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Charles Darwin, Emily Dickinson and the Evolution of Happiness

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This article explores the interconnected perspectives of Charles Darwin and Emily Dickinson on happiness, offering a comprehensive analysis of their respective contributions to the understanding of this elusive concept. It contextualises Darwin's and Dickinson's views within the broader historiography of happiness, juxtaposing them with religious depictions, particularly the Christianisation of the idea. Unlike religious interpretations, Darwin's discoveries challenged providential design, asserting chance as a governing principle in natural processes. To be more precise, his groundbreaking evolutionary theory, particularly outlined in *On The Origin of Species*, significantly alter traditional notions of happiness by emphasising the role of emotional and instinctive drives. Besides, this article underscores the impact of Darwin's ideas on Dickinson's scepticism toward religious interpretations of happiness, evident in the alignment of her poetic expressions with the challenges to faith during Darwin's transformative era. By means of examining several of Dickinson's poems and letters in conjunction with Darwin's autobiography, it establishes a dialogue between the two figures, revealing Dickinson's nuanced engagement with Darwinian concepts. The exploration extends then to Dickinson's approach to chance, as reflected in her poetic exploration of nature's workings. Likewise, it highlights Darwin's impact on Dickinson's worldview, suggesting that she valued chance as a gift, aligning with his view that chance is indispensable to the origin of new species. Overall, it offers a rich examination of the dynamic interplay between Dickinson's poetic vision and Darwin's scientific insights in shaping the evolving concept of happiness in the nineteenth-century.

Charles Darwin, Emily Dickinson and the Evolution of Happiness

Irene Lopez Sanchez

> Some writers indeed are so much impressed with the amount of suffering in the world [...] According to my judgement happiness decidedly prevails, though this would be very difficult to prove.
>
> Charles Darwin[1]

> Accept my timid happiness. No Joy can be in vain, but adds to some bright total, whose Dwelling is unknown -.
>
> Emily Dickinson[2]

Reflecting shifts in philosophical thought, literary values, and scientific understanding, the idea of happiness in Western culture has undergone numerous changes over the last two millennia. To reconsider the role of happiness in nineteenth-century Western thought, the juxtaposition of Charles Darwin's theories and Emily Dickinson's poetics illuminates how scientific and literary discourses can inform and enrich one another, fostering a deeper appreciation of both their works and the broader context in which they were created. Although Dickinson's scientific imagination has been thoroughly studied by scholars in the past, reading Dickinson's Darwinian evolutionary explorations in her poems and letters through the concept of happiness offers new avenues of investigation. Therefore, it is critical to reclassify Darwin and Dickinson as foundational figures in the history of the concept of happiness, highlighting their contributions to how individuals may lead a life worth living.

To understand the conditions in which Darwin's and Dickinson's views arose, it is necessary to briefly outline some of the changes that are at the heart of happiness's development. 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). In religious interpretations, happiness was viewed as episodic and subsumed under the domain of affection, whereas in classical tradition (pre- and post-Socratic), happiness was regarded as an all-encompassing concept comprising the totality of existence.[3]

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[1] Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809–1882: With the Original Omissions Restored*, edited by Nora Barlow (London: Collins, 1958), p. 88.

[2] Emily Dickinson, Letter 528, vol.2, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1958). Hereafter cited according to the editor's numbering system.

[3] See Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010).

Unlike classical views, the Judeo-Christian tradition considered earthly life as a trial – with happiness envisioned as a reward in heaven – and overlooked present existence. As a result, the temporality of happiness shifted from the present in classical notions to the future in religious ones. Although these two interpretations of happiness may differed considerably, they have one thing in common: in both cases, happiness was understood as the inherent purpose of a person's life (or afterlife) and only attainable by 'a happy few', since it was nearly a miracle. On the contrary, during the Enlightenment it was assumed that happiness should be a right for all. Nonetheless, the failure to define the ways in which this right could be attained during the eighteenth century resulted in an ambiguous reception of the concept in the nineteenth century. By then, the concept of happiness had engendered hostility among its adherents as it had lost its privileged position.[4]

In light of this evolution, this article investigates the transatlantic convergence of perspectives on the concept of happiness between two prominent nineteenth-century figures: Charles Darwin and Emily Dickinson, placing their insights within the larger historical debate on the topic. To be more precise, Darwin's scientific discoveries challenged widespread Christian interpretations of happiness, arguing that chance, rather than design, was the fundamental factor driving natural processes. His seminal work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), not only altered scientific paradigms but also redefined traditional conceptions of happiness, emphasising the significance of emotional and instinctive drives in human experience. Drawing on the idea that Darwin's insights provide a useful lens for exploring Dickinson's poetics of happiness, this article examines some of her poems and letter fragments alongside Darwin's autobiography, demonstrating her nuanced engagement with Darwinian concepts. Through their exploration of chance, agency, and fulfilment, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of happiness and the ongoing pursuit for meaning in a world that is constantly evolving.

Charles Darwin, more than any other scientist, cast doubt on providential design by proving chance to be a governing principal in nature. Moreover, 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 activities.[5] According to Darrin McMahon, Darwin's 'instinctive emotions bear directly on our social interactions' and 'are bound up closely

[4] See Darrin McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

[5] McMahon, p. 410.

with happiness'; for this reason, 'human beings must struggle with the beast within'.[6] Following the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, a revolution in evolutionary theory occurred that swiftly expanded to all domains of knowledge, with Darwin emerging as its central figure. 'Darwinism', as Joan Kirkby points out, 'impacted every field of human inquiry: biology, botany, geology, philosophy, theology, psychology, and anthropology'.[7]

On top of that, 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 Samuel T. Coleridge, John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Michel de Montaigne, Adam Smith, and Immanuel Kant that can be found in his notes.[8] Darwin's lifetime project is summarised in his autobiography, which is considered a landmark 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 chance over design, which respectively convey his dismissal of the theological representation of happiness as a reward in heaven.

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst (Massachusetts) in 1830, at the soon to be centre of a fervent debate between creationists and evolutionary supporters. As Bert J. Loewenberg asserts, 'New England was the main battleground' of this debate between 1859 and 1873, and 'New Englanders either by birth or residence were among the most distinguished contributors to the controversy'.[9] 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*.[10] In Kirkby's words, 'while Darwinism (the idea of evolution) challenged the intellectual basis of the religious system, it also revivified the religious spirit in the form of speculative theology'.[11] For instance, when *The Descent of Man* was published in 1871, Dickinson wrote to her friend Elizabeth Holland: 'why the Thief ingredient accompanies all Sweetness Darwin does not tell us'.[12]

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[6] Ibid., p. 413.

[7] Joan Kirkby, '[W]e thought Darwin had thrown "the Redeemer" away: Darwinizing with Emily Dickinson', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 19 (2010), p. 7.

[8] McMahon, p. 412.

[9] Bert J. Loewenberg, 'The Controversy over Evolution in New England, 1859–1873', *New England Quarterly*, 8 (1935), p. 234.

[10] Patrick J. Keane, *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), p. 13.

[11] Kirkby, p. 7.

[12] L359.

In this case, 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, Darwin perceived the world, using Dickinson's formulation, as a 'bright total', and embraced the Solonian maxim of being unable to judge his own existence while still alive, as evidenced by his autobiography.[13]

Darwin declared 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'.[14] This statement is closely related to Solon's views since happiness 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. 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 instance, 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'.[15] 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'.[16]

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 shown in a letter she addressed to her friend Judge Otis P. Lord in 1882, in which the poet stated: 'but we [Dickinson and her sister Lavinia] thought Darwin had thrown "the Redeemer" away'.[17] 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.

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[13] Solon was a Greek lawmaker and poet who lived in the sixth century BC. Solon's proverb 'call no one happy until death' emphasises that the idea of happiness, as an all-encompassing notion, cannot be judged or determined until the moment of death. This notion is engrained in Greek tragic pre-Socratic tradition.

[14] Darwin, p. 21.

[15] Ibid., p. 59.

[16] Ibid., p. 76; p. 85.

[17] L750.

Dickinson was aware of the challenges that Darwin's theories posed to both providential design and 'the tradition of natural theology'.[18] Dickinson, like Darwin, frequently turned to science for explanations as shown in the following poem:

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see -
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency![19]

These verses were sent to her friend and editor Samuel Bowles in 1860. Although religious belief may be considered 'convenient' at times, the speaker suggests that science may be more helpful and appropriate when immediate action is required. Besides, as Paul Crumbley suggests, 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'.[20]

Similar to the notion of faith as 'a fine invention', it is not surprising that some of Dickinson's speakers considered hope also as 'a strange invention', and attempted to define it on numerous occasions by questioning its foundation.[21] 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 -[22]

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[18] Jane D. Eberwein, 'Outgrowing Genesis? Dickinson, Darwin, and the Higher Criticism', in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 48.

[19] Emily Dickinson, Poem 202, vol. 1, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited according to the editor's numbering system.

[20] Paul Crumbley, *Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), p. 35.

[21] Dickinson's speakers challenged the notion of hope in these four poems: 'The service without hope' (F880); 'Could hope inspect her basis' (F1282); 'Hope is a strange invention' (F1424); and 'The way hope builds his house' (F1512). In other poems, though, as in '"Hope" is the thing with feathers' (F314) or 'When I hoped, I recollect' (F493), 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: 'This is the place they hoped before' (F1284) and 'Hope is a subtle glutton' (F1493).

[22] F532.

Dickinson's speaker claims that no one believes in Noah, whose ark reached Mount Ararat. According to Jane D. Eberwein, geological discoveries 'upset findings about Noah's ark, despite continuing efforts of scholars to accommodate scientific evidence to beliefs'.[23] Despite these efforts, miracles were still unlikely to occur as Darwin implied.

Although Dickinson did not likely read Darwin's books (as Eberwein suggests), the poet explicitly incorporated his scientific discoveries into her thought and poetry. On the one hand, Dickinson's careful examination of nature resembled Darwin's meticulous surveying of it.[24] On the other hand, 'the key New England figures' debating Darwin's theories 'were all known to Dickinson either through her family, her schooling, her library or the libraries at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke, or through the pages of the New England periodicals to which the Dickinsons subscribed'.[25] When *On the Origin of Species* was published, for instance, several articles appeared either attacking or honouring Darwin's discoveries. 'At the time, Darwin's work was receiving a warmer reception in America than in Britain', writes Elizabeth Willis, and 'Asa Gray, the great natural historian based at Harvard, was its primary defender'.[26] 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'.[27]

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 -

[23] Eberwein, p. 53.

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

[25] Some of those figures were Edward Hitchcock, Asa Gray, and Chauncey Wright. Kirkby, p. 7.

[26] Elizabeth Willis, 'Dickinson's Species of Narrative', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 18 (2009), p. 25.

[27] Eberwein, p. 56.

To guess it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -
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 -[28]

Given that Dickinson rarely uses periods in her poems, it is worth noting that the first verse declaring that 'This World is not 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 or 'scholars'.

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.[29]

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

[28] F373.

[29] Willis, p. 25.

history'.[30] 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 Dickinson's poem discusses the juxtaposition of chance (or accident) and design in nature's processes:

> 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 -[31]

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'.[32] Therefore, this poem suggests that a

[30] Ibid.

[31] F1668.

[32] Keane, pp. 25–26.

tragic reading of the world is necessary when assessing the circumstances under which fragile and finite beings must dwell. Those characteristics, however, 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.

Regarding the value of chance in pre-Socratic tragic tradition (as shown in Solon's proverb 'call no one happy until death'), or in Jackson Lears' formulation, in 'cultures of chance', Darwin deemed chance 'indispensable' provided that 'minor chance variations' were 'the origin of new species'.[33] Darwin's discoveries called into question that linearity leading to progress, which was emphasised in the Exodus story, since 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'.[34]

This 'surrender to chance' 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'.[35] Like Lears, Maurice S. 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)'.[36] 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 as shown in the poem below:

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

[33] Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 180.

[34] Ibid., p. 183.

[35] Ibid., p. 184.

[36] Maurice S. Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 181.

Eclipses be - predicted -
And Science bows them in -
But do One face us
suddenly -
Jehovah's Watch - is wrong -[37]

'Turning Paley's watchmaker analogy against natural theology', Lee contends, 'Dickinson notes that natural laws can always be undone by sudden anomalies'.[38] In more detail, some of Dickinson's speakers insist – as in her poem 'how many schemes may die in one short afternoon' (F1326) – that infinite plots emerge, create, and recreate as individuals live their lives because 'no amount of experience can master chance'.[39] 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.[40]

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'.[41] For this reason, each individual should create her or his own meaning. Directing one's own life and actions toward an externally determined goal that promises a future reward – as in religious 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

[37] "F427A – Sunset at night is natural" (1862).

[38] 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 'Meeting by accident' (F1578). Lee, p. 195.

[39] Other examples include: 'From cocoon forth a butterfly' (F610) and 'I stepped from plank to plank' (F926). Lee, p. 196.

[40] Darwin, p. 88.

[41] Ibid., p. 92.

this latter gain undoubtedly is the highest pleasure on this earth'.[42] 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. The poet, for instance, 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 -[43]

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 connects 'the Prince Question' to Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy on the meaning of life. This question, to a greater extent, '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'.[44] 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 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, since loving 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 is this letter to her beloved sister-in-law Susan, in which the poet expresses her delight – in a Shakespearean tone – at 'the opportunity to serve those who

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[42] Ibid., p. 94.

[43] L865.

[44] Páraic M. Finnerty, '"Stratford on Avon – Accept us All:" Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kent, 2000), p. 253.

are mine, and to soften the least asperity in the path which ne'er "ran smooth"'.[45]

Like Darwin, the poet considered 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!'.[46] By loving anew, by being affectionate to others, individuals can gain this affection from others, which is the highest pleasure on this earth. In another letter to Elizabeth Holland, Dickinson wrote, 'pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world *in*sane, 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'.[47] According to Wendy 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'.[48] 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. Moreover, there is a specific feature emphasised at the end of Darwin's autobiography on which Dickinson may have also 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.[49]

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 her friend T. W. 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?'.[50]

In conclusion, from the pre-Socratic emphasis on chance to the post-Enlightenment assertion of happiness as a universal right, the concept of happiness has

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[45] H L4. Martha N. Smith, Ellen L. Hart, Lara Vetter, and Marta Werner, eds., *Dickinson Electronic Archives* <https://archive.emilydickinson.org/> [accessed 9 February 2024].

[46] H L22.

[47] L185.

[48] Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich* (the University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 162.

[49] Darwin, p. 139. Dickinson's Eternal Now and Nietzsche's Eternal Return 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.

[50] L342A.

evolved significantly throughout Western history, reflecting the dominant ideologies and philosophical currents of the time. The convergence of perspectives between Charles Darwin and Emily Dickinson offers a compelling lens through which to explore this evolution. Darwin's groundbreaking scientific discoveries challenged traditional religious interpretations of happiness, highlighting the role of chance and instinctive drives in human experience. Dickinson, in turn, responded to Darwin's insights with a nuanced engagement in some of her poems and letters, questioning religious interpretations of happiness and embracing the inherent value of earthly existence.

Through her exploration of nature and human experience, Dickinson echoed Darwin's recognition of chance as a fundamental aspect of existence, challenging traditional religious doctrines and affirming the importance of individual autonomy and self-discovery. Likewise, Darwin's scepticism towards providential design and Dickinson's embrace of chance underscore the dynamic interplay between science and literature in shaping the evolving concept of happiness in the nineteenth century. As we continue to grapple with the possibility of happiness – and the impossibility to determine its meaning before death – in the modern era, the dialogue between Darwin's scientific discoveries and Dickinson's poetics remains as relevant and illuminating as ever.

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