

‘Tell All the Truth but Tell it Slant—’ The Riddle of Emily Dickinson

by

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Stuart Hall's Theory of Framework of Knowledge

Encoding

According to Stuart Hall's theory, to "encode" a message means to manipulate language and possibly visual elements into a piece of media so that it conveys an intended message to its audience. According to Hall, encoding is the first of two "determinate" moments, where "the structure employs a code and yields a "message" (Hall 130). For example, in the production of a political commercial, the producer purposefully uses manipulative words, lighting, camera angles, particular actors, colors, music, etc. in the process of encoding their message. The determinate moment is the act of this initial encoding.

Framework of Knowledge

Hall's theory of the "structure," or "framework of knowledge," means the set of experiences, the culture, and the society of a person that determines why they would encode or decode the message as they do. Hall explains a determinate moment as the point when something is concretely encoded or decoded. Encoding and decoding are related in that they are based on the same message, but they work individually in that an encoded message will not necessarily successfully translate to the receiver. Frameworks of knowledge effect how one person encodes and another decodes a message, and because people all possess different frameworks of knowledge, they can decode the message in numerous ways. According to Hall, "encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message" (Hall 136). Socioeconomic circumstances, class, race, gender, religion, and other factors shape a person's framework of knowledge, permits them to decipher, or decode, a

political commercial in various ways. While one cannot guarantee that the receiver will decode the message as it was intended, the initial encoded message limits how the message can be decoded or interpreted.

Decoding

Once a viewer receives the message in its discourse form (if it is transmitted through language) that they can see as “meaningful”—or something interpretable using a framework of knowledge—they decode it. The viewer’s framework of knowledge influences how they decode the message, and this might differ from how the sender of the message encoded it or meant for the viewer to decode it. As Hall notes, “The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between encoder-producer and decoder-receiver” (Hall 131). Hall’s idea of the “relations of equivalence” refers to the gaps in understanding and frameworks of knowledge between an encoder and decoder which leads to “distortions” or “misunderstandings.” A lack of comprehension between encoder and decoder results in an unsuccessful decoding of the original message.

According to Hall, the moment of decoding is also the second of the two determinate moments. While encoding serves as the first determinate moment, the second occurs when a message is decoded by the receiver. After a message is decoded, it is “applied to practice,” meaning it affects the ways in which a message becomes encoded and decoded in the future, shifting commonly-accepted knowledge and meaning. Hall explains “the ‘message’, via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices” (Hall 130). At this second determinate

moment, the receiver uses this once-hidden message and applies it to practice. Now that the message is decoded in a particular way by the receiver, it contributes to the receiver's framework of knowledge. Messages are always encoded with the intention of pushing a specific idea, as stated before, they "satisfy a 'need' or [are] put to a 'use'" (Hall 130). No matter how one decodes the intended message, it becomes involved in larger social practices, whether one agrees or not with the decoding. If a political commercial employs dark lighting and crude, targeted nicknames, to encode that a candidate possesses malicious intentions and should not receive one's vote, the receiver could decode this message in numerous, but limited, ways. For an example, one might agree with the intended message. Or, in contrast one might recognize the propaganda encoded within the commercial and consciously deconstruct the codes in an oppositional way. No matter how the message is decoded, it is related to the initial encoded message, but not identical. A decoded message stems from an initial message than is encoded, but is in significant part determined by the frameworks of knowledge of the viewer.

Riddles

Riddles in their general sense "compare[e] an object to another entirely different object...the description must contain some discordant detail to put the hearer on his guard and suggest the correct answer" (Taylor 129). As defined by notable riddle-solver, Archer Taylor, a riddle is made up of assorted metaphors that confuse the "hearer," prompting them to come up with an answer that would add the necessary context or detail to metaphors, easing the hearer's confusion. Someone who listens to and then in turn answers the riddler is referred to as the "hearer." Another writer, Roger D. Abrahams, specifies this definition, stating that the metaphors

within the riddles must also be “culturally relevant,” in order for the hearer to decode the answer the riddler, or the person speaking the riddle, intends (182). To properly engage an audience of using a riddle, the riddler must use metaphors that are commonly-understood and digestible within the majority of the audience’s framework of knowledge, to people of a certain time period and general overlapping experiences (large-scale news events or elections). Emily writes numerous poems that are classified by scholars and critics as “riddle poems,” in which she utilizes the metaphorical and incomplete qualities of the riddle form as ways to both discuss and avoid discussing something.

Abraham's also argues that another characteristic of a riddle is the riddler’s literary control over the metaphorical elements provided in the riddle. He writes that “when a riddler questions, whether the audience knows the answer or not, he is demonstrating a certain control over the focal points of the of the environment or crucial transactions or interactions of the community” (182). When the riddler presents a riddle, they are demonstrating a precise assertion of the “focal points” of the community. The riddler inherently has a certain power over the hearer because they are asking a question that is designed with the purpose to confuse the hearer. Emily, who in this context acts as riddler, has the tendency to confuse and subvert power within her correspondences and poems. For example, in her correspondence with sister-in-law Susan “Susie” Gilbert Dickinson, Emily gives over all power to Susie, telling her “only want to write to me, only sometimes sigh that you are far from me, and that will do.” In this dynamic, Emily begs for Susie to do as little as sigh at the thought of their distance, and that will ease her; Susie holds the power of either easing her mind or not. Though within the dynamic of the letter, Susie retains power, Emily is the one who dictates it. As riddler, Emily subverts power as a way to dictate

order within the riddle. The reader of the letter between the two is the hearer, attempting to decode the answer as to what Emily intends by this.

Taylor notes another element that is present in riddles, and will prove to be useful when looking at Emily's riddle poems: "The true riddle may also contain an introductory and a concluding element...the introductory element may describe a scene...a summons to guess the riddle...the concluding element usually refers to the difficulty of the riddle and promises a reward for success or threatens a penalty for failure" (129). The first sentence or line, in this case, of the riddle is an indication that something is going to expand into different metaphors before it becomes precise. For example, Emily begins her poem "A Something in a Summer's day," indicating that there is "something" about a summer's day that is going to be described using metaphors. The concluding sentence or line indicates to the hearer that it is time to determine what, precisely, the riddle is alluding to. Emily ends this poem by stating "something" is related to the "heaven unexpected" arriving into the poem.

Emily's Personae

Besides her immediate family and a few choice friends, Emily maintained her relationships and social standing within Amherst society through letter correspondences to a variety of people. Varying, depending on who she is writing to, Emily adopts a certain manner of writing and attitude. In a collection of letters addressed to an unnamed "Master," known as the Master letters, as well as in many of her letters to her editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily adopts personae that subvert power within these relationships will still dominating over the syntax and form of the letters themselves.

Master Letters

There is a small collection of letters from Emily where she regards herself as “Daisy,” addressed to an unnamed “Master.” Within these letters, Emily writes with a desire to appease, bashful, worried attitude and syntax, attributing these qualities to her persona of “Daisy.” While there are many theories as to who, biographically, Master is, we are not concerned with uncovering this mystery. Because it is a common question and concern to many Dickinson scholars as to who the Master is, the history of how these letters are dealt with has shifted the Master letters collection from examples of poetic love letters to a riddle that asks to be solved. The collection of Master letters adheres to certain criteria that categorizes these works as riddles in prose or letter form. Writer Roger D. Abrahams writes “Riddles rely on the basic metaphors of cultural existence (182). Emily, therefore, moves past portraying herself as weak and needy, and is placed in the position of riddler who undertakes a persona in order to convey the answer, as to who the Master is, and what their relationship is. She writes “Would Daisy disappoint you—no—she would’nt—Sir—it were comfort forever—just to look in your face, while you looked in mine—then I could play in the woods till Dark—till you take me where Sundown cannot find us—and the true keep coming—till the town is full” (qt. in Johnson 375). In this excerpt from one of the Master letters, Emily uses riddling metaphors such as playing “in the woods till Dark,” until Master brings Daisy to a place where there is no “Dark,” where “Sundown cannot find” them, until the “true” keep coming until “the town is full.” There are multiple metaphors within this larger metaphor: where or what is this place where there is no “Sundown,” and who are “the true”? In the power dynamic of this correspondence, Emily, as Daisy, gives over all power to “Master,” leaving herself outwardly vulnerable and needing of Master. Master has the ability to

stop Sundown, and bring Daisy to a metaphorical place that is filled to the brim with “the true.” Daisy expresses eager desire to not disappoint, giving Master the power to dictate whether or not Daisy has disappointed. Daisy also refers to herself in third person, prior to referring to herself as “I,” making it known that the writer is writing as Daisy and not Emily. This distinction of Daisy as not inherently Emily solidifies the theory that Daisy is a character, a persona, that is undertaken to convey something.

Further, if Emily is considered the riddler of these letters, Daisy, by extension, is also the riddler. While Master holds the power between the two characters of Daisy and Master, Daisy rules over the ideas and syntax of the letters. Emily begins the second Master letter by writing “If you saw a bullet hit a Bird--and he told you he was’nt shot--you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word” (qt. In Johnson 375). This sentiment sets the stage for how the Master letters should be read, or how the ideas presented in them should be interpreted. In this metaphor, the “Bird” is Daisy, and by extension, Emily, and “you” is Master, the presumed reader. Emily’s first letter to the Master opens “I am ill, but grieving more that you are ill, I make my stronger hand work long eno’ to tell you” (qt. in Johnson 333). Emily, writing in the persona of Daisy, positions herself as ill but is “courteous” in that her injury does not matter as much as Master’s, much like the Bird that “a bullet it...and told you he was’nt shot.” This bullet-hit bird metaphor suggests how these letters should be read, that Master should keep in mind that the “Bird,” and Daisy, belittle themselves and their injures/needs for his sake. The metaphors and syntax within the Master letters dictates the power structure of the relationship between Emily and Master. While Master holds the power within this dynamic, it is set up so and only made possible by Daisy, and in turn, Emily.

Abrahams also writes “Riddles are devices which are used to demonstrate control over words and objects and ideas that are central to the life of the riddling group” (182). When Abrahams refers to the “riddling group,” he means those who are involved in uncovering the answer to the riddle provided. The Master letters, “may have been” discovered in a “locked box under,” which “Lavina destroyed upon discovery.” (Franklin 5). Regardless of who these letters were intended for and for what purpose, they were placed under literal lock and key, meant to be a secret in her life; no one was meant to see the Master letters besides Emily and the person to whom she is addressing. Therefore, the riddling group that Abrahams refers to, in this context, would be only Emily and the recipient, meaning the metaphors and ideas she discusses only must make sense to her and “Master.” All criticism arises outside of the riddling group, and outside of the necessary framework of knowledge.

Biographers and critics are concerned with who the Master is, and have treated this collection of letters as a riddle that asks to be solved for this. Critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Master is Judge Otis P. Lord, while biographer Richard Sewall argues that it was Samuel Bowles, while writer William Shurr argues that it was Reverend Charles Wadsworth (Smith 99). All of these writers, and any except Emily and her supposed Master, are outside of the riddling group, therefore they lack the necessary framework of knowledge to decode these letters for their intended meanings.

Meek in Higginson Letters

Emily, as detailed earlier, first reaches out to Higginson in an attempt to recruit him as her “Preceptor,” or poetic teacher. In her letters to him, Emily takes on the meek, dainty, religiously-traditional persona of a “student,” juxtaposing her placement of power to Higginson within this

relationship as her “Preceptor.” Just as in the power dynamic of her correspondence with Master, Emily is again portraying herself in an inferior manner as a means of subverting power. Here, however, Emily holds the power of possessing the framework of knowledge, and is able to correctly decode her letters; a task that Higginson cannot complete because of his different framework of knowledge.

Within lines that make her appear as small, there is often a double meaning; one in which Emily defies traditional rules and inferiority. In her second letter to him, she writes “[Father] buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind... You speak of Mr Whitman—I never read his Book—but was told that he was disgraceful—” (qt. in Johnson 404). On the surface, Dickinson’s tone and word choice suggest that she respects her father’s demands and she does not read “disgraceful” literature because it would appear unladylike or improper to do. Her father does not want her to read certain books because they would “joggle the Mind,” or corrupt her mind with ideas that contradict the traditionalist, Christian-based ideology. Even when she discusses an author as “disgraceful” as Whitman, Dickinson refers to him as the formal “Mr Whitman,” to demonstrate some amount of respect, which would have otherwise appear as improper as reading his work.

Using the surrounding sentences, and with specific word choice and organization in mind, Dickinson encodes that she does the opposite of what the above quotation suggests. Within this same letter, Dickinson states that her family is “religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their “Father” (qt. in Johnson 404). By using the same word for both her actual father and the “Eclipse,” or God that she says her family prays to, the encoded message suggests that she does not obey a “Father,” whether god, or her biological

father, and she will read whatever she pleases. Though her letters to Higginson are not technically riddles because they are not metaphoric, there is an intended targeted group that is able to decode these lines with multiple meanings for the correct reading, and the sole person in this group is Emily herself. She is deliberately encoding these things about herself in a way that is outside of Higginson's framework of knowledge. Emily is both invoking the persona of inferior scholar by sharing these statements about her life, and is also controlling the power dynamic within the relationship by acting as "Preceptor" towards Higginson, hinting at and suggesting how he should read her letters.

Framework of Knowledge in the Smaller Scale

During a class discussion, one can see the strong influence that a person's framework of knowledge has over how one interprets or decodes information. The class was provided with background information regarding Dickinson and Susie's relationship. Half the class received sources that illustrated the familial tensions that resulted in the two sister-in-laws to dislike each other, and the other half received sources that explained their dramatic and passionate letters to each other were a result of bubbling homoerotic desires. All of the students then read the same two letters between Dickinson and Susie. The students, despite all reading the same letters, the class was split in how they interpreted these letters, and every one of the students was convinced they were right. The idea at work is that the two sets of different background information alters the students' framework of knowledge of the situation between Dickinson and Susie. Then, when the students read the letters, they are doing so with a particular framework of knowledge, and

therefore interpret the letters differently based on the background information they received, and all of the students believed they were correct.

Familial Tensions

One of the sets of background information explained that Dickinson and Susie were often at odds with each other, which explains the dramatic and questionable letters between the two: “In 1856 Susan married Austin, moving the wedding at the last minute from Amherst to Geneva, New York. Susan was vague about her reasons for the change, which seems to have kept the Dickinson family from attending the ceremony. There are no letters to Susan from 1856” (Hart ##). Critic Ellen Louise Hart credits Susie as maliciously changing the date of her and Austin’s wedding with the intention of not telling the Dickinson family, making it so they would not be there. The half of the class that received this kind of background context went on to read the letters between Susie and Dickinson in a very suspicious, negative way. One line of a letter Dickinson wrote to Susie states that Dickinson had “been hard at work this morning, and I ought to be working now—but cannot deny myself the luxury of a minute or two with you” (qt. in Johnson 175). The students’ framework of knowledge made it so the class decoded this line to mean that Dickinson adopted a facetious, sarcastic, passive aggressive tone when she suggests that she does not actually have the time to, or want to, see Susie.

Homoerotic Desires

The other set of provided background information detailed that the reason for their strangely affectionate and overly passionate letters were because of homoerotic feelings between the Dickinson and Susie. It was explained that many critics and biographers refer to the letters between Dickinson and Susie as “love letters,” suggesting that it would do Dickinson a

disservice to confine her to the ideals of heteronormativity posthumously: “These letters speak a language of love and desire, but critics have overlooked this aspect of the later letters to Susan because the allusions are condensed, because the playful tone in some of the letters can be misleading, and because many critics who assume a heterocentric point of view are led away from readings that recognize homoerotic passion” (Hart 253). This allowed for the students to adopt a totally different framework of knowledge than the other half; these students now approach the letters differently, resulting in an open-minded reading where they did not question Dickinson or her motives. This half of the class interpreted lines such as “Oh my darling one, how long you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting and looking, and calling for you” to be heartfelt and genuine, as opposed to sarcastic (qt. in Johnson 175).

Riddled Relationship: Emily and Higginson

Emily Seeks a “Preceptor” Through Encoding

In order to break down the related but individual moments of encoding and decoding, one can view this process as a correspondence through letter-writing; the encoder serves as the letter-writer, while the decoder serves as the recipient. Emily, a masterful poet and writer, writes encoded letters, with poems included, back and forth to editor, and later friend, Thomas Higginson. The correspondence between the two leads to an intense friendship that lasts for the rest of her life. Dickinson initiated the correspondence because, in her letters to him, she encodes that she wants him to become her “Preceptor,” or teacher. Because he is a professional editor and frequent publisher in *Atlantic Monthly*, Emily looks for his thoughts on her poems, when she asks “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive” (qt. in Johnson 403), and “Could

you tell me how to grow—or is it un conveyed—like Melody—or Witchcraft?” (qt. in Johnson 404). She encodes her letters within a framework of knowledge that Higginson does not possess. Emily possesses a framework of knowledge derived from having a well-rounded education and private tutoring from a young age. These experiences suggested to her the benefits from working with some sort of teacher.

Higginson Decodes Dickinson's Letters

Higginson is an ordained minister, publisher, and has studied at both Harvard and the Harvard Divinity School. At the time of his correspondence with Dickinson, he is a frequent publisher for Atlantic Monthly and editor. His framework of knowledge is one that suggests more of a traditional, structured educational experiences. In the former quote, she asks Higginson if he is too busy to deem her poetry “alive,” meaning entertaining and curious. In the latter line, she asks if he can concretely tell her how to improve her poetry or not.

Upon reading the poems attached to the first couple of letters he receives from Emily, Higginson suggests that she “delay to publish,” [making] clear his reluctance to see her enter print,” and suggesting that her poems were “produced absolutely without the thought of publication” (qt. in Eberwein, MacKenzie 44). Within his framework of knowledge, as a professional publisher who thinks his correspondent, Emily, hopes to publish, he decodes Emily’s questions to mean that she seeks editorial advice on her poetry. One can see how Emily and Higginson’s lack of “symmetry” contributes to Higginson’s unsuccessful decoding.

From Higginson’s editorial, traditional poetic standpoint, Dickinson’s poems are not fit for publication. Emily, however, does not want an editor to perfect her work, in terms of grammar, line breaks, or word choice. Emily “dismisses his early charges that her verse is

‘spasmodic’ and ‘uncontrolled’ (Eberwein, MacKenzie 46). She does not want to alter her poems, and she does not want an editor to make them more palatable to a wider audience her published work could attract. She seeks a “Preceptor,” someone to teach and mentor her, without the imposition of traditional poetry rules. Although Higginson can not, at first, correctly decode her message, he eventually overcome his misunderstanding and becomes her Preceptor, providing her with a correspondence that inspires her, outside the confines of traditional form and expectations for publication.

Higginson Navigates His Misunderstanding

After Emily’s death, in Higginson’s 1891 Atlantic Monthly account of his correspondence with her, he writes that he “simply accepted her confidences, giving as much as I could of what might interest her in return” (qt. in Eberwein, MacKenzie 45). By “confidences,” Higginson means Emily’s poetry and the intriguing letters he receives from her. She does not seek editorial advice on how to revise her poems, and she actively disapproves of the opinions that Higginson gives her: “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish’ ...If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her” (qt. in Johnson 408), meaning that she will not change her poems so the public can consume them more comfortably. Higginson suggests delaying publication because, as a traditional editor, he sees flaws in her work. As a Preceptor, however, Higginson accepts her letters and poems, but instead of giving her edits, he states that he writes back with whatever content he thinks may “interest her.”

Higginson Echoes Emily’s Encoding

One cannot know how Dickinson’s letters were received because no record of a return letter exist. Eight years after the beginning of their correspondence, and after many invitations

for him to come to Amherst, Massachusetts, Higginson finally goes to meet Emily. While he visits her, he writes a letter to his wife about his experience: “[Emily] came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said ‘These are my introduction’ in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice” (qt. in Johnson 473). In fear of his wife’s jealousy towards Dickinson and their relationship, he writes that Emily is “childlike,” and meek, and has almost a ghostlike presence, choosing perpetuating and echoing the meek and milquetoast persona that Emily encodes about herself in her initial letters to him.

Higginson’s re-encoding in this letter to his wife, an echo of Emily’s own earlier-encoded message, demonstrates that through the intense progression of their friendship, he successfully decodes her initial message. Higginson learns to decode Emily’s writing more accurately as they become closer; Higginson also encodes his messages parallel to how Dickinson encodes. He re-encodes the persona she put forth in her letters to him, portraying femininity and meekness when the reality is Dickinson adopts these traits in order to undermine Higginson’s apparent power within their correspondence.

Framework of Knowledge in the Larger Scale

The Problem With the Biographer

As one can see from the experiment detailed above, one’s framework of knowledge deeply affects how they decode information. The influence of one’s framework of knowledge extends beyond simple classroom discussions. Every single person possesses an individualized framework of knowledge, meaning that every person approaches interpretation from their own unique perspective. This implicit bias shifts the way one analyzes, and we must keep this in mind when reading and analyzing different biographies written about Emily Dickinson. The different

frameworks of knowledge of each biographer effects how they approach framing and writing about Emily's life. The "problem" of the biographer, therefore, is their implicit bias and framework of knowledge inevitably influencing their decodings.

Another "problem" of the biographer is the tendency to frame biography as the quest to uncover something previously unknown, the quest to uncovering a correct answer to the riddle of who Emily was and what her life was like. "The riddle's stock in trade is both to lead and mislead; the delight of the audience is to be so misled that when the answer is announced one has a sudden sense of the world order discovered or rediscovered" (Abrahams 178). It is in this sense that Emily's life is that of a riddle, or at least approached this way by biographers. In her letters and poems, Emily purposely misleads her intended reader as a way to subvert power within the context of her poetic themes and correspondences. The reader, or in this context, the biographer, finds themselves so misled that they feel the need to provide "the answer" that will make the riddle complete, discovering something previously concealed. The biographer is misled, delighting themselves with discovering something they were supposedly misled, or led away from. Due to every person's differing framework of knowledge, biographers conclude with different answers or discoveries. Richard B. Sewall suggests that the "answer" lies within the Dickinson family's Puritan heritage, and Martha Dickinson-Bianchi shares personal accounts of her "Aunt Emily," implying the "the answer" can be found through this route. Regarding Emily, everything is riddled with misleadings: her poems, letters, and to those with differing frameworks of knowledge, her life. There are many riddles to be "solved," and every "answer" or "discovery" that is put forth by a biographer lends itself to a greater dialogue between frameworks of knowledge, rather than establishing "the correct answer," as Taylor says.

Richard B. Sewall, "The Life of Emily Dickinson"

Biographer Richard B. Sewall opens his two-volume biography of Emily, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, by warning the reader of the "problem" of the biographer, while ironically, taking a stance as a problematic biographer. He writes "the biographer must mediate between [Emily] and the world to which she refused so much, fill out the hints she dropped, be discursive where she was elliptical; give her a lineage, a background and foreground; a believable family, home, and friends; an education, culture, and (above all) a vocation" (Sewall 11). Sewall is framing this biography of a real-life person, Emily, as hypothetical. He attempts to solidify any uncertainties about Emily's life in order to figure out how Emily, whose family history shows no poetic genius, emerged as "The Poet" she is now considered (Sewall 706). While in this way he cannot decode exactly how Emily becomes the poet she does, it is interesting interpretation as to how it may have occurred. Sewall, in this way, acts as the riddler, "serving as harmonizer, a teacher" (Abrahams 182). By positioning himself as the "mediator" between Emily and "the world," Sewall is assuming he has no bias toward either parties, but instead positions himself as the teacher of Emily's life, solely responsible for piecing her life together in a harmonizing fashion. Sewall does not speak for Emily, but instead provides plausible interpretations of her life events and relationships, creating an argument that others can build off of by either crediting or discrediting him. Where Emily "was elliptical," and did not reveal much information as to what she intended, Sewall, as riddler more than biographer, attempts to fill in the blanks, and he does so without questioning his position in relation to Emily; he does not possess the same framework of knowledge as Emily. Despite this, Sewall is attempting to uncover the riddle of Emily's life, and solve how she obtained her poetic skills and stature in history as "The Poet."

The *Life of Emily Dickinson*, published in 1974, nearly a century since Dickinson's death, assumes the position as timeless and without framework of knowledge. Sewall writes of Emily's life as "unreal" and "Mythic" (Sewall 11, 706), discussing his interpretations of her life: "The Puritan lived in constant, fearful awareness of his soul, maintained continual vigilance, and took his spiritual measurement daily, even hourly...Dickinson's need for a strict account may not have been entirely theological, but the fierce introspection and the diary keeping of the Puritans surely had a bearing on her mental habits" (Sewall 23). The "problem" of the biographer, in this case, appears to be the taking of agency away from the subject, discussing it at a distance, in an attempt to understand the presumed origin of Emily's poetic impulse; Sewall's work brings to mind the idea that perhaps the problem of biography in the first place is that it does not, in this case, come from a firsthand account, or from someone with a similar framework of knowledge. Sewall argues from his individual framework of knowledge that Emily's habits are derived from Puritanism, crediting her family's heritage as the reason for the "Poet" and "figurative" person in history.

The "problem," of writing from a different framework of knowledge as Emily, though, does not necessarily mean that Sewall is going about decoding Emily's life incorrectly. Since no one possesses her framework of knowledge, meaningful analysis about her life and poetic origin can still be made and considered without being held as the universal "correct" answer to it. Sewall argues that Emily's meticulous accounts of her days through poetry "were her way of keeping the long transaction of constant review" (Sewall 23) that Puritans were known for keeping. Sewall's decoding of the influence of Puritanism on Emily's life, and it being the reason why she did certain things, is an attempt to "solve" Emily, to figure out how she emerged into

“The Poet.” By writing about what may have occurred, Sewall is opening a discussion for a deeper look into Emily’s poetic process

Martha Dickinson-Bianchi, “Emily Dickinson: Face to Face”

Martha Dickinson-Bianchi, daughter of Emily’s older brother Austin and his wife Susie, Emily’s direct niece, was the only surviving Dickinson at the time of this publication. Dickinson-Bianchi prefaces her novel by stating “Inevitably to one of her own family, Emily Dickinson must appear at angles different from any possible to those who never knew her. Yet again it must be reiterated to the literal-minded that her extravaganza, inconsistency, and contradiction—so often a stumbling block to them—are but part of her whimsical and imaginative reality” (xxi). Dickinson-Bianchi, from the beginning, is aware of the idea that those who did not experience Emily the way she did could not possibly understand what it really was like, as they have drastically different frameworks of knowledge from Emily. She also, however, positions herself as having the same, or similar, framework of knowledge as her Aunt Emily despite their different lived experiences and ways of perceiving the world and the Dickinson relationships around them. Dickinson-Bianchi recounts times those outside of the immediate Dickinson family would attempt to pry their way into the inner-workings of Emily’s life. Dickinson-Bianchi does not serve as the riddler, but someone who is forced into this position because of her similar, yet not entirely the same, framework of knowledge as Emily. The society of Amherst was “puzzled” as to why Emily “wore white year around” (Dickinson-Bianchi 37). Dickinson-Bianchi recalls that “various fantastic tales were circulated about her. Sometimes such stories made us laugh; more often they made us hate the stupidity that invented them. She puzzled those people she was not just like, simply because she was not like everybody else of that day and place” (37). This

memory from Dickinson-Bianchi's childhood serves as a smaller-scale example of the ways in which Emily's life is picked apart for reason and correct answers. Emily's act of wearing white all year and her fellow Amherst community members' question of why she does this acts as a riddle, placing Emily as the unintentional riddler, and the people of Amherst as the riddling group that demands the correct answer to the question.

Dickinson-Bianchi emphasizes the drastically varying frameworks of knowledge of the people of Amherst, saying the "stories" they conjured up were so off-base that they had the potential to either humorous, or angering. When Dickinson-Bianchi uses the term "us," she is referring to those in Emily's immediate family including her parents, siblings, and sibling's children. The reason they as a group find these stories so ridiculous is because their framework of knowledge is more similar to that of Emily's than anyone else. The people of Amherst, while feel a divide between their town and the inner-workings of the Dickinson family, felt their frameworks of knowledge had the authority, perhaps due to closeness in proximity and time, to attempt to decode the correct answer as to why Emily wears white all year.

Closeness in time and space, however, has little influence over framework of knowledge, especially in this context. Dickinson-Bianchi goes on to explain that "the only person who never thought of it as a mystery was Emily herself, as she moved about her father's house and garden. They could no more approach her than they could make the moon come down and sit on their parlor sofas" (37)! Those within the riddling group creating these incorrect decodings never, firsthand, experienced Emily, nonetheless spoke with her. While the people of Amherst and Dickinson-Bianchi's frameworks of knowledge are forged in the same place geographically, their experiences of observing Emily from a distance versus being within the immediate Dickinson

family could not be more different, or result in more different frameworks of knowledge. The intended, correct answer as to why Emily wore white exists only in her framework of knowledge, and within the framework of knowledge on the Dickinson property, a place that is as unreachable for the public as Emily's interiority. This riddle, which is not considered a riddle within Emily's framework of knowledge, is therefore unsolvable to someone outside of this framework. It was not intended to be a riddle by Emily, who is unwillingly placed in the position of riddler in a situation she did not create. The riddling group has set out to solve a riddle that they enacted, and do not have the framework of knowledge to solve realistically.

Dialogue Between the Texts

It is commonly known that Emily and her sister-in-law Susie had a relationship that impacted the both of them in their lives. How exactly they influenced each other is what biographers intend on solving. Dickinson-Bianchi discusses the relationship between her mother, Sue, and Emily, emphasizing the suggestion that Susie and Austin's three children, whom Dickinson-Bianchi is one of, brought the larger Dickinson family together. "If his Aunt Lavinia went to a neighbor's for an evening chat," Dickinson-Bianchi writes of her brother, "Ned was usually to be found in front of the fire with Aunt Emily perched on the edge of a stiff-backed chair" (169). According to her accounts of life with her Aunt Emily, Emily and Lavinia assisted in parental roles when Susie and Austin were away, acting as important caretakers from Dickinson-Bianchi's upbringing. Her interpretation attributes the Dickinson family's success to Susie coming into their lives, and her devotion to the Dickinson's. Richard Sewall responds to Dickinson-Bianchi's account, calling her book a "zeal to defend her mother," saying she "suppressed evidence or altered dates" in order to uphold her mother, Susie's, reputation.

Dickinson-Bianchi's framework of knowledge places her in an interesting position as biographer of her Aunt's life. Her interpretation of Emily's life is framed around how she is viewed within her immediate family, influenced by who Emily is to her personally.

The chapter in which Dickinson-Bianchi discusses the dynamics of the Dickinson family is entitled "The Beloved Household." Specifying in the name, in this chapter she writes about the household as a machine with many moving parts, an account that focuses on the family as a unit, as she remembers it. She does not discuss any struggles in the relationship between her mother and her Aunt Emily because of her especially biased framework of knowledge. Sewall, meanwhile, has a chapter entitled "Susan and Emily," discussing the shifting relationship of the two. While their relationship was strong and caring, as Dickinson-Bianchi writes about, Sewall discusses periods where this is not the case. "For two years after the wedding [of Susie and Austin], there were no letters" (199). Further Sewall, discusses "a few general truths" about Emily, such as "on the night of Gilbert's death Emily had come to Sue and Austin's house for the first time in '15 years'" (198). Whether this is due to Emily's qualms with leaving the Dickinson property, or because of those inhabiting the house, Sewall details parts of Emily's life that Dickinson-Bianchi does not touch on. They are approaching the idea of biography from two very different frameworks of knowledge, therefore inherently shifting, one way or another, the narrative they put forth.

A Look at Riddle Poems

"A Something in a Summer's Day..."

This poem asserts itself as a riddle poem more apparently than others by referring to the subject in question as an undefined “something.” Emily then uses each stanza to separately list scenarios in which this “something” lives or shows itself. The opening stanza reads:

“A something in a summer’s day,
As slow her flambeaux burn away,
Which solemnizes me.”

One of the most curious aspects of this poem is the unnamed “Her” character. It is unclear, or intentionally ambiguous, as to who or what “her” is. There seem to be two options so far: “her” could be as to how Emily is referring the “summer’s day,” or the slow-burning flambeaux, or torch. Let us consider the former; the “something” that Emily is referring to is the feminine summer’s day, and the flambeaux is the sun. Immediately, the reader finds themselves parallel to the solemnized “me” character, the only grounded character in the poem. I want to note here that we start off small, from the single perspective of the “I” character.

Biographically, the use of the female pronoun and her power over the “me” character suggests possible homoerotic tones, though Emily writes to Higginson, “it does not mean—me—but a supposed person” (qt in Johnson 412). Even if the “her” is not referring to anyone specific, biographically speaking, it is not surprising that Emily allows a female character to hold apparent power over the speaker. It was a common trope within her collection of letters to keep her correspondents, especially men, at an arm’s length, deliberately playing games with her word choice and syntax so the recipients do not know where they truly stand within this dynamic. In this context, the feminine sun has power over the “I,” and there are also numerous times throughout Emily’s large body of work that reference the sun as religious and being paralleled

with the traditional Christian deity. Within the context of this poem, the sun is feminine rather than the masculine god that her family would have worshipped, further suggesting homoerotic tones between these two characters through the imbalanced power dynamic of this relationship.

“A something in a summer’s noon,—

An azure depth, a wordless tune,

Transcending ecstasy.”

The descriptor “something” comes back in this stanza as a placeholder for the following imagery that cannot be fully and properly described, asking to be solved by the hearer of the riddle. The em dash at the end of the first line of the stanza indicates that the “something” can best be described as the “azure depth,” “wordless tune,” and also as “transcending ecstasy.” The description of the “azure depth,” or blue like a cloudless sky, indicates that this could be the “something” that is being referred to, but we have not yet gotten to the end of the poem. We are transported from a concrete solemnization of the “me” character, to ungrounded imagery of a tune, paired with the idea of transcending an ecstatic feeling. This opens up the scope poem; we are no longer one person next to another, but we are left in a quasi-spiritual, non-physical realm. There is no concrete place we arrive at after we are transcended from the “something” in a summer’s noon, therefore we are left floating, surrounded by semi-connected images of what this “something” could be and how it affects the speaker of the poem.

“And still within a summer’s night

A something so transporting bright,

I clap my hands to see;”

Again we are given the vague descriptor of “something,” but here it takes a semi-physical form of being so literally bright that the speaker must “clap [her] hands to see” it. This “something” itself seems to transcend the restrictions of what is considered to be a “summer’s day.” It transcends even the physical realm and influences how the speaker sees the imagery given in the poem. This is now the first time in the poem that the “something” takes on a form other than drawing a transient feeling out of the speaker. Since the speaker states that this happens during a “summer’s night,” the possibility of this “something” being the sun is ruled out. Here, we now know that this “something” is more than a feeling, but a literal thing that is hindering the speaker’s sight. The poem suggests that “something” refers to one, concrete, namable object. The speaker could be referencing the moon, but the word “still” hints that this is the same “something” that is pervading throughout the poem thus far. Whatever it is, is, and has been, bright.

“Then veil my too inspecting face,
Lest such a subtle, shimmering grace
Flutter too far from me.”

Now, this light that was once referred to as “something,” is directly interacting with the speaker and vice versa. The “I” character and the floating imagery are now connected to each other. Not only does the speaker need to shield her face so that she is not blinded by this light, but the speaker worries that the light will be scared off if it sees the speaker “inspecting” too much. “Something” takes on another form, as being personified as the “her” character from the first stanza as a way to show the dynamics of this partnership. Rather than transcending and being described as a floating “wordless tune,” this “something” now partakes in the physical

action of being able to “flutter away,” if it feels too watched. The speaker places a barrier of a “veil” in between herself and the “something” that is bright. However, the first line of this stanza has a double meaning of the speaker veiling her face from the light for it being too bright, or from the fear that her face is “too inspecting,” and does not want the “grace” to “flutter” too far from her.

“The wizard-fingers never rest,
The purple brook within the breast
Still chafes its narrow bed;”

Here, a new image of “wizard-fingers” is introduced. Perhaps the riddler is suggesting the indescribable “something” is so mystic and unable to fit into a taxonomy that it must be created by a wizard, someone who has a large amount of power not only over how it functions in the world, but also over the riddler, who has power in her own right over the poem. We now see layers of power within this poem: the “wizard-fingers” have power over the imagery within the poem, and the “I” character has power over the poem as a whole, it would not exist without this “I.”

This is the stanza where the imagery begins to unravel; it does not only exist within the confines of this poem, but it leaves the speaker in awe of something. The riddler seems to be alluding to the “purple brook” of the horizon at sunrise or sunset, and how it also does not fit into the constrained space it is allotted. The “wizard-fingers never rest,” and the horizon “still” chafes within the space it is given for a sunset or sunrise. These things do not cease; instead, they permeate and are cyclical, as the poem suggests by using the word “still,” and by describing a sunrise/sunset, which is literally a continuous cycle.

“Still rears the East her amber flag,
 Guides still the sun along the crag
 His caravan of red,”

The stanza starts off on “still,” which suggests that it is directly related to the previous stanzas and their imagery. The imagery becomes more clear here, that the East is being personified as having wizard-like abilities by the sheer fact that the sunrise/sunset of a summer’s day exists. The riddler is alluding to Greek mythology as well, specifically Apollo and his sun-chariot.

In this stanza, we are taken even more out of the speaker’s perspective, and we are no longer parallel with the perspective of the “me” speaker. There are numerous vague pronouns within this stanza. The “her” and “his” could both be referring to the East and her now-amber sky. But, the masculine “His caravan of red,” could be again referring to the masculine Christian God and his domain. The poem also suggests that the “wizard-fingers” govern that the “amber flag” “rears the East, and “guides...the sun along the crag.” However, following the argument that the feminine “wizard-fingers” from the previous stanza have power over the imagery of this stanza, the “his” pronoun in the last line raises questions of continuity and the use of pronouns.

“Like flowers that heard the tale of dews,
 But never deemed the dripping prize
 Awaited their low brows;”

We are lead from firmament to fin within the span of these two previous stanzas, which is also not an uncommon space to inhabit for Emily. We are lead from the mysterious workings of the sky and span of a summer’s day, back down to the physical ground of the flowers; from the

vague and mystical idea of a wizard-orchestrator to the known, grounded idea of flowers needing their sustenance. The word “never,” regarding the flowers waiting for the dew, echoes the repeated word “still” from the beginning half of the poem, and the endless cyclical nature of this poem.

“Or bees, that thought the summer’s name

Some rumor of delirium

No summer could for them;”

These two previous stanzas reveal things that do not reap the benefits of their inherent surroundings. The flowers have heard the age-old tale of being watered, the busy-calm-delirious summer in which bees can, unbothered, perform their job. All of the natural-world elements so far pervade cyclically not just throughout the poem, but through the expanse of time, and they are unchanging still, upholding the cycle of imagery within the poem.

“Or Arctic creature, dimly stirred

By tropic hint,—some travelled bird

Imported to the wood;”

Here, an image is painted of a specific event of a tropical bird being imported to the arctic. To the Arctic creatures, the bird is not very distinct from its surroundings, but the reader of the poem realizes that this is an unusual occurrence. Perhaps this echoes back to the idea of the cyclical, pervading, and constant theme that the ways of nature do not change over time. An Arctic creature is barely stirred within this poem, like it has always been and will be.

“Or wind’s bright signal to the ear,

Making that homely and severe,

Contented, known, before”

Again, the “something” that is being described takes form as audible to the speaker. Rather than a wordless tune, it is a “signal to the ear;” a signal specifically for the speaker, once again aligning the reader with the perspective of the “me” character within the poem. The wind is creating a “bright signal” that alerts the ear. We are again shown the image of “something” assuming a certain brightness that affects the speaker. The speaker finds both calmness and severity in this unimaginable sound. In the last line of this stanza we are reminded of the cyclical, constant theme coursing through the poem. This “signal to the ear” evokes a feeling of contentedness and of having experienced it “before.”

“The heaven unexpected came,
To lives that thought their worshipping
A too presumptuous psalm.”

The break in stanza confuses the meaning of this imagery. Grammatically, the word “before” from the previous stanza, as it lies after a comma, could be referring to the moments before the “heaven unexpected came” in the present stanza. It can be read that the events within the poem occur before the “heaven unexpected came,” but can also be read as being shaken from content to something new, juxtaposing the two once again, much like a tropical bird in a polar climate. It can be read that all of the aforementioned scenarios are that of “heaven,” and those who “thought their worshipping a too presumptuous psalm.”

The word that has the ability to change the meaning in this stanza is the pronoun “their,” and what image this it is referring to. “Their” could either be referring to the worshippers or the heaven; the heaven came to the worshippers to congratulate those who thought their own prayers

to exceed the bounds of a traditional prayer, or heaven, or rather death, thrust itself unto the worshippers who dared to pray beyond what they were allowed to by the Christian Church.

Critic Analysis

Because of the ambiguous nature of a riddle, critics have a wide selection of “correct” possible answers as to what the “something” is that Emily could be referring to. Through close-reading this riddle poem, I came to the conclusion that the repetition of the words “something” and “still” create an ever-growing way of describing this “something” that cannot be succinctly described. Critic Joan Dayan decodes these repetitions as “progressing through graduated imprecisions.” Dayan argues that this riddle poem “sets up intensity but leads nowhere” (Dayan 421). To Dayan, the intensity leads nowhere because the riddle is not explicitly solved. Instead, the poem concludes with a multiple-meaning image of encountering heaven because of “too presumptuous psalms,” acting as conclusion to the poem, and also a standalone riddle in itself. Dayan’s claim of the poem “leading nowhere” is a result of there being no explicit answer to the riddle, not realizing that goal is fruitless due to the inherent, vague nature of a riddle. What is overlooked is that the form of the riddle makes it so there are inherently multiple ways answers as to what the “something” is. Though because there is no concrete answer, this does not mean that this riddle poem leads “nowhere;” the riddler leads the hearer to the end of the riddle.

Lecturer Hazha Salih Hassan takes a different approach by attempting to uncover what the “something” is by studying how the color purple functions in different religious contexts, within this and other of Emily’s poems. In Christianity, the religion Emily grew up surrounded by, the color purple is “representative is pride...the color of Advent and Lent...the spirit of penitence and mourning” (Hassan 481). The color purple is an unexpected entry-point into the

center of the poem, but Hassan uses this religious context as a way to situate the riddler's references to purple in a biographical argument.

Hassan cites other of Emily's poems that use the color purple to portray something, saying that she uses purple to indicate "preciousness," "peace," "deep connection to the spiritual realm," and "magnificence of nature" (487). Using religious and biographical context, Dayan centers her analysis of this riddle poem around the significance of the purple which was mentioned only once. Hassan decodes that "'The purple brook' of this poem is a vein in which blood is passing; it indicates continuity, persistence, spiritual persistence. For Dickinson this certain summer's day provides her permanent spiritual relieve that never have a rest. It is just like a brook, which is full of activity and a source of life for her" (Hassan 491). While Hassan does not provide an explicit answer to the riddle Emily puts forth, she argues how the imagery works biographically, and therefore for the poem, though Emily tells Higginson that the "I" in her poetry does not necessarily reference herself. The purple brook within the poem is a brook of the horizon in the sky, Hassan argues, and metaphysical brook of life, spirituality pervading in nature.

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant..."

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind —”

The first line of this poem summarizes how to utilize the riddle form. If Emily wants to “Tell all the truth” to those around her, she must “tell it slant,” or tell it indirectly by burying it into a riddle. These are also instructions on how to riddle, to first suggest there is a “truth” to be uncovered, or un-slanted. Along with suggesting there is something to be uncovered, the riddler then provides what Abrahams calls “threats of discontinuity” (182), or what Taylor refers to as “discordant details” or “contradictions” (129). All of these terms refer to the inconsistencies in and between metaphoric images within a riddle that must be explained, or solved, in order for the images provided to make sense. In her letters to Higginson, Emily encodes hints that suggest to Higginson that there is something between the lines of her words. Unlike the previous poem, “A Something in a Summer’s Day,” the above poem is not divided into stanzas; it is unclear which, if any, lines are enjambed, and should be read as connected to the next line. Within this poem, the discordant details are emphasized by the lack of stanza breaks, which were present in the previous riddle poem,

The next line, “Success in Circuit lies,” perhaps is instruction on how to “success[fully]” reveal the “truth,” by reading and rereading the poem, in a continuous circuit, in different ways. It is unclear to the reader as to how to read this poem, and the form emphasizes this issue. Each image is not clearly separated from the next, creating a continuous circuit of imagery for the reader to work through until “the correct answer” is solved (Taylor 129). The following line, “Too bright for our infirm Delight” refers to the “success” that is found within the circuitry of a

riddle poem, suggesting that the correct decoding of the riddle is too, metaphorically, much for “us” to take. It is unclear to the reader whether the “truth,” “success” of revealing the truth, or the surprising aspect of the revelation of the truth is what is “too bright” for the hearer, or person attempting to solve the riddle. Taylor explains that a riddle “consists of two descriptions of an object, one figurative and one literal, and confuses the hearer who endeavors to identify an object described in conflicting ways” (130). Though in typical Emily fashion, these two terms are not as distinctly-defined within the riddle as expected. The “Truth” is described as something that is literally told “slant[ed],” and physically “too bright” for the reader if revealed suddenly. Its surprising nature is juxtaposed with the another description that is found in the following lines, “As lightning to the Children eased/With explanation kind.” In this description, the lightning is shown as literally bright, much like how the “Truth” is described. The brightness of the lightning is literal, referring to actual lightning, which also serves as a figurative description of the bright truth. Emily, as the riddler, then references the “truth’s superb surprise,” and the surprise of lightning to children, when stating “The Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind— .” Just as lightning is foreign and must be explained to children in order to ease them, the “truth” must be revealed with explanation, as not to “blind.” These two descriptions of one object, one literal and one figurative, result in confusing the hearer, suggesting to return back to the beginning of the riddle in an attempt to solve what truth is being slanted, or how one must slant their own truth. The “surprise” can be referential to how the poem suggests a riddle should be solved; the surprise, then, is that of the riddle cycling back to its own beginning.

The riddler of this poem does not reveal the answer, but instructs on potential ways to reveal it. This is reminiscent of the ways Emily interacts with her correspondents, by suggesting there is more to be decoded, but does not instruct the reader on how to decode further. In Emily and Higginson's correspondence, the terms of "Preceptor" and "student" and how they are traditionally used and perceived are turned on their head, therefore riddling these terms. It is unclear as to who the Preceptor is, and who the student is throughout their correspondence, depending on what part of their relationship is being studied. Emily, as it is previously explained, asks Higginson to be her "Preceptor," therefore positioning herself as a student on the surface. There are times, though, where Emily uses the terms "Preceptor" and "friend" interchangeably, suggesting that these terms have no purpose beyond taxonomical, that there is no shift in power between the use of the two terms. "Preceptor," as it is traditionally used, suggests that Higginson has the power of knowledge and experience over Emily, while "friend" suggests more of an equal power balance. Higginson, an editor and frequent publisher, has the technical knowledge of traditional grammatical and syntactical rules, whereas Emily is the amateur poet who follows her own individual literary and poetic rules. Though the traditional definitions of these terms mean very little in the context of Emily's work. On the surface, Higginson is encoded as "Preceptor" because of his occupational background, though this is not the role he plays in his relationship with Emily. She writes to him, "I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue—" (qt in Johnson 408), then proceeds to not change her works to fit his editorial suggestion. She values his opinion of her work, and takes it as just that, opinion and not fact. Though, according to the terms she has drawn out, she is supposed to embody the role of "student," she still gives herself with the same

editorial power as Higginson, riddling the terms of Preceptor and student. The latter part of the above quote, stating the “tears” from trying to thank Higginson would “block” the tongue suggests that even attempting to change her writing to fit Higginson’s suggestions would result in the inability to write.

The cyclical nature of this riddle poem does not reveal what it hints at, allowing the reader to take on that task, assuming the role of student. This is also what unfolds in the correspondence between Emily and Higginson. The above poem can even be read as instructions on how to read the letters sent by Emily to Higginson, to understand that there is a truth that is slanted, and that it must “dazzle gradually,” or be revealed slowly. To tell the reader there is already a truth that is slanted suggests there is more to be decoded from these letters and poems. Though the truth can be un-slanted by the reader, it is done so by utilizing one’s own framework of knowledge, and no one has Emily’s specific one. Higginson navigates his misunderstandings of Emily’s works throughout the rest of his life by engaging circuit-like with Emily, by sending and receiving letters that he did not necessarily understand, but were significant within their relationship. He undertakes the titles of “Preceptor” and “friend” without fully understand exactly what Emily intends when she uses them. Higginson has the title of Preceptor, but is made to act in the role of a student when conversing with Emily, as she continuously teaches him how to read her work. The way in which Emily uses the terms Preceptor and student is a riddle in itself, as it asks for the reader to determine the roles of each, even if they do not coincide with the traditional definitions of the words.

The goal, then, is not to solve for who these terms refer to, but to discuss the ways in which they are used, and the many reasons why that might be important. Dickinson-Bianchi

recounts numerous memories of her Aunt being the subject of gossip, attempting to be solved by fellow community-members. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “The Sphinx,” discusses a being, the Sphinx, that is asking for the hearer of the poem to discover and tell its “secret” or “answer.” He writes that the Sphinx “always it asketh, asketh;/And each answer is a lie,” presenting the Sphinx as riddler, paralleled to Emily in this context, where any “answer” comes from a framework of knowledge that is different from the god-like Sphinx, and each answer that is put forth as being the correct one is “a lie,” or not the intended, encoded answer. In both Emily’s riddles and “The Sphinx,” the steps to decoding the answer involve a continuous cycle. Emerson writes “And under pain, pleasure—/Under pleasure, pain lies/Love works at the center.” There is an answer “at the center,” but the hearer of the riddle within this poem is instructed to work through a cycle of pain and pleasure, where one is eternally met with the other. Just as with Emily, there is a suggestion that there is a correct, universal answer, but the only way to decode this answer is to exhaust the cyclical nature of the riddle; the answer to the riddle can only be found within the cyclical nature of itself, therefore, it is the riddle itself.

Perhaps Emily enacts riddling, presenting questions that can only be answered with the same question, so that she remains the center of discussions. There is a “Truth” or answer, but not only one universal answer to be found. Instead, the suggestion that there is a decodable answer leads to an endless cycle of discussion as to what that answer could be. Emerson concludes his poem by revealing the answer: “Who telleth one of my meanings,/Is master of all I am.” There is a continuous cycle of meaning, and the answer one decodes from their framework of knowledge is the “one” meaning and only one of the “meanings” at the same time. Each answer is correct within a certain framework of knowledge, making the hearer the “master” of all

the riddle, but only within the hearer's own framework. Just because an answer is not the universal meaning does not suggest that it is insignificant or meaningless; it is simply one of the multiple meanings in the cycle of riddling that can be decoded.

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