “eternity is the unfolding present, not a destination or location.”¹³⁶ Despite its uncertain encircling halo, eternity in human terms is a now that renews itself every moment; it unfolds and recreates, to use Dickinson's formulation, in a permanent temporality occupying all present space and time.

Most Dickinson's speakers recognise life as an all-encompassing concept, echoing Nietzsche's views, and resist devaluing their present existence in pursuit of a better otherworldly happiness. In response to the mystery of the afterlife, Dickinson's speakers' concern with the mutual need and bond of consciousness and body is well depicted in this poem's opening:

The Spirit lasts -
but in what
mode -
Below, the Body
speaks,
But as the
Spirit furnishes -

¹³⁵ McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 76.

¹³⁶ Martin, *American Triptych*, 143.

Apart, it never
talks -¹³⁷ (first stanza)

The persona seems confident in the mutual dependence of mind and body in this stanza. She wonders what the Spirit would look like or where it would go without the Body, given that both parts appear to be essential to completing the whole, or performing the active tasks they accomplish as one. Although it is surprising, as Dickinson wrote to Maria Whitney, “that the Body contains the Spirit -,” the combination of both elements enhances the fragile and volatile nature of human finitude.¹³⁸ In the poem below, she also ponders how we can possibly know the future:

I shall know why - when Time
is over -
And I have ceased to wonder
why -
Christ will explain each separate
anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the
sky -

He will tell me what "Peter" promised -
And I - for wonder at his woe -
I shall forget the drop
of anguish
That scalds me now - that
scalds me now!¹³⁹

In the first stanza, the speaker anticipates that mysteries will be revealed to her when “time is over” and she does not wonder anymore. Ironically, it appears pointless to know “why” when you no longer care. The second stanza suggests that Christ will reveal everything to her “in the fair schoolroom of the sky,” including the meaning and reason for all pain. In the third stanza, she seems to convey that Christ's teachings about Peter's anguish may be helpful in

¹³⁷ “F1627B - The spirit lasts but in what mode” (1883). McIntosh, *Nimble Believing*, 77. In McIntosh's reading, this poem reaffirms “the spirit and the body's mutual need for each other.”

¹³⁸ L643 (1880).

¹³⁹ “F215A - I shall know why when time is over” (1861).

alleviating her current anguish; however, the futility of receiving those “teachings” when she most needs them, which is now, indicates how irrelevant revealing the surprise will be when it will no longer be surprising. According to Hagenbüchle, “the reversal from being into nothingness (and vice versa) takes place anew at every moment” for most Dickinson's speakers, as shown in this prose fragment written to her cousin Louise Norcross in 1880:¹⁴⁰

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because “unloaded,” but that touched “goes off”?¹⁴¹

How can a divine force plan out the entire course of a person's life? Every conscious moment contains the potential for both creative and destructive action. And each has a long-term impact on “the whole area of life” and modifies the whole area of death. The dice are constantly thrown, and individuals' chances can conversely shift from existing to non-existing.

Earlier that year, Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland about a conversation she had with her brother Austin about “the Extension of Consciousness, after Death,” and how Austin told her “confidentially ‘there was no such person as Elijah’.”¹⁴² It is no coincidence that Dickinson's speakers questioned the possibility of an immortal life after death that includes consciousness and, as a result, chose to focus on the “life that now is” and the possibility of living it again as proof of its intrinsic value. Dickinson wrote in the same letter, “the Weather is like Africa, the Flowers like Asia, and the Numidian Heart of your 'Little Friend' neither slow nor chill.” She then added this poem:

The Road to Paradise
is plain -
And holds scarce one -
Not that it is not
firm

¹⁴⁰ Hagenbüchle, “Precision and Indeterminacy,” 41.

¹⁴¹ L656 (1880).

¹⁴² L650 (1880).

But we presume
A Dimpled Road
Is more preferred -
The Belles of Paradise
are few -

Not me - nor you -
But unsuspected
things -
Mines have no Wings -¹⁴³

Given her reverence for nature here on Earth, “The Road to Paradise,” as depicted in religious accounts, does not appear to be a preferable path for Dickinson's speakers, who lack the “Wings” to fly. They rather choose a more disordered and chaotic path since, as Dickinson's prose fragment implies, “Paradise is no Journey” but it “is within;” although for that reason “it is the most Arduous of Journeys.”¹⁴⁴ This is analogous to reading Nietzsche's Eternal Return as “the heaviest burden.” Dickinson inquired in a letter to Alice Tuckerman in 1885: “is not that which is called the ‘Burden of Life,’ a bewitching weight?”¹⁴⁵ Certainly, depending on the circumstances of each individual life, the prospect of living – and, more importantly, of living again – could be considered worse than eternal damnation.

Another example of Dickinson's reflections on living again is her niece Martha's description of Dickinson and Susan's encounters in “The Northwest Passage.”¹⁴⁶ What she remembers is a recurring greeting between her aunt and mother that went as this: “‘are you sure we are making the most of it, Sue?’ ‘Any advices, Emily? If a man die shall he live again –’.”¹⁴⁷ This greeting contemplates the possibility of reliving one's life as an example of having made the most of it by the time of death, or when “Circumference be full.”¹⁴⁸ The poet's

¹⁴³ “F1525C - The road to Paradise is plain” (1880).

¹⁴⁴ PF99.

¹⁴⁵ L959 (1885).

¹⁴⁶ Bianchi, *Face to Face*, 25-6. Named by Dickinson and Susan, “The Northwest Passage” was the area “between the kitchen and the middle hall.”

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-6. Besides, in letter L727 (1881), Dickinson wrote: “Vinnie is picking a few seeds – for if a pod ‘die, shall he not live again’.”

¹⁴⁸ “F653A - No crowd that has occurred” (1863).

circumference – or circuit world – “represents the boundary itself between the circuit of personal space and whatever might be outside,” Eberwein observes, “it is margin, never center;” it comprises “mortality, finitude, and limitation” and there are “as many circuits as beings.”¹⁴⁹ If there are as many circuits, or circumferences, as beings, and this perimeter delineates the boundary between the wholeness of existence and non-existence (whatever that non-existence is), it certainly resembles Solonian happiness. The possibility of happiness is thus encircled by this circumference. Its significance, however, will not be revealed until death. In 1883, Dickinson wrote to Maria Whitney: “to have been made alive is so chief a thing, all else inevitably adds. Were it not riddled by partings, it were too divine.”¹⁵⁰ Being alive, or existence in and of itself, holds the highest value in Dickinson's opinion, with everything else falling into a lower category. However, the vestige of death perplexes people's presence, limiting and expanding their awareness in the here and now.

Like Dickinson, Nietzsche asserted the value of being alive as the ultimate phenomenon in *Ecce Homo*, his last work that functions as an autobiography: “*how should I not be grateful to my whole life? ... The fortunateness of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality ... at once decadent and beginning.*”¹⁵¹ Although his circumference was not yet complete (as in Darwin's *Autobiography*), Nietzsche believed it was necessary to consider the entirety of life in order to provide a value judgement regarding “the fortunateness of existence.” Furthermore, Nietzsche's words resonate well with Dickinson's “privilege of finiteness,” which is understood as an exclusive opportunity that individuals have before dying.¹⁵² Dickinson also stated in the aforementioned letter to Maria Whitney: “you speak of ‘disillusion.’ That is one of the few subjects on which I am an infidel. Life is so strong a vision not one of it shall fail.”¹⁵³ As in Aurora Leigh's meditation on the possibility of failing in life, Dickinson claimed that no part of life, no matter how small, could be perceived as a failure. Dickinson's late writings in light of Nietzsche's, and vice versa, provide the

¹⁴⁹ Eberwein, *Strategies of Limitation*, 161. For Eberwein, Dickinson's circumference, or circuit world, also includes “consciousness, identity, the senses, and matter.”

¹⁵⁰ L860 (1883).

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 37-8.

¹⁵² “F831A - Till death is narrow loving” (1864).

¹⁵³ L860 (1883).

opportunity of gaining a better understanding of the preliminary conditions that may lead individuals to affirm and value their mortal life in its totality.

The abyss of Nietzsche's Eternal Return, like Dickinson's Eternal Now, is rooted in chance. "Nietzsche turns chance into an affirmation," according to Deleuze, since the possibility of eternal return is "the reproduction and re-affirmation of chance itself."¹⁵⁴ Experience's unpredictability in this life is thus given the highest value. Deleuze's analysis concludes that "multiplicity, becoming, and chance are objects of pure affirmation."¹⁵⁵ In other words, the concept of eternal return is based on the ability to perceive existence in all its diversity and ambiguity, the awareness of always being in the process, and the acceptance of chance.¹⁵⁶ Within these parameters, the eternal return translates into the desire to live each moment exactly as it was, without wishing it to be different or better. According to Nietzsche, in "its most terrifying form," this thought implies that "present existence, just as it is, without either meaning or goal, but unavoidably returning, without even a finale in nothingness."¹⁵⁷ There is no end or beginning, neither hope nor goal. In sharp contrast to religious interpretations and their promise of "a better life, happiness in a world beyond," Nietzsche's doctrine "offers happiness on earth to all those who are capable of this faith;" more specifically, "faith in each instant of life as being worthy of returning should raise humanity far beyond itself;" thus, the will to live today over and over again symbolises happiness' affirmation given that "this life is your eternal life."¹⁵⁸

In related terms, Dickinson's Eternal Now proposes that each moment be cherished, appreciated, and deemed worthy of living – or being lived – since we are caught always in the present. For this reason, each moment is valuable in its own right. Several Dickinson poems, according to Grabher, demonstrate that "time's only apprehensible reality is the present," and that "the now forever escapes us, only to tease us with another and another and another now, *ad*

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 26-8. For instance, "the reign of Zarathustra is called 'great chance'."

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁵⁶ Michel Haar, "Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language," in *The New Nietzsche*, 29. According to Haar, the notion of the eternal return implies that "if the present is a repetition of the past, then every instant must find itself multiplied to infinity, both forward and backward, and be swollen by its own repetition until it is equal to eternity."

¹⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 30.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-2.

infinitum.”¹⁵⁹ As a matter of fact, appreciating and being thankful for each moment is critical in order to consider life to be worthwhile. Thus, we see that most Dickinson's speakers, in their desire to value each moment, stand for a Yes to reliving all of those moments. According to Hagenbüchle, “the tragedy of human existence is that we are forever in the process of losing the present moment.”¹⁶⁰ Until death, however, we are always in the process of gaining another present moment. And it is precisely a tragic view of happiness that allows people to appreciate each moment in its entirety, because we never know which one will be the last.

From a tragic standpoint, in Dickinson's words, “we do not know the time we lose” before the seclusion of death and, consequently, each instant presents itself as intrinsically valuable, as shown in the following poem:

I never hear
that one is dead
Without the chance
of Life
Afresh annihilating me
That mightiest Belief,

Too mighty for the
Daily mind
That tilling its abyss,
Had Madness, had
it once or, Twice
The yawning Consciousness,

Beliefs are Bandaged,
like the Tongue
When Terror
were it told
In any Tone
commensurate

¹⁵⁹ Grabher, “Forever is Composed,” 267.

¹⁶⁰ Cited in Grabher, “Forever is Composed,” 267.

Would strike
us instant
Dead -

I do not know
the man so
bold
He dare
in lonely
Place
That awful
stranger -
Consciousness
Deliberately
face -¹⁶¹

In this poem, Dickinson's speaker considers that we – and those we love – will die at some moment, which is one of the most terrifying truths for people's abyss-like consciousness. Without a doubt, this is an overwhelming thought that cannot be held in our minds for long, because the awareness of death at a moment's notice, "that awful stranger," or gigantic unknown, has the potential to drive people insane. Nonetheless, we are all given "the chance of Life" before this tragic and unyielding event occurs, and each moment – exactly as it is – should be treasured.

As previously stated, Dickinson's *Eternal Now* emphasises the significance of the present, and her circumference denotes that each instant matters within the context of experience. In related terms, Nietzsche's *Eternal Return* suggests that the highest affirmation of life can only be conceived through a tragic perspective. Unlike Emerson, both thinkers saw the tragic approach as a necessary condition for contemplating happiness as a possibility in this life. According to Griffith, Dickinson's poems anticipated "the tragic sense of life as it

¹⁶¹ "F1325A - I never hear that one is dead" (1874). Dickinson offers some alternative words in this poem. In the last verse of the second stanza, "Consciousness of this." instead of "yawning Consciousness." In the fifth verse of the last stanza, "lonesome Place -" and "secret Place" instead of "lonely. And in the last verse, "look squarely in the Face." Instead of "Deliberately face -."

has been reformulated for our time by Unamuno and the existentialists.”¹⁶² Similarly, the indeterminacy in Dickinson's language – which will be discussed in the following paragraphs – could be understood as adapted to a “world characterized by manifold uncertainties.”¹⁶³ Within this tradition, both Dickinson's and Nietzsche's work can be understood as a way to cope with the fatality and vulnerability of mortality.¹⁶⁴

In opposition to the Christian interpretation, which forever negates, suspends, or postpones the question of happiness, tragedy represents even the affirmation of suffering within life.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* claims that Socratism, with its emphasis on reason, may be a threatening force “undermining life,” because it is “rationality against instinct.”¹⁶⁶ As shown in this early poem, Dickinson's speakers, like Nietzsche, find consolation in neither religion nor reason:

I reason -
 Earth is short -
 And Anguish - absolute -
 And many - hurt -
 But, *What of that?*
 I reason -
 We should
die -
 The *best* - Vitality
 Could not excel Decay -
 But *What of that?*
 I reason -
 That in "Heaven" -
Somehow - it will be *even* -
 Some *new Equation* - given -
 But - *What of that!*¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Griffith, *Long Shadow*, 6.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶⁴ Griffith, *Long Shadow*, 42-3. For Griffith, some of the strategies that Dickinson used were: poet's child images, irony, paradoxical utterances, ambiguity, and the attraction and merging of opposites.

¹⁶⁵ Haar, “Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,” 21.

¹⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 79.

¹⁶⁷ “F403A - I reason, earth is short” (1862).

Although it is unavoidable that individuals' mortal lives will be surrounded by pain and grief, Dickinson's speaker cannot establish that, first, there will be an afterlife in heaven and, second, that this afterlife will be better than, or an improvement on, life on earth. In any case, whether we reason or not, there is nothing that individuals can do to guarantee or underpin the rationale. This poem, according to Smith, "redirects the reader and recast her understanding to underscore the unreasonableness and irrationality of the Christian assurances Dickinson calls into question here."¹⁶⁸ After Christmas in 1882, Dickinson wrote to Elizabeth Holland: "the Fiction of 'Santa Claus' always reminds me of the reply to my early question of 'Who made the Bible – 'Holy Men moved by the Holy Ghost,' and though I have now ceased my investigations, the Solution is insufficient –."¹⁶⁹ Dickinson alludes to the fictionality of both stories by linking her conception of Santa Claus to the authors of the Bible, as there is insufficient evidence to support either of them.

Unlike the certainty of death and the possibility of happiness within the contingency of earthly existence, accepting the promise of a better life in a world other than this one seems contradictory. In the midst of the possibility of tragedy, where "time is short and full,"¹⁷⁰ Dickinson's speakers are well aware of "the tragic paradox," in which, as Abrams points out, "the values of life are valuable precisely because they are limited and defined by death."¹⁷¹ Therefore, the ability to cope with the possibility, terror, and appreciation of tragedy and death in this life is critical for Dickinson's personae in their approach to happiness. "The great confidences of Life are first disclosed by their departure," she wrote in a letter in 1883.¹⁷² Those valuable elements within people's finite condition become even more valuable as they become aware of their potential loss and the presence of death. Furthermore, given their demise, this estimation is a terrifying prospect that must be confronted alone:

There is a solitude of space,
A solitude of sea,

¹⁶⁸ Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, 67-8.

¹⁶⁹ L794 (1882).

¹⁷⁰ L667 (1880).

¹⁷¹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 444.

¹⁷² L807 (1883).

A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be,
Compared with that profounder site,
That polar privacy,
A Soul admitted to Itself:
Finite Infinity.¹⁷³

Dickinson's speaker considers how certain solitudes may appear to accompany individuals as members of their own society when compared to "that polar privacy" that a person isolated from others – with her infinity of voices within her finite self – experiences. As Hagenbüchle's analyses of the last couplet implies, "in human consciousness, which is primarily a consciousness of death, the finite continuously verges on the infinite in much the same way that the advancing and retracting forces meet in the critical turning point of each moment."¹⁷⁴ As is customary for Dickinson's speakers, opposites attract one another, and small and large, pleasure and pain, finite and infinite are all fragments of the same whole (as Nietzsche's Zarathustra assures). For Gelpi, "man's littleness was, in a strange way, the condition for his greatness, and his limitations pointed toward infinity."¹⁷⁵

Within the limits of circumference, as represented by Dickinson's Eternal Now, where each moment in this finite, tragic, and frugal existence – and each joy and sorrow within it – "adds to some bright total, whose Dwelling is unknown;" indeterminacy allows most Dickinson's speakers to dwell in an earthly and evanescent "timid happiness" that is both estimated and threatened by the unforeseen intrusion of death.¹⁷⁶ Dickinson added in the aforementioned letter to Elizabeth Holland: "take sweet care of the small Life, fervor has made great."¹⁷⁷ This zeal and sincerity are required to transform "the burden of life" into "the power of life," as Dickinson's aphorism assured Elizabeth Holland two years later: "Death cannot plunder half as fast as Fervor can re-earn."¹⁷⁸ Re-earning is always

¹⁷³ J1695 - There is a solitude of space.

¹⁷⁴ Hagenbüchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy," 49. This idea is also highlighted in "F830A – The admirations and contempts of time" (1864).

¹⁷⁵ Gelpi, *Mind of the Poet*, 71.

¹⁷⁶ L528 (1877).

¹⁷⁷ L794 (1882).

¹⁷⁸ L901 (1884).

possible while in the realm of existence or, as the poet puts it, in the “lands of consciousness.”¹⁷⁹ Dickinson's speaker's awareness of the everlasting possibility of happiness here on Earth resembles Solonian happiness and the privilege accorded to the notion in classical accounts by acknowledging the wholeness and indeterminacy of experience in light of the inevitability of death. Unlike the overarching necessity to determine happiness, or its causes, in major nineteenth-century representations of the idea, it is critical for this study to reveal Dickinson's mechanisms that enabled her work to be relentlessly open to possibility and indeterminacy – as the idea of happiness should always be.

The Possibility of Happiness in Dickinson's Writings

Go not too near
a House of Rose -
The depredation
of a Breeze
Or inundation
of a Dew
Alarm its Walls
away -

Nor try to tie
the Butterfly,
Nor climb the
Bars of Ecstasy -
In insecurity
to lie
Is Joy's insuring
quality -¹⁸⁰

According to the speaker, “in insecurity to lie” is one of the conditions of happiness. She connects the strangeness of nature – or the separation between self and nature – with the strangeness of the causes of happiness.¹⁸¹ Given that

¹⁷⁹ In letter L830 to Maria Whitney in 1883, Dickinson wrote: “I still hope that you live, and in lands of consciousness.”

¹⁸⁰ “F1479A - Go not too near a house of rose” (1878).

¹⁸¹ Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, 165. This idea resonates well with Lear's account and the conditions needed to create the possibility of happiness in life. For Lear, “to live with human

“to see is perhaps never quite the sorcery that it is to surmise,” uncertainty and indeterminacy are the bedrocks of happiness, because it is not caused, but simply happens.¹⁸² This idea resonates with Dickinson's “happiness without cause is the best happiness” and “service without hope is tenderest,” because they are “rewarded work” in and of themselves. In July 1878, Dickinson enclosed this poem in a letter to Sarah Tuckerman.¹⁸³ In a subsequent letter to Sarah Tuckerman in August, the poet pondered: “I fear you have much happiness because you spend so much. Would adding to it - take it away or is that a penurious question?.”¹⁸⁴ That is a complex question. To some extent, adding implies the need to estimate how much we already have of it or how much it is worth, and this estimation, in turn, implies a judgement or determination of value. Therefore, it may take away or displace the insecurity required to appreciate it most. This prose fragment could also be read in light of “Unto the Whole - how add?,” where it is impossible to conceive of this “whole” – which could be interpreted as happiness or a life worth living – and, thus, to add to it, because nothing can be added to the totality of experience. In any case, when Dickinson declared three years later that “‘Happiness’ is for birds and other foreign nations, in their faint esteem,” the possibility of adding and decreasing, or withholding and expanding, happiness seems irrelevant.¹⁸⁵

When the esteem (or judgement) is weak and hollow, not genuine or made *a priori*, as in reified sentimental representations of happiness, the idea appears foreign to most Dickinson's speakers – or only accessible to birds. In terms of her references to foreign countries, the preceding statement can be compared to the poet's comment to the Norcross sisters:

We read in a tremendous Book [the Bible] about ‘an enemy,’ and armed a confidential fort to scatter him away. The time has passed, and years have come, and yet not any ‘Satan.’ I think he must be making war upon some other nation.¹⁸⁶

possibility, one has to tolerate a peculiar kind of theoretical anxiety: the willingness to live without a principle. Only then can we begin to grasp the peculiar possibility for possibilities that human being opens up.”

¹⁸² L565 (1878).

¹⁸³ L558 (1878).

¹⁸⁴ L565.

¹⁸⁵ L734 (1881).

¹⁸⁶ L693 (1881).

In this context, one could argue that a predetermined or reified concept of happiness is as distant for some of Dickinson's speakers as religious faith in heaven. In line with Solon's proverb, the ambiguity and open-ended nature of Dickinson's thought and work, in form and content, sheds light on the call for indeterminate happiness, which should be understood as a possibility within this life.

Dashes are one of the formal strategies Dickinson employs to amplify indeterminacy in her poems. According to Crumbley, "precisely because these dashes can expand rather than restrict voicing options, they play an important role in defining a poetic project designed to present readers a wide range of simultaneous meanings."¹⁸⁷ With this in mind, Dickinson's use of dashes can be interpreted as a refusal of the notion of wholeness, provided that "through these many voices, the subject expresses a self that is always in the process, never entirely realizable in spoken language."¹⁸⁸ In other words, the speaker's voice in numerous Dickinson poems reveals a self always in process, a self composed of a variety of cultural and personal languages that cannot be contained within a single voice. For instance, the poet wrote: "a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one."¹⁸⁹ For Crumbley, Dickinson's poems tend to multiply rather than constrict the meaning of her speakers' words. On the one hand, she creates poems in which each element embodies the conflict for creative expression that characterises the work in its totality. Her poems, on the other hand, transcend all barriers, including social, intellectual, emotional, and linguistic ones.¹⁹⁰ In this way, "Dickinson's inclusive poetics" is constantly generating "possibility."¹⁹¹ Her poetics thus appear to be an eloquent and unique approach to grasping happiness as a possibility.

Dashes help to boost Dickinson's writing's multifacetedness on all levels. As a result, Juhasz claims that reading her "demands a technique, and a

¹⁸⁷ Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-9.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

perspective, that can see doubly.”¹⁹² Within this doubleness, meanings and interpretations multiply. In “Approaches to Reading Dickinson,” Miller conveys that “Dickinson believes in the extraordinary power of language, but she believes in its power both to open and to close the process of perceiving or of thinking.”¹⁹³ Dickinson's ability to consider every possible alternative and perspective enables her speakers to highlight the processes by which language can potentially create and disrupt human perception. What Miller notices is that “textual instability or fluidity as a practice is fully commensurate with the characteristic openness of Dickinson's verse,” provided that the “ephemeral performances” that poets produce are “the ‘essence’ of lived experience or daily phenomena.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, Dickinson's “poetics of process,” as defined by Hagenbüchle, achieves this simultaneous doubleness and indeterminacy by approaching but never fully achieving its goal, as expressed in the following poem:¹⁹⁵

Who never wanted -
 maddest Joy
 Remains to him
 unknown -
 The Banquet of
 Abstemiousness
 Defaces that of Wine -

Within its reach,
 though yet ungrasped
 Desire's perfect Goal -
 No nearer - lest the
 Actual -
 Should disenthral thy
 soul -¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Juhasz, “Reading Dickinson Doubly,” in *A Celebration for Readers*, 218-9. Besides, Juhasz observes that “double meanings can cancel one another out, or enrich one another, or provide a suggestive tension, or irony, or contradiction.”

¹⁹³ Miller, “Approaches to Reading Dickinson,” in *A Celebration for Readers*, 228.

¹⁹⁴ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 116-7.

¹⁹⁵ Hagenbüchle, “‘Sumptuous – Despair:’ The Function of Desire in Emily Dickinson's poetry,” in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 5, no. 2 (2009): 2.

¹⁹⁶ “F1447A - Who never wanted - maddest joy” (1877). Dickinson proposes numerous word choices in this poem. In the first verse of the second stanza, “hope” instead of “reach.” In the second verse, “and -

In this poem, "maddest Joy" may be triggered by a yearning for something unattainable. Dickinson's speaker contends that the force of desire is driven by the perception of being simultaneously within reach and yet unreachable. Nonetheless, the realisation may be less appealing than the anticipation. It is this "having not having," as Hagenbüchle observes, "that provokes the self's continuous search."¹⁹⁷ In the acceptance that individuals are always caught within the process, "Dickinson had the courage to face the unsettling truth that a stable and truly reconstituted self cannot be achieved in life."¹⁹⁸ Like Hagenbüchle, Miller states that Dickinson's desire "is often more powerful than possession, and joy is precious because it is ephemeral."¹⁹⁹ Analogously, Dickinson's writings – reinforced by her use of dashes - assert that a stable and true happiness cannot be attained while in this process.

Indeterminacy is widely regarded as one of Dickinson's most prominent characteristics. Indeterminacy is "a fundamental aspect of Dickinson's poetry," according to Bennet, considering that "the Dickinson of ultimate indeterminacy" is "fully audible to us."²⁰⁰ Despite the fact that her poetry is historically and culturally accessible, Dickinson felt that not naming was preferable to limiting the poem to a single event.²⁰¹ Dickinson's verse remains open to multiple interpretations by not fixing it, allowing her poetry to flow continuously and be applicable to an infinite number of occurrences. The poet's ambiguity, according to McClure Smith, can be linked to "a larger reader-oriented strategy of indeterminacy that heightens desire by perpetually deferring fulfilment," since "Dickinson discovered the condition of indeterminacy to be itself indeterminate."²⁰² Given this, Dickinson's poetic ambiguity cannot be solved

just" instead of "though yet." And in the fourth verse, "Reality -," "its penury -," "the possible," "Vicinity -" instead of "the Actual -."

¹⁹⁷ Hagenbüchle, "'Sumptuous – Despair,'" 2. For Hagenbüchle, desire and love are Dickinson's poetic engine; desire is seen "as the driving force behind the poet's oeuvre."

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹⁹ Miller, *Reading in Time*, 132. For instance, in "F317A - Delight is as the flight" (1862).

²⁰⁰ Bennet, "New Introduction," *Woman Poet*, xxv.

²⁰¹ Ibid., xxix. For Bennett, the poem "F340A - I felt a funeral in my brain" (1862) is "a masterpiece of indeterminacy" considering that "not only did St. Armand and Phillips [*Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*] tie the poem to the war," but "they identified the specific incident that elicited it, namely the funeral of Frazer Stearns [Austin's friend]." Ibid., xxvi.

²⁰² Robert McClure Smith, *The Seductions of Emily Dickinson* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama; London: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), 6.

because its solution is multiple, and the more readers there are, the more possibilities are created; as a result, its indeterminacy continues indefinitely:

Wonder - is not
precisely knowing
And not precisely
knowing not -
A beautiful but
bleak condition
He has not lived
who has not felt -

Suspense - is his
maturer Sister -
Whether Adult
Delight is Pain
Or of itself a
new misgiving -
This is the
Gnat that
Mangles men ⁻²⁰³

The uncertainty of wondering is both “beautiful” and “bleak” for Dickinson's speaker or, to use McIntosh's terminology, “needed and dreadful.” However, it is a necessary part of the living process because “he has not lived who has not felt [it].” Similarly, the affliction of delight may be “a beautiful but bleak condition,” because both elements are inextricably linked. Although this idea – both insignificant and crucial – may disrupt people's reasoning, it is precisely this disruption that is required to create a surprising scenario. In McClure Smith's reading, it is “excitement” that “is contingent on uncertainty, anticipation, teasing, possibility.” ²⁰⁴ This insight can partially be applied to the tragic Solonian interpretation of happiness, which is also rooted in contingency, uncertainty, and possibility. Most Dickinson's speakers frequently use the contingency and indeterminacy of experience as a mechanism for elevating human beings'

²⁰³ “F1347A - Wonder is not precisely knowing” (1874).

²⁰⁴ McClure Smith, *Seductions*, 6.

inherent possibilities in this life. As Fineman's essay suggests, "the fragmentary nature of knowing presents one not with an epistemic failure but with an ontological opportunity."²⁰⁵ For example, in her poem "What I see not I better see," the inability of seeing completely offers "an unbounded opportunity, an unending potentiality, and it is the arena of poetry," according to Fineman.²⁰⁶ Similarly, this unfinished phenomenon is also the domain of happiness in Dickinson's views.

Bearing in mind "Life's Mysterious Boat," Dickinson's work not only treasured indeterminacy but also enlarged it.²⁰⁷ In *Rethinking Sympathy*, Noble points out that "Dickinson refuses closure at every level: meter, stanza, line, word, syntax, punctuation, paper, publication, and more. Her poetry frustrates expectations of secure locations and firm grasps of meaning."²⁰⁸ Dickinson's poetry dares readers to collaborate in the development of it, challenging them to read critically and provide their own unique perspective.²⁰⁹ In terms of happiness, its conditions also call for an active and open-ended creation and cocreation of it since its outcome is never secure. For this reason, Dickinson's writings are committed to representing the ongoing nature of processes and interpretation by enabling her readers to interact with them. According to Noble, "Dickinson wanted her poems to be alive, to breathe, to have an inner vitality, and she requires readers to disseminate a poem's circumference in their own way."²¹⁰ Referring back to Dickinson's "Sweet Skepticism of the Heart," possibility is born out of indeterminacy for her speaker, and it is the basis of happiness for mortal beings in tragic interpretations of happiness. According to Crumbley, "such scepticism is sweet," and "'Certainty' would be a withered thing compared with the delicious mixture of joy and fear which is uncertainty."²¹¹

²⁰⁵ Fineman, "Against Mastery," 92.

²⁰⁶ "F869A - What I see not I better see" (1864). For a discussion of this poem, see Fineman, "Against Mastery," 104.

²⁰⁷ Dickinson wrote this in letter L802 to Elizabeth Holland in 1882.

²⁰⁸ Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy*, 198.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 199. For Noble, "the signature features of her unique style – syntactic doubling, missing words, compression of multiple images, alternative words and playful inscriptions, esoteric allusions, and idiosyncratic punctuation and spelling – all call the reader to create the work and its resonance on their own."

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

²¹¹ Cited in Petrino, "Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence in Emily Dickinson," in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 19, no. 1. (2010): 82. Quoted from Crumbley's *Inflections of the Pen*. Crumbley notices that "Dickinson adapts a dialogical style that allows a number of voices to exist simultaneously and hence

Dickinson's indeterminacy, by allowing a "hermeneutics of possibility," serves as a critical mechanism in her speakers' approach to happiness as a possibility, since chance is perceived as indispensable in order to avoid diminishing happiness' potentiality:

The gleam of an heroic act
Such strange illumination
The Possible's slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination²¹²

For Dickinson's speaker, to carry out a formidable, bold, and daring endeavour, it must first be imagined as a possibility. In this light, what can enable some people – those "happy few" – to achieve the near-miracle of having lived a life worth living by the time they die is to envision such a heroic undertaking as doable. In Hagenbüchle's reading, "life is pure possibility, it is 'The Possible's slow Fuse'."²¹³ Likewise, happiness in this life is "pure possibility." According to Hagenbüchle, it is no accident that "Dickinson's poetry is characterized by an element of deliberate indeterminacy, which alone can do justice to the mystery of existence."²¹⁴ Certainly, the indeterminacy – the uncertainty at the heart of Solonian happiness – serves as a mechanism for grasping this mysterious mortal existence and the possibility of an elusive happiness within it. "Maturity only enhances mystery, never decreases it," the poet wrote in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd in 1882.²¹⁵ As with the mystery of happiness, the mystery of life not only intensifies throughout existence but also follows individuals until the end, as Dickinson wrote later that year to Joseph K. Chickering: "life never loses its startlingness, however assailed –," especially thinking of the inevitability of death from a tragic perspective.²¹⁶ Returning to the commonalities between Dickinson's and Nietzsche's views, two statements of the philosopher resonate well with the poet's mysterious and startling maxims. On the one hand: "no, life has not

amplifies indeterminacy in her poems." According to Petrino, Crumbley "demonstrates the indeterminacy engendered in reading her poems due to their many possible intertextual references."

²¹² F1686A - The gleam of an heroic act.

²¹³ Hagenbüchle, "Precision and Indeterminacy," 55.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 56. For Hagenbüchle, "just because the feeling of awe and wonder tends to get lost in the rigid 'Prose' (J613) of daily routine, Emily Dickinson has made it her 'business' (L268) to create anew this sense of mystery within the 'Circumference' of her poetry."

²¹⁵ L769 (1882).

²¹⁶ L786 (1882).

disappointed me. On the contrary, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year –.”²¹⁷ The increase of the mysterious aspects of life, then, expands its appreciation. On the other hand: “yes, little riddles are the danger that confronts those who are happiest –.”²¹⁸ For both thinkers, mystery confronts and enables the chances of happiness.

Dickinson's work aims to provide a spacious area – with the capacity to continue expanding – in which an infinite number of possibilities can be contained by acknowledging the multiple, mysterious, and ambiguous qualities of individuals' existence. This is Dickinson's “hermeneutics of possibility” or, as Nell Smith puts it, “a story of reading lending itself to a thousand and more interpretations, all of which may be faithful to Dickinson's poetic project;” an open-ended project that dwells “in Possibility.”²¹⁹ Dickinson's writings are described as “infinitely open” by Howe, who adds that “it's like Shakespeare – a miracle.”²²⁰ And, until the end, the concept of happiness should be “infinitely open,” as well as mysterious and miraculous; in Dickinson's words, “those that are worthy of Life are of Miracle, for Life is Miracle.”²²¹ In response to nineteenth-century major interpretations of happiness in their assumption that determining a concept might lead to a better understanding of it and thus its attainment, Dickinson's writings insist that it is the uncertain component of life – inherent in happiness – that entices people to keep guessing and offers them the opportunity to keep trying. In MacKenzie's words, “Dickinson's gaps” are “invitations, opportunities for possibility.”²²² and those are the opportunities required to approach, but not “tie,” the possibility of happiness.

²¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, point 324, 255.

²¹⁸ Ibid., ending point 302, “the danger of the happiest,” 242-3.

²¹⁹ Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, 58. For Nell Smith, it is Karl Keller who affirmed that Dickinson “is now strong enough as a writer in our literary history to transform our view of the culture itself.” Cited in *Rowing in Eden*, p. 59. In line with this statement, this study argues that Dickinson's work could also transform our views regarding what a life worth living might mean.

²²⁰ Howe, *Birth-Mark*, 153. As in the case of Shakespeare, Howe highlights both the temporal and atemporal quality (nature) of Dickinson's writings: Dickinson “is always somewhere else. She is in many ways – and it has often been said – a seventeenth century poet. And then again, she is so far ahead of us in 1989 that editing her seems to be a nearly impossible task;” furthermore, Dickinson “abolishes categories.” Ibid., 157.

²²¹ H B179 (1864).

²²² Cindy MacKenzie, “‘This is my letter to the World': Emily Dickinson's Epistolary Poetics,” in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters*, 21.

In line with Dickinson's views, Sara Ahmed argues in the final chapter of *The Promise of Happiness* that the possibility of happiness can contain both terror and joy. Similarly, from this vantage point, people “can value happiness for its precariousness, as something that comes and goes, as life does;” therefore, “to turn happiness into an expectation is thus to annul its sense of possibility.”²²³ However, William Davies’ *The Happiness Industry* points out that people's pursuit of happiness has been tactically directed and administered in a rationally objective and measurable manner. According to Davies:

From the time of the French Revolution to the present (and accelerating in the late-nineteenth century), a particular scientific utopia has been sold: core questions of morality and politics will be solvable with an adequate science of human feelings.... Happiness science has achieved the influence it has because it promises to provide the longed- for solution.²²⁴

Despite the fact that this “longed- for solution” has been debated for the last two millennia, specialists in various disciplines attempting to identify happiness' causes are still deluded by the notion that this is actually possible; to fine-tune the formula, as if such a formula existed, that will guarantee happiness once and for all. Dickinson's work, on the other hand, insists that there should be no such thing as a formula for happiness.

Referring back to Barret Browning's reformulation of Solon's proverb in *Aurora Leigh*, no one should be called “happy” or “unhappy” while alive. Dickinson's work, in its entirety, upholds the possibility of constant and daily renewal, as indicated in one of her final letters in 1886: “if we love Flowers, are we not ‘born again’ every Day, without the distractions of Nicodemus? Not to outgrow Genesis, is a sweet monition —.”²²⁵ Dickinson's appreciation of “the momentousness of the present” as well as “the miraculousness of existence” is paramount in imagining the possibility of happiness in a life that is constantly assailed by the inevitability of death. As she stated in this brief poem:

²²³ Sara Ahmed, “Conclusion – Happiness, Ethics, Possibility,” in *The Promise of Happiness* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 19.

²²⁴ William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business sold us Well-Being* (London: Verso, 2016), 7, 9.

²²⁵ L1037 (1886). As Johnson points out, Dickinson seemingly refers to “Nicodemus’s questions about the meaning of” the rebirth of Jesus. Johnson, *Letters*, vol. 3, 899.

A fresh
Morning of
Life with its'
impregnable
chances, and
the Dew, for
you,²²⁶

Dickinson sent these words to Susan Dickinson in 1882, reminding her that the only “unassailable” aspects of life are possibilities, and that chances are automatically renewed every morning – provided individuals can perceive it as such. However, as possibilities renew – as the present moment does – they fade away; as every Now becomes a new Now. As previously cited:

There is
no first, or last,
in Forever -
It is Centre, there,
all the time -²²⁷

Thus, the centrality of the present moment is given careful consideration in Dickinson's *Circumference*. “Her poems and letters became increasingly integrated with her life as she increasingly resembled her poems and letters and they resembled her,” MacKenzie writes.”²²⁸ In other words, Dickinson's speakers resembled her and vice versa, and as a result, the poet's artistic and living integrity enabled her to perceive the wholeness of existence, in which all experiences within it are fragments of the same whole. Dickinson, according to Martin, experienced life “as comprehensive totality rather than quest.”²²⁹ Dickinson's ability to see the wholeness of life evokes and parallels the Solonian interpretation of a life worth living.

In addition to the dashes, Dickinson's gaps and language use bring readers into the process by allowing them to actively create new interpretations of her poems. They engage her readers in an open-ended and everlasting task

²²⁶ H B194 (1882).

²²⁷ H B56 (1864).

²²⁸ MacKenzie, “Epistolary Poetics,” 16.

²²⁹ Martin, *American Tryptic*, 164.

through word choices, differing punctuation, and a multiplicity of versions.²³⁰ Consequently, there are as many interpretations as readers since, according to Bennett, “poems were not fixed, any more than life or thought were.”²³¹ Applying this formula to the concept of a life worth living, there are as many types of happiness as there are people – as Locke suggested. Dickinson's artistic and living integrity – exemplified by both her notion of circumference and the Eternal Now – creates the conditions for an interpretation of happiness based on the inevitability of death, the contingency of existence, the circularity of processes, and the multiplicity of experiences within it. As Bennett points out:

The world which her poetry creates is a world in which nothing can be known for certain and in which, therefore, the ideals of order and perfection (the foundation stones of Western Phallocentrism) give way to process and incompleteness.²³²

The space created by her poetry, then, is one that allows for the inherent meaninglessness of a tragic and changing world in which people must face what “befalls them” and accept that many circumstances are beyond their control. According to Bennett, Dickinson's speakers are aware of “all the terror that the isolated individual feels when confronted with nothingness – the abyss.”²³³

As Nietzsche's use of metaphors to confront the abyss of life and his most abysmal thought in which the present moment eternally recurs, Dickinson's metaphorical use of language in her poems is capable of containing both the terrors and joys of existence, as well as the multiplicity and indeterminacy enclosed within the possibility of happiness on Earth. For this reason, pretending to solve Dickinson's riddle or to find a unique and absolute meaning in her poems is futile, because it is precisely this mystery that gives them meaning and amplifies their potential. Returning to the impossibility of defining beauty and, by extension, the impossibility of defining happiness, Hagenbüchle assures that it is

²³⁰ Smith, *Rowing in Eden*, 53-4. According to Smith, Dickinson's reader-oriented strategy “invites readers to make decisions for themselves” and the poet's work is “remade with every reading.”

²³¹ Bennett, *Woman Poet*, 42.

²³² Ibid., 19. For Bennett, “the result is a free, constantly changing form of poetry in which conclusions – whether formal or thematic – cannot be drawn and in which variant readings are part of the very substance of the text.”

²³³ Ibid., 34.

because of “this impotence of expression that the soul becomes aware of its potential.”²³⁴ On the assumption that:

Elysium is as
far as to
The very nearest
Room
If in that Room
a Friend await
Felicity or Doom -

What fortitude
the Soul contains,
That it can so
endure
The accent of
a coming Foot -
The opening of
a Door -²³⁵

Elysium, bliss, felicity, or the conditions of happiness are always present and accompany individuals in each instance. In this case, the particular state in which this friend may be “waiting for us,” either dead or alive, in an adjacent room, will determine whether the individual is about to experience a moment of contentment or of burden. For Hagenbüchle, this poem acknowledges “the radical openness of man’s existence;” by using the image of “the opening door,” which is “a central image of transition in Dickinson’s poetry,” signifying “the potentiality of human life as such, which plunges man into a strange mixture of ecstasy and despair.”²³⁶ In Tim Morris’ reading, “Elysium is always as far as to the very nearest room. You look forward to Felicity or Doom on a daily basis.”²³⁷ As in tragic interpretations of happiness, the possibilities contained within each moment are infinitely open and cannot be predicted ahead of time. As a result, attempting to determine the

²³⁴ Hagenbüchle, “Precision and Indeterminacy,” 52. For instance, in “F1725A - If I could tell how glad I was.”

²³⁵ “F1590A - Elysium is as far as to” (1882).

²³⁶ Hagenbüchle, “Precision and Indeterminacy,” 53-4.

²³⁷ Tim Morris, “Auntie Gus Felled It New,” in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, 281.

concept of happiness, or a life worth living, *a priori* is as futile and counterproductive as attempting to determine the single meaning of Dickinson's poems, because doing so would negate their everlasting possibilities.

Conclusion

Despite absorbing and rethinking their features and implications, Emily Dickinson's views on happiness departed from major nineteenth-century interpretations to present a radical new idea – although her perspective can be linked to Greek tragic traditions dating back over two thousand years – that is genuinely a blending of theory and practise, and it could help people rethink what it means to live a happy life today. The success of Dickinson's writerly project stems from her ability to ground happiness in her daily habits and to appreciate its changing circumstances. Dickinson's happiness without hope – to which causes cannot be attributed – does not expect to be prospectively compensated, and thus differs from a conventional or customary notion of happiness that is grounded in the fact and hope that a better happiness is about to come.

Dickinson's work, which draws on the pleasures (and pains) of writing poetry and thinking with and about it, does not expect to achieve a specific outcome – although goals and aims are embedded within the process itself – because its mere performance is valuable and esteemed. As a result, the poet's approach to happiness is based on the value of processes, the present moment, experience, contingency, the unknown, contradiction, mortality, existence, both reason and emotion, joy and grief, love and care. Actually, her approach may be the most appropriate and adequate for contradictory, finite, unknown, incomplete, and imperfect beings such as humans. Dickinson's full integrity of thought, work, and life rises and is contained within her own views of a life worth living, given that her writings were concerned with and cherished the possibility of happiness in this life – by viewing happiness as a stimulus. Happiness, like nature, beauty, and humanity, evades definition in Dickinson's cosmology. Indeed, possibility denotes the state of being possible, and it is diverse and plural; thus, happiness is also diverse and plural. Individuals may experience both joys and terrors as a result of the ungrounding of happiness' definition, because there is so much that remains uncertain and outside of people's sphere of influence in this perspective based on chance. However, what is crucial for Dickinson's speakers is to learn to live on the abyss of existence since, from this vantage point, life unfolds as full of wonders, mysteries, and surprises that must elude full comprehension in order to reveal its potential.

Dickinson attained immortality for her work, mind, and story by adopting a mortality-centred perspective and confronting her culture's "immortal" or "godlike" figures. Her viewpoints were similar to existential interpretations of happiness, which suggest that existence is meaningless and that humans must create meaning for themselves. Her work questioned and eventually rejected the Calvinist, sentimental, and transcendental Gods. As a result of bringing her own responsibilities down to earth, Dickinson became a god herself, a maker, a creator. Similarly, she created the conditions necessary for her to fulfil her passion and vocation while also using these poetic tools to help and care for her loved ones. Dickinson's concept of the Eternal Now – as the circumference of circumferences – magnifies the relevance of the present. By barely leaving her home in the last twenty years of her life, Dickinson created a space in which her freedom to decide what she wanted to do was not constrained by external events or expected tomorrows. Her complete command of time, combined with the fact that she rarely planned ahead of time, enabled her and her speakers to live in an eternal present that could evolve or shift in any direction at any moment. For example, she never knew if she would receive a letter that day (or perhaps write one herself), or what she would read in the papers, or if she would run into Susan at some point, or receive a little note from her; how her loved ones were feeling, how her flowers looked, and which birds may find their ways towards her surroundings. Perhaps she would find inspiration for a new poem, or maybe old verses would get rewritten. From sunrise to sunset, Dickinson's "small" life constantly expanded and contracted, and beyond all, her life was full of possibilities that not only renewed at every instant, but that she perceived as such.

Dickinson's work and life are still in constant flux, much like the concept of happiness. Over the course of a century, the spectrum of her criticism has shifted from her work being good – but not great – to the recognition of her oeuvre's brilliance and its influence in subsequent traditions. Furthermore, her work's unique openness, ambiguity, and indeterminacy, which engages her readers in the process of meaning-making and interpretation, allows her poetry to breathe and change with each new reading. Because she never published during her lifetime, her work was always "in progress," or "in the process," and her writings

are infinite since there will never be a final interpretation of them. For this reason, her poems will keep evolving and her materials will keep on bringing new evidence about her poetic strategies and life perspectives that may point in any direction. Dickinson's narrative, like happiness' narrative, has changed over time as it has transformed and adapted to the values and needs of different periods. Her story, for example, has been adapted to modern audiences in the TV series *Dickinson* (2019), and the films *A Quiet Passion* (2016) and *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018). Furthermore, the Dickinson Museum just reopened its doors in Summer 2022 after a lengthy renovation process. Dickinson's force keeps exploding. Given that major representations of happiness in the nineteenth century were "foreign" to Dickinson, this study contended that the current concept of happiness would have been as well. To some extent, both ideas are quite similar in that they are both based on (and prioritise) future rewards and outcomes; thus, neither are grounded in the present and the appreciation of every instant, regarding that every spark is numbered and individuals have no idea when they will experience their last.

Dickinson was a poet, not a philosopher, despite the fact that her poems addressed contemporary philosophical debates. Throughout her life and career, she dismembered philosophical concerns about how to live through poetry. Despite the fact that her poetry and letters are deeply concerned with the exploration of life as a whole in order to offer alternative options for navigating it, her thoughts have frequently remained outside of those debates. Unlike most philosophers, Dickinson's work does not rely on ideals or absolutes; rather, her poetics of possibility and indeterminacy enabled her speakers to present an idea of happiness that challenged contemporary philosophies while referring back to classical notions. Poetry, as opposed to prose, provided a wide open space in which meanings are subject to the whims of contingency and the fluidity of experience. Dickinson's poems are radically open to multiple interpretations, and this openness is required when approaching happiness since such a judgement is also open until death. Dickinson's challenge was to question foundational principles and universal truths, such as religious dogma, recognising that absolutes are deceptive and that the particulars of each situation should guide possible responses to them. Dickinson's work supports the maxim that a

statement of poetics could not be written since any statement would determine and fix knowledge in a trustworthy manner. She did, however, use her poems to present ideas that could be moulded and altered at a moment's notice, provided that life and happiness also functioned in that manner. For example, both a fortunate and unfortunate event can and will change a person's life path, though the full extent of that change will never be known. Dickinson's poems resist singular interpretation, and her words resist denotation, which are key elements in her approach to happiness, which also eludes singular interpretation and resists denotation. Rather than simply stating it, Dickinson performed her own poetic philosophy and made it available to the world so that her readers, instead of following hers, could create and find their own way to live.

This study has interpreted Dickinson's story and views on living a meaningful life in dialogue with the concept, transformation, and evolution of happiness from the fourth century BC to the nineteenth century. In light of major nineteenth-century interpretations of happiness, such as the theological, sentimental, and transcendental, Dickinson's writings, while informed by all of them, refused to be reduced or contained within a single doctrine, instead devising an open-ended strategy that brought her ideas of happiness closer to both the Greek tragic tradition and existential approaches to the concept. Consequently, the aim of this study was to examine those interpretations through the eyes of Dickinson's personae in order to integrate her insightful exploration into old and new debates. Dickinson's views on happiness as a stimulus or possibility – always within reach but yet unreachd – resonate well with Solonian happiness, in which individuals cannot be declared happy while alive due to the contingency of life. This happiness, then, encompasses the entirety of existence and contains a wide variety of experiences. Furthermore, it is indeterminate because happiness cannot be predicted in advance, and as a result, chances and possibilities remain open until death. Dickinson's concept, like Solonian happiness, assumes that there is so much beyond people's control and that accepting what happens to you is the first step toward the possibility of developing and creating your own path within, which should be grounded in finitude, mortality, and chance.

The aforementioned concept of happiness is partially lost when post-Socratic tradition transforms chance into reason (and virtue). As in Aristotle's virtue ethics

and his praise of the Golden Mean, virtue is defined as the attainment of this ideal mean and perceived as the true path to happiness, which also serves as a measure of perfection. Happiness has an active component here, and it is through habit that any person can strive to act better every time. This doctrine acknowledges the influence of chance; however, while there will always be instances and circumstances beyond people's control, a truly virtuous person will always be able to reduce the impact of unfortunate events by acting virtuously after developing a good character. Religious interpretations assimilated the concept of acting virtuously and infused it with grace. In this tradition, the phenomenon of chance vanishes because it literally ceases to exist; there is no chance, only divine Providence. Besides, the temporality of happiness was also altered from its present conditions to its future reward – perfect happiness (blessedness) in heaven. Dickinson's writings actively challenged these precepts, and her doubts about the reliability of religious teachings grew larger throughout her life – from her initial doubts about becoming a Christian as a teenager – and were reaffirmed in her late works and final years. Dickinson was never interested in sacrificing the present for an unknown future. Rather, she transformed God's gift into the gift of mortality (along with the gift of life), and her poetic philosophy never deviated from her awareness of her own finitude, fragility, and vulnerability. Dickinson's suspicion and disbelief in Christian doctrine was heightened by Darwin's revolutionary discoveries and theory of evolution. According to him, last-minute chances are what allow the emergence of new species, and nature does not appear to follow any design. As a result, Darwin's views restored chance as an undeniable mechanism, the workings of which could be seen in nature in particular and the universe in general. Darwin's discoveries aided Dickinson's instincts and intuitions.

Death was always given a high place in Dickinson's views of happiness since it is through death (or loss) that humans can better appreciate their lives (or gains). In tragic accounts, death was seen as both the end of life and the point at which happiness could be judged. However, the symbolism of death changed dramatically in religious perspectives because, in their views, death represented the passage to eternal happiness in heaven; thus, death was happiness itself. Turning from Aristotle's virtue and its intrinsic value to religious virtue in relation

to a further aim or reward, virtue was associated with suffering, martyrdom, and renunciation. This proclivity to endure life and praise misery was emphasised in the case of women, whose virtue was mostly associated with chastity and obedience. Moreover, in light of immortality, mortality was sacrificed, and as a result, life was transformed into a trial that must be endured prior to the blessedness in heaven. This happiness of hope has had a significant impact on the idea for centuries, and traces of it can still be found in the current concept of happiness. Nonetheless, Dickinson's happiness without hope actively questioned this view in her writings, as well as the approaches that were grounded in it, such as the discourse of sentimentality, which was very popular and influential in Dickinson's time and carried the trial logic far beyond the pulpits and right onto people's bookshelves. The happiness revolution, on the other hand, was led by the Enlightenment's motto of the right to pursue happiness, which was influenced by the French and American revolutions, and reduced the idea to the level of positive experience, while other mechanisms such as the certainty to secure happiness for all and the inevitability to do so developed and animosity towards the concept. When attempting to define happiness and reify its causes, sentimentalism exacerbated this animosity. Despite this, Dickinson's views on a "happiness without a cause" remained solid in the face of the need to uncover and predict the causes of happiness.

The bending of virtue, grace, and sentiment proved to be very resilient and convincing in approaching happiness. This venture did not include a concern for chance, nor, at times, a concern for happiness itself. Most Dickinson's speakers, on the contrary, insisted on actions that were intrinsically valuable in their approach and concern for happiness. However, through the trial narrative form, the affective or sentimental interpretation reduced the concept of happiness as an all-encompassing theme to a positive emotion to be experienced by the end of the trial if it had been successfully endured. As a result, the trial mechanism assumed an ethics of renunciation and suffering and, while Dickinson's work and life were cloaked and understood within this context, her writings did not succumb to either the ethics of trial or the privilege of negative emotions. To some extent, the influence of sentimental best-selling novels, as well as the image of episodic, reified, and determined happiness, spread as a literary phenomenon, whose

teachings and morals were highly integrated and accepted by a vast majority. One of the reasons was its association with well-known religious narratives, which appeared too familiar to be refuted. Domestic bliss for women was well grounded in an idea of prospective happiness, which reification – whether in marriage, money, fame, status, heaven, or freedom – would be experienced as a reward soon enough (or at least sooner than its heavenly reward); however, this reward was never as appealing as its expectation or hope. Sentimental poetry was reduced to lyric and the majority of women writers, such as Dickinson, were associated with the “poetics of misery.” Nonetheless, Dickinson’s writings remained grounded in contingency and mortality, and instead of accepting trial ethics, they frequently advocate learning by opposites. Rather than prioritising negative emotions, the poet’s views on the multiplicity of experience guided her journeys through joy and grief, pain and pleasure, gain and loss, knowing that there is little we actually know and, therefore, people’s finitude is infinitely open, and if no one be called happy until death, simultaneously, no one should be called unhappy. While there is time, there are chances.

Although religious and sentimental approaches to happiness had an impact on romantic and transcendental approaches, it was the latter that restored some of the classical principles, such as happiness as an all-encompassing concept, its present temporality, and its elusive definition. Dickinson and some of her contemporaries gather strength from Emerson’s philosophy to pursue their own “angles of vision.” Emerson’s happiness was brought or carried to nature and grounded in virtue – Aristotle’s idea of virtue rather than one linked to religion. This happiness is present and highlights the importance of today in both past and future events by adapting Calvinist rigidity to the needs of the times. Furthermore, Emerson’s transcendentalism places power in the hands of the individual and emphasises that people live amid surfaces and are always in the process, given that everything is in constant flux. He submits his natural law of compensation and fairness to the scrutiny of a transcendental God, who provides a certain degree of idealism in his views. Despite Dickinson’s opposition to some of Emerson’s ideas, his influence can be seen in her writings. Dickinson’s work, however, transcended transcendentalism due to her lack of idealism (or idealisation). There is no law of compensation in nature, according to several

Dickinson's speakers, and they doubt whether consciousness may transcend the body. Emerson drew circles where Dickinson drew circumferences, and she created fluid poetics and nimble premises through the edge of her circumference. Although Emerson was aware of contingency (or the workings of chance) and its effects, he kept his viewpoint largely outside of its (direct) influence. Unlike Emerson's antagonism with grief, Dickinson's poems embraced all sensorial experiences, bringing her closer to tragic readings of happiness, such as Nietzsche's, whose views were also influenced by Emerson.

In their approaches to happiness, most Dickinson's speakers and Nietzsche's Zarathustra restored chance's privileged position. These chances redeemed brought to light the power and value of existence without a higher purpose. Both Dickinson and Nietzsche became mortally divine by exposing the fallacy of divinity, as well as becoming makers and creators, by grounding their perspectives on the world's lack of meaning and, as a result, creating the meaning themselves. As the most abysmal thought, Nietzsche's Eternal Return is analogous to Dickinson's Eternal Now. In both cases, the present existence – not a better one – serves as the basis for evaluating life and represents the source of happiness. By praising mortality, contingency, and finitude, both writers ceased to hope for a better future or consider a better happiness. They concentrated on the moment and created an eternity in time rooted in the present, in which the life that was and is seemed worthy of eternal return. Pain and suffering were not an impediment to happiness because a lifetime is rich and full of multiple experiences (or all possible experiences). In Dickinson's cosmology, the Now extends indefinitely, and what makes it sweeter is the knowledge that it will eventually end. For this reason, life on Earth is perceived to be rich and full, whereas eternity appears to be neither worthy nor desirable. Therefore, Dickinson's happiness requires time and finitude to be fully appreciated.

In light of a happiness rooted in chance, Dickinson's ambiguous writings, in form and content, enlarge and produce possibility by fostering indeterminacy, surprise, and wonder. The lack of referents, alternative word choices, dashes, and multiple variants allow her readers to participate in the interpretative process by creating new meanings in any new readings. As happiness provides new chances to venture with each new morning, Dickinson's poems with no

beginnings and no endings provide endless opportunities to think with and about them. Dickinson scholars have recently emphasised the materiality of her poems and have focused on working with her original manuscripts. Unfortunately, many aspects of her manuscripts were overlooked in this study. Her self-preserved fascicles, for example, demonstrate connections between groups of poems that are not addressed here. Furthermore, many references to real-life incidents and events in her poems were withheld. Nonetheless, the fact that there is so much to discover in her poetic philosophy – in relation to Dickinson's vast body of work and its infinite interpretations – demonstrates how her poetry is as relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century.

Scholarly research on the concept of happiness could be expanded in relation to Dickinson's work and its emphasis on possibility. Although the majority of this research is based on historical and philosophical interpretations of happiness, it would be interesting to hypothesise about the relationship between poetry as a distinctive aesthetic and literary standpoint towards happiness as a judgement. Besides, Dickinson's work may assist in identifying the characteristics of the concept of happiness today or during the twentieth century. For instance, it would be interesting to examine contemporary sociological and philosophical theories of happiness in relation to Dickinson's views, because her writings cover such a wide range of topics that they could aid in gaining a better understanding of any of the conditions associated with happiness today. One of those themes could be love and how her writings dealt with it. Certainly, she wondered in one of her letters whether there was more to life than Love and Death. One can argue that both themes would be interesting approaches to explore in relation to happiness.

Given that the modern concept of happiness derives from religious and sentimental representations, Dickinson's writings are extremely relevant today since they emphasise the importance of the present, the need to be oneself, the value of mortality and finitude, the need to avoid external validation and outer expectation, and the miraculousness of life itself. From a literary standpoint, this study provides the first methodical approach to the relationship between Dickinson's writings and happiness as a theme (rather than as an experience). Bringing the tragic tradition into dialogue with Dickinson reveals new ways of thinking about her pain and grief as intrinsically valuable within her life. Her poetic

endeavour enabled her to try to make her own life and live under her own (fluid) premises. Most Dickinson's personae found her surroundings both stimulating and perilous in the face of death because they were aware that their daily routines could end anytime. Although Dickinson's writings are rooted in her historical, literary, religious, and philosophical milieu, her poems have a timeless quality that transcends her own mortality. As a result, Dickinson's work can be examined from an interdisciplinary standpoint, and it can inform contexts far removed from her own.

Nowadays, the appraisal of categorical classification, general trends taken as absolute truths, external validation as a measure of success, and the expectation of certain outcomes, forces individuals to give up their present. Dickinson's work – by emphasising the value of the unknown as well as the possibilities and options that uncertainty offers – proposes a rethinking of taken for granted interpretations of happiness, placing the individual in the omitted centre of this endeavour. Instead of limiting happiness to an emotional experience, Dickinson's writings offer a narrative approach to it in which the rationality of emotions and the multiplicity of processes become entangled in an open-ended web of perceptions. The more one understands how malleable human perception is and how much it can be expanded and constrained by ordinary choices and actions (as well as language uses), the more possibilities appear. According to Dickinson, the more one knows, the more one realises how much more there is to learn and how much will never be known or revealed. While mystery prevails, Dickinson's writings will continue to open new perspectives on how to live a valuable life, as well as how to apply and create strategies that are appropriate and convenient for each individual (without forgetting that those strategies may be suitable today but not tomorrow). She treasured time because she knew it was limited and scarce. If classical accounts frequently regard happiness as a near-miracle, Dickinson declares that life and existence were miracles in and of themselves. Most importantly, she celebrated the life that Now is, as well as love, care, and affection. By living on her own terms, her mind was far from being reclusive, as she was well aware of, and connected to, the world around her. Dickinson's complete integrity of life and work, body and mind, pleasure and pain, finitude and eternity, coherence and contradiction, enabled her to put her own poetic

philosophy into practice and to lead by example in the way she thought was best for her. Emily Dickinson took her chances in her approach to happiness as a possibility –

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