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Rebooting Emily: Dickinson in biographical fiction

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Abstract

This thesis examines four biographical novels about Emily Dickinson – *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* by Jerome Charyn, *I Never Came to You in White* by Judith Farr, *Miss Emily* by Nuala O’Connor, and the short story “EDickinsonRepliLuxe” from *Wild Nights!* by Joyce Carol Oates. The thesis will look at what it is that these books do which is biographical, and whether we gain any insight into Dickinson’s life from fictionalising that we did not know before. What are the tools of biographical fiction the authors use, what do they invent, and what image do we get about Dickinson?

First, there will be an introduction of the biographical person Emily Dickinson, definitions of biography and biographical fiction, and a discussion of how these genres relate to Dickinson and these four books. The next four chapters discuss each of the novels before the conclusion sums up the discoveries.

Some discussions include how the genre might influence a reader’s perception of Dickinson as a biographical person, but also her epistolary and lyrical production; how the novels may add to our understanding of the poet’s writings; and motivations for writing a biographical fiction. The originality of this thesis lies partly in its attention to Emily Dickinson as a subject of biographical fiction because very little has been written about this now.

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This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to me -
The simple News that Nature told -
With tender Majesty

Her Message is Committed
To Hands I cannot see -
For love of Her - sweet countrymen -
Judge tenderly - of Me
(Fr 519)¹

¹ This poem, numbered 519, is 'This is my letter to the world' (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Edited by Ralph W. Franklin, 3 vols [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998], I, 527-8): Subsequent references to Dickinson's poems are to this edition, unless stated otherwise, and are cited by poem number and the prefix 'Fr'.

Introduction

This thesis

This fiction is based, with some variation and compression, upon actual events. In the words of Emily Dickinson's poem, I have tried to "Tell all the Truth" about her inner life [...] but I have chosen to do so in the "slant," fictional way that she herself preferred. (Farr 219)

Judith Farr is the author of one out of four biographical novels about Emily Dickinson that this thesis examines. Her statement is interesting because it raises a fairly obvious question: if the book is based on facts, why is there a need to fictionalise? In Dickinson's case, the answer might appear to be that she was a recluse. But more is known about her life than people always realise, not least because of her own letters and from statements made by close friends, relatives and correspondents. Why is it, then, that so many fictions have come out recently about her? And what do they tell us not just about Dickinson, but about their authors and about the genre of biographical fiction itself?

Farr's statement might seem unproblematic proved by the indifference to theory and discussion that this genre seems to induce in the public, whereas this thesis wishes to contribute to a healthy discussion of the genre and its possibilities and challenges. This thesis will only look at biographical novels and the genre in relation to Emily Dickinson, but acknowledges the widespread use in movies and other media.²

The genre includes popular works like *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), *Schindler's List* (1982), *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *Wolf Hall* (2009), and others: in 2017 the Man Booker Prize went to George Saunder's *Lincoln in the Bardo*.³ The blend of biographical facts and fiction is interesting, not least because stating that something is based on truth carries an ethical responsibility – both as author and as reader. It is necessary to be aware when reading such a novel using a biographical person as the starting point of a fictional story.

What are the ethical challenges faces by writers of fiction about historical personalities? To what degree are writers obliged to respect the privacy of these biographical subjects? In one sense, this is a version of a debate that has emerged in Norway after the publications of Vigdis

² For example *The Social Network* (2010), *Kon Tiki* (2012), *Braveheart* (1995), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), and many more.

³ A novel about Abraham Lincoln and his son who died at 12, whom Lincoln visited several times in his crypt.

Hjort's *Arv og miljø* (2016) and her sister Helga's counter novel, *Fri vilje* (2017). *Arv og miljø* tells the story of a family: the conflicts regarding the inheritance of two cabins after the father's death, and experiences of incest. Hjorth's sister wrote what has been called a "revenge novel" to tell what she constitutes as truth. These are mostly living people and calls for a different discussion than ours – so the question is, do we have to respect the rights of people who are long dead and with no living relatives, like Dickinson? As Millicent Todd Bingham asked in *Emily Dickinson: A Revelation*, published in 1954: "In possession of long-concealed crucial facts, should I continue to conceal them? If so, since the Dickinson family is extinct, to what purpose?" (2-3) This thesis attempts to answer these and other questions in relation to how biographical fiction creates a sense of authenticity.

After Michael Cunningham won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Hours* in 1999 the attention to this genre has increased and many discussions have reached the public (like that about *Arv of miljø*) but biographical fictions about long dead people still deserve more attention. Little has been written about biographical fiction about Emily Dickinson, and this thesis makes a contribution in that sense.

Biographical fiction and Emily Dickinson

Many rumours are connected to "The Myth" Emily Dickinson. Many stem from truth but have suffered from decades of "one feather becoming five hens." Her most widely acknowledged biographer, Alfred Habegger, opens the introduction of *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2001), with this clarifying quote:

Any great writer who stands aloof from customs seen as fundamental is certain to be mythologized by posterity. For no one is this truer than Emily Dickinson, whose reclusiveness, originality of mind, and unwillingness to print her work left just the sort of informational gaps that legend thrives on. And yet there is no need to settle for the simplifying icons of her that pass for truth, including the icon of ineluctable mystery. In spite of the gaps, there are enough materials for a solidly documented narrative of her life covering the conditions that shaped her to the inner dynamics of her art and thought. (xi)

Before discussing biography, biographical fiction and the novels, it is necessary to have some basic knowledge about Emily Dickinson. This is so that the discussions in chapter 1-4

can be read from an informed and critical point of view, but also in order to understand more of why this poet in particular has become so popular in recent biographical fiction.

Emily Dickinson

Early life

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born 10 December 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts.⁴ The second child of father Squire Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) and mother Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882), she grew up living a privileged life despite some early economic hardship. Austin (1829-1895), her older brother, and Lavinia “Vinnie” (1833-1899), her younger sister, shared close relationships – the latter even staying a lifelong companion as she neither married nor left home. The three Dickinson children all received a good education – with Emily starting at a common school around five and writing letters at six (Habegger 101). All the children were protected “during spells of sloppy weather and sickness,” and Habegger points out that particularly the eldest daughter was kept much at home and carefully protected, whereas Austin was more often allowed to leave the house for school (97-8). The Dickinson children lived a protected life at home and Habegger points out that their “parents believed in simplicity, systematic planning, steady discipline, and hard work, but the work fell in their own shoulders rather than the children’s and the punishments were less frequent than rewards” (76). Her father went frequently on business trips and many letters are preserved where he amongst other things sent encouragements to keep reading, and instructions to let their mother rest and treat her well (97-9). “One of the fundamental things young Emily grew up taking for granted was that Mother had a great deal of work, was often worn out, and must be spared as much trouble as possible” (Habegger 80). Dickinson absorbed much of her mother’s patterns and it was because of her “illnesses and narrow ways and self-exhausting tendencies, and partly because of the family enterprise of sparing her,” that the poet had to develop what Habegger calls a “precocious independence” (92). She was independent but still struggled with growing up, and among the siblings “it was the one slowly moving toward literary production through a thicket of prohibitions, who had the most trouble growing up. ‘I wish we were children now,’ Emily confessed to Austin in 1853; ‘I wish we were *always* children, how to grow up I don’t know” (Habegger 245).

⁴ The information presented here is widely known and agreed on – for example at the website for The Emily Dickinson Museum, based in her historical home in Main Street, Amherst, and in Alfred Habegger’s *My Wars are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2001).

Parental influence

Both of the poet's parents were deeply affected by their own childhoods and upbringing. Edward Dickinson lived an uncertain economic life because of a father who put mortgages on everything he owned, partly in order to bankroll the growing Amherst College; Emily Norcross grew up in a home where she was the only older child to reach adulthood and did much work in the household of her rich grandfather Joel Norcross (Habegger 21 and 31). This could explain Edward's extreme protectiveness and stern attitude, as well as mother Emily's "fanatical insistence on household order; a melancholy, inexpressive, relatively inelastic spirit" (Habegger 32). Habegger is the first Dickinson biographer to look thoroughly at the upbringing of the poet's parents and to conclude that this inevitably shaped the Homestead household and thereby the children.

Schooling and early writing

In the 1840s the poet went to Amherst Academy, which their grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson was one of the founders of (Habegger 11). Here she met amongst others Abiah Root who was to be an important friend and correspondent for the coming decade. Dickinson's grace and exploration with words is apparent already in letters dated 1842, even though her punctuation was poor:⁵

[T]here was one young man who read a Composition the Subject was think twice before you speak – he was describing the reasons why any one should do so – one was – if a young gentleman – offered a young lady his arm and he had a dog who had no tail and he boarded at the tavern think twice before you speak. Another is if a young gentleman knows a young lady who he thinks nature has formed to perfection let him remember that roses conceal thorns he is the sillyest creature that ever lived I think.
(L3)⁶

Habegger quotes a letter to Austin where Dickinson tells about trouble with the roosters and describes it as:

⁵ Habegger considers this a result of home schooling by Emily Norcross Dickinson who was no great writer (98).

⁶ This letter, numbered 3, was sent to Abiah Root (*Emily Dickinson Selected Letters*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971], 4-6): Subsequent references to Dickinson's letters are to this edition, unless stated otherwise, and are cited by letter number and the prefix 'L'.

[A] striking piece of storytelling, far more detailed and vivid than anything in her parents' many surviving letters. [...] Coming from a child only eleven years old, the letters are altogether extraordinary. The headlong energy of her self-expression; the directness with which she says what is on her mind; the lavishness with which she bestows her attention on the world around her; the innocence of that gaze; the warmth; the constant flicker of humor, of irony; the already well-stocked mind; the colloquialisms and odd mistakes: these varied elements show that the young writer already commands a very great range. (134-5)

Habegger seeks out to prove that even though (letter) writing was an indoor activity many women of Dickinson's class excelled at, few had her natural talent and feeling for words.

Her time at Amherst Academy proved a trying time for the poet: not only did she have long periods of absence due to reasons of health, but in a weak period of the Academy in 1844 all her friends except possibly one transferred to other schools, including Abiah Root (Habegger 148). This too proves an attitude and a trend: "the Dickinsons' real and imaginary fears for Emily's health probably explain why she alone never went to another academy" (Habegger 148), and Dickinson often forged close friendships with people who drifted away – mainly, but not exclusively, female. In later life this continued, and as such is a factor to be considered in fiction about her.

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary

After finishing Amherst Academy, Dickinson's formal education continued at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, just south of Amherst. She left the Dickinson home on West Street⁷ at the end of September 1847 for the only year she would ever spend away from her home and family. Her time at MHFS is often told as one where she was not happy, unable to thrive and longed to return home. Letters show she got homesick and that her enthusiasm faded but also that she enjoyed her time there, excelled academically and felt proud of her achievements (Habegger 195). To Abiah Root she wrote: "Everything is pleasant & happy here & I think I could be no happier at any other school away from home," and "Miss Lyon and all the teachers seem to consult our comfort and happiness in everything they do and you know

⁷ Later known as North Pleasant Street (Habegger 123). In what follows, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary will be referred to as MHFS.

that is pleasant” (L18). Habegger writes that what “Mount Holyoke then chiefly encouraged was not detached critical judgment but intense commitment: to religion, daily lessons, the rules” (92). The 235 girls who attended the same year as Dickinson, all slept, studied, ate and prayed together. They were each given domestic work, both to lower fees but also to make them “genteel women” (Habegger 195). Mount Holyoke did not grant a degree but a diploma, and as most of these girls were destined to be wives and mothers, and not economically independent, they had no need for this qualification. It seems that the experience of boarding school and socialising with other girls were more important than the actual education and therefore the length of it (Smith-Rosenberg 17). Most only stayed for one year, making Dickinson no exception, and this might also explain Edward’s eagerness for his daughters’ educations even though he had fairly chauvinistic opinions otherwise (Habegger 193).

Together with Austin, Root was the main recipient of letters during this year. Eleven letters are preserved, seven for Austin and three for Abiah.⁸ The latter was hesitant to keep up correspondence with Dickinson as shown in this letter dated 29 October 1848, shortly after the poet’s return to Amherst:

Six long months have tried hard to make us strangers, but I love you better than ever notwithstanding the link which bound us in that golden chain is sadly dimmed, I feel more reluctant to lose you from that bright circle, whom I've called *my friends*. I mailed a long letter to you the 1st of March, & patiently have I waited a reply, but none has yet cheered me. (L26)

Abiah would continue to withdraw as she got engaged to be married, and eventually another friend, Susan Gilbert, would fill the void.

In the end, it was just as much the patriarchal power of a man concerned for his daughter’s health that ended her education, as it was her own homesickness. In February 1848 her father decided that she would not return for a second year (Habegger 193). Edward Dickinson’s role in his daughter’s life will become an interesting aspect of the biographical fiction studied in this thesis.

⁸ Letters 16-25.

Adult life in Amherst

Upon Dickinson's return to Amherst from MHFS, she found herself back in a household of "extreme imbalance of power between father and mother" (Habegger 76). This taught her the invaluable lesson of what Habegger calls "becoming one's father rather than one's mother" (210). In February 1850, *The Indicator*, Amherst College's literary monthly, anonymously published a poem by Dickinson (Habegger 236-7). It is the poet's first known publication, and is about women in literature.

In 1855 Edward repurchased the family Homestead lost after Samuel Fowler defaulted on mortgage payments. The Squire had waited for this moment since they had to leave the house his father, Samuel Fowler, built in 1813. This was socially and personally important to him whereas the Dickinson women viewed Pleasant Street as home and were at the beginning not too pleased to move back (Habegger 130). During the latter half of the 1850s Emily Norcross Dickinson became ill, and the poet and her sister Lavinia had more and more responsibilities for her care and the care of the home: this was probably a pragmatic beginning to what became her reclusiveness.

In 1861-4 Dickinson had her most productive period, and underwent at the same time major emotional trauma (Habegger 405 and 406). Sue gave birth to Edward "Ned" 19 June 1861 and was no longer as available to the poet; Samuel Bowles got ill and left for a stay in Europe in 1862; Reverend Charles Wadsworth left for San Francisco – Dickinson was left by all those she valued the most, and her distress is apparent in the poems as well as the Master letter drafts which are from this period. At this time her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson started. In 1864 and 1865 Dickinson spent two extended periods of time in Boston for eye treatment, staying with her aunt and uncle, and cousins Louisa (1842-1919) and Frances (1847-1896) whom she stayed close in touch with through letters. In 1866 her faithful companion Carlo died (L314). Her dog was named after the pointer of St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, one of her favourite novels. This is when the period of her intense reclusion begins – perhaps again as a practical result of not having a dog to take out for walks, and finally a chance to stay indoors to dedicate all her time to poetry and letters. As Habegger puts it, this is an "assured assessment of the basic direction of her social life, which grew in intensity as it decreased in scope" (254).

The protected and somewhat dysfunctional home the three Dickinson children grew up in, made it hard for them to actually grow up when they had to. Habegger continues to argue that this "kind of retardation in growing up was a vital aspect of her poetic vocation" (246) as

her creativity was free to soar, ignorant of the rules adult society lived by. And never forgetting the overprotective father who wanted his daughters to be literate, but not too smart: “He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind” (L261).

Sue

Susan Huntington Gilbert (1830-1913) and her sisters became friends with the Dickinson girls, and after the poet’s return from MHFS, her correspondence with Sue grew. Around 6 February 1852 Dickinson wrote to Sue:

Oh my darling one, how long you wander from me, how weary I grow of waiting and looking and calling for you; sometimes I shut my eyes, and shut my heart towards you, and try hard to forget you because you grieve me so, but you’ll never go away, Oh you never will – say, Susie, promise me again, and I will smile faintly – and take up my little cross again of sad – *sad* separation. (L73)

This looks close to how the poet wrote to Abiah Root: passionately, all-consuming, creatively – in a way that was not uncommon, according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. In her essay “The Female World of Love and Ritual” she looks at several women’s correspondences and find many similarities to what we can see in Dickinson and Sue’s. At the same time as the young women corresponded, Sue and Austin started a courtship that resulted in marriage on 1 July 1856 (Habegger 343). They moved in next door from the Homestead, in the newly built Evergreens.

If the late 19th century and most of the 20th century regarded Dickinson as a recluse who may well have been in love with a married man (the Reverend Charles Wadsworth being one of a number of male candidates), the late twentieth century and twenty-first has raised the possibility that she was in love with her sister-in-law. The evidence of the letters from Dickinson herself do not at all rule out the possibility that she was passionate about Susan. But it does not exclude the possibility that there were other interests either – like Wadsworth, or Susan’s friend Kate Scott Anthon,⁹ or Judge Otis Lord, to whom she drafted a number of amorous and erotic letters. Except that almost all Dickinson scholars insist on Dickinson having

⁹ Rebecca Patterson’s *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1951) was the first to suggest a lesbian attraction for Kate Anthon.

one main love or one sexuality, as far as I know, none has suggested the possibility that she might have been bisexual.

A big part of the Myth Emily Dickinson is Sue. The lesbian partly unrequited love is often seen as important in a one-dimensional discussion about the poet, her sexuality and her poetry. On one hand, a female friendship or love that perhaps also was a poetic workshop;¹⁰ on the other hand, a falling out that was never fully repaired. Merely three hundred feet apart, Dickinson still barely, or at all, “crossed her father’s ground,” even to visit the Evergreens. It is uncertain how much the women met after Sue gave birth to Ned in 1861 but there are many letters and poems that passed between the houses (though there is a long gap in their correspondence that does need to be explained properly). Despite the uncertainties it was Sue who wrote the obituary when the poet died, becoming a participant in creating the Myth that surrounds Dickinson:

As she passed on in life, her sensitive nature shrank from much personal contact with the world, and more and more turned to her own large wealth of individual resources for companionship, sitting thenceforth, as some one said of her, “in the light of her own fire.” Not disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the past two years, not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient of any mental work or social career – her endowments being so exceptional – but the “mesh of her soul,” as Browning calls the body, was too rare, and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work.

[...]

To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formalized faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer. (Hart and Nell Smith 266 and 268)¹¹

A biographer’s influence

For many years the most critically acclaimed Dickinson biography was *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) by Richard Sewall, which tells the story of the poet through chapters about

¹⁰ As argued for by Nell Smith in *Rowing in Eden* (1992), but Habegger points out that the “theory has won adherents but has also met widespread skepticism, if only because induction requires more than one example” (368).

¹¹ Published in the *Springfield Republican* 18 May 1886.

people in her life. Habegger started the work on his biography twenty years later on the grounds that previous biographies “present the poet’s life as an amalgam of separate relationships and correspondences, the basic story of *her* life and work is not laid out” (xv). In Sewall it is also clear how a biographer can influence the readers even though based on apparent facts: the chapter “War Between the Houses” tells the story of the poet, Sue, Austin, and his affair with Mabel Loomis Todd. It portrays the strain Austin’s affair had on the households, and how this influenced all relationships across the houses. Sewall received a great deal of help from Millicent Todd Bingham, Todd’s daughter, and there is no doubt that she influenced his narrative of a decades-long split between Dickinson and Susan, and of Dickinson’s rejection by Sue and support of Austin (though again, the truth is probably more complex). Habegger says that Sewall “ended up absorbing Austin’s perspective on Sue, and more importantly, on Emily’s ‘posing,’ which became one of Sewall’s leading themes. Few things can be so dangerous for biographical objectivity as the sense of privileged access” (456).

Martha Nell Smith, in her *Rowing in Eden* (1992), has been the most vociferous promoter of a mutual and literary relationship between the poet and her sister-in-law, and one of my interests in what follows is the degree to which these writers acknowledge or suppress this relationship.¹² Habegger comments on this way of telling a life as “trying to see Dickinson through a single lens” (xv). A much fairer way to look at Dickinson’s life and sexuality is by accepting that she was passionate and that she loved Sue – perhaps the love of her life – but she also loved other people, including men, and stripping that from her is doing her disservice.

Late life

Maggie Maher

Margaret “Maggie” Maher (1841-1924), the Irish maid, arrived at the Homestead in February 1869 as a successful conclusion to a “long search for steady domestic help” (Habegger 503). This came as a relief to the domestic perfectionist Emily Norcross Dickinson and the poet who no longer had to contribute as much. Born in Tipperary, Ireland, Maggie accompanied her employers, the Boltwoods, to Hartford, Connecticut. It was the death of her father and an accident to her brother-in-law that took her to Amherst and closer to her family where she found what originally was just a temporary job at the Homestead. It quickly turned out that Squire Dickinson “was not about to let this faithful and devoted young servant work for anyone else”

¹² In *A Quiet Passion* (2016), British film-maker Terrence Davies oddly downplays the connection between Dickinson and Sue, while also problematising her relationship with Austin. The only successful lifelong association is with her sister, Lavinia.

(Habegger 503). Maggie slept at the Homestead but spent her time off with her family who lived only a few steps away. Initially she was somewhat resistant to stay on as she “found them kindly enough but their home felt strange to her and she had too much time on her hands: ‘there is one grate trouble that I have not half enough of work so that I must play with the cats to Plase Miss Vinny’” (Habegger 503). Yet she spent thirty years with the Dickinsons as maid, housekeeper and cook. Even though the poet’s “relationship with her deepened and intensified,” Habegger points out the difference of class, and that strong ideas of this and patronage influenced her hardworking life (504).

One of the more interesting critical works of the last decades has been Aife Murray’s *Maid as Muse* (2010), which argues that Dickinson incorporated Maher’s speech rhythms and ways of pronunciation into her poetic meter, rhyme and syntax. “[Genevieve Taggard] was perhaps the first to acknowledge in print that the poet was attuned to servant speech. She wrote in 1930 that ‘Maggie Mahar’s Irish speech pleased Emily’s ear; it had flavour’” (Murray 14-5). But Murray also writes chapters where, in the absence of hard, factual evidence, she imagines Dickinson and Maher having long, almost equal conversations. “Margaret appears to have been a really good match for Emily, as much a soulmate as a servant” (Murray 20). Murray’s work is a kind of hybrid, joining literary criticism with biographical fiction. And it raises a similar question – is it acceptable to invent relationships just because one thinks they might have happened?

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

The first letter to New England minister and man of letters Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) was written 15 April 1862 and opens with the famous line: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” (L260). This was at the beginning of what Habegger terms her “Fighting Years” (1862-5), when the poet was left alone by the three most important people in her life at that time – the new mother Sue, Samuel Bowles and Reverend Charles Wadsworth.¹³ Higginson became the poet’s friend and mentor, and during a correspondence of around 20 years, comprising over 70 letters from her, she managed to include about 100 poems for him to comment on.¹⁴ Obviously her reluctance to publish did not include sending poems to people who encouraged her and believed in her abilities as woman and poet. Higginson met her twice, and at her funeral it was he who read the Emily Brontë poem, “No Coward Soul is Mine.” After her death, his influence made it possible for the publication of *Poems: First series*

¹³ Wadsworth is possibly the Master from the letter drafts, see chapter 2, section “Lesbian love.”

¹⁴ For these numbers see R.W. Franklins *The Poems of Emily Dickinson III*, pp. 1552-3.

in 1890 (Habegger 628). His preface to this first edition is as important as Sue's obituary as, along with Austin and Lavinia, they knew her best. Neither tells the story of a heartbroken victim. Higginson describes Dickinson's "Poetry of Portfolio" – poetry written without the aim of publication which has the advantage of formal and imaginative freedom:

In the case of the present author, there was absolutely no choice in the matter; she must write thus, or not at all. A recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep, and many more years during which her walks were strictly limited to her father's grounds, she habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends; and it was with great difficulty that she was persuaded to print, during her lifetime, three or four poems. (Dickinson, "The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson" 5-6)

According to Mabel Loomis Todd, and Higginson, her first editors, Dickinson's themes were love, time and eternity, death, and nature: her posthumous poems were organised into these categories. Consider what these say about the writer, and what Higginson says about her style:

In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed. In other cases, as in the few poems of shipwreck or of mental conflict, we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. (Higginson and Todd 5-6)

Three men

Apart from Higginson, there were three other important men in Dickinson's life: Charles Wadsworth (1814-1882), Samuel Bowles (1826-1878) and Judge Otis P. Lord (1812-1884). Wadsworth, a famous preacher who she first heard on a trip to Philadelphia in 1855, is known to have visited her twice (once from the west coast, which is quite extraordinary), and after his

death in 1882, she corresponded with his relatives, and referred to him as her “Philadelphia” (L750).

Samuel Bowles was the owner and editor-in-chief of the *Springfield Republican* and a friend of Austin and Sue. Dickinson met him at the Evergreens and thought he looked like an Arabian. She began a correspondence that mainly took place in the years 1861-2 that were particularly difficult to her (Habegger 394-441). He received about 40 poems and was probably one of the last people outside the family who saw Dickinson, at Edward’s funeral in June 1874 (Habegger 627).

Judge Otis P. Lord was an old friend of Edward and took a liking to the poet. She writes in the first known letter to him in about 1878:

I confess that I love him - rejoice that I love him - I thank the maker of Heaven and Earth - that gave him to me - the exultation floods me. I cannot find my channel - the Creek turns Sea - at thought of thee – (L559)

This is evidence of a heterosexual relationship that people who support the theory of Sue and Emily as lovers choose to ignore – and vice versa. Judge Lord wanted to marry his “Jumbo” but she held out, and in 1884 he died of a heart attack. His role as a late male love interest in the poet’s life during her reclusiveness is not to be overlooked.

Mabel Loomis Todd

Emily Dickinson sent so many copies of her poems to other people that it was almost inevitable that it would have been published posthumously, but without Mabel Loomis Todd it might not have happened so quickly. She was Austin’s mistress for thirteen years, and the only other person in addition to the poet that Austin poured out his heart to (Sewall 170). Dickinson and Mabel corresponded, but even though Mabel was at the Homestead during the secret meetings between Mabel and Austin that Vinnie arranged, they never met (Sewall 178). This speaks volumes to the poet’s reclusiveness or her desire not to take sides against Sue, but indicates perhaps also a plan to ensure her legacy by sending poems to Mabel, thereby catching her interest, while never losing it by revealing her face. A plan or not, it worked, and due to Mabel’s tireless work deciphering the poet’s handwriting and typing out the poems, the first poems were published in 1890.

Reluctance to publish

A big question in Dickinson's authorship is why she appears to have been reluctant to publish (apart from the small number that were published anonymously and without her permission during her lifetime).¹⁵ There are many possible factors and theories, but Habegger reminds us of perhaps the biggest one: he draws a line back to the poet's father and points out that neither "his [wife] nor his daughters would be able to ignore his fixed and vehement opinions on ["female virtues"], which go a long way toward explaining the poet's extreme sense of privacy and why publication was such an issue for her" (46). Edward believed in the superiority of men, and that women were meant to be obedient and contribute to the home – which is where they would find husbands (Habegger 48). It is needless to point out the irony of then having two spinster daughters. The tendency in some of the biographical fiction to make Dickinson a rebel in her behaviour ignores the fact that she was a rebel in a different way, writing poetry for her own pleasure, reading the books she liked, writing to men who were publicly important – Lord was a judge, Bowles an influential editor, Higginson a war veteran and respected writer, Wadsworth a noted preacher.

Far from abating, Edward's heated opinions about literary females and staying at home exerted an immensely complicating effect on his daughter's position as a writer of genius. To publish her poems or proclaim her ambition would have been extremely risky acts. Of the many things that conspired to both energize and silence Dickinson, her father's emphatic views were not the least salient. (Habegger 50)

Habegger's final comment is devastating: "He fathered one of the greatest poets but probably never realized it" (Habegger 50).

Biography

M.H. Abrams defines biography as a term that "connotes a relatively full account of a person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the facts of the subject's experiences and activities" (15). It is a basic human instinct to preserve our experiences in different ways – today, through photographs, Facebook postings, blogs and even graffiti. Historically, biography is associated at the beginning with Plutarch who wrote about

¹⁵ See "Poems Published in Emily Dickinson's Lifetime" in R.W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson III* (1531-2).

the lives of famous Greeks and Romans. The New Testament is in many ways a biography of Christ – or four of them. Wordsworth’s *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1850) can be thought of as biography in verse. Hagiography in the Middle Ages told stories about saints and ecclesiastical leaders, not necessarily critical works of literature. In 1791 James Boswell published perhaps the most famous biography ever, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* – creating an expectation that a biographer knew his subject. Yet Boswell received criticism for not writing about Johnson’s whole life, in addition to his bias as friend and admirer. Today we expect the biographer to submerge themselves in their subject, getting to know what they believe is the essence of the person and their life. Encyclopaedia Britannica supports this claim:

One of the oldest forms of literary expression, [biography] seeks to re-create in words the life of a human being – as understood from the historical or personal perspective of the author – by drawing upon all available evidence, including that retained in memory as well as written, oral, and pictorial material. (Kendall)

The genre evolved further with the Bloomsbury Group and Lytton Strachey’s very popular *Eminent Victorians* (1918). He followed up with the equally successful *Queen Victoria* (1921), before publishing what according to Virginia Woolf was, by comparison, a failure – *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928). Woolf explores biography and fiction in her essay *The Art of Biography* (1942), and attributes the “triumphant success” of *Queen Victoria* to the amount of material:

In the first place it is clear that the two Queens present very different problems to their biographer. About Queen Victoria everything was known. Everything she did, almost everything she thought, was a matter of common knowledge. No one has ever been more closely verified and exactly authenticated than Queen Victoria. The biographer could not invent her, because at every moment some document was at hand to check his invention. (“vol VI” 183)

Further, Abrams explores the realms of biography and how it develops towards biographical fiction:

The term psychobiography has come to be applied to the procedure of writing the life of an author [...] which stresses the subject's psychological development, by reference both to external evidence and to evidence in the author's own writings; its procedure is to advert to unconscious and disguised motivations and dynamics in the formation of the author's character, often in accord with a version, or a revision, of the Freudian theory of psychosexual development. (230)

Dickinson has attracted a considerable number of biographies: Sue and Higginson were the first to have something to say about her character and life, but since then there have been many more.¹⁶ Many of these seem to be able to reveal something: on Amazon Griffin Wolff's biography from 1986 is presented such:

Emily Dickinson led a quiet life, treasuring her privacy and eventually giving herself over completely to her art: it was in her poetry that she “deliberately decided to live” and there that she is most clearly revealed to us. Yet until now, no biography of this most enigmatic of American poets has attempted to unravel the intricate relationship between the poet's life and her poetry, between the life of her mind and the voice of her poems. (Amazon; my emphasis)

The problem with biography is precisely this sense of full disclosure. Sir Sidney Lee claimed that the biography is the “truthful transmission of personality” (Woolf, “vol IV” 473). But what constitutes truth? Dickinson scholars read into her lyric and epistolary production as truth, and can get caught up in what they wish to see. As Woolf comments on biographical facts: “these facts are not like the facts of science – once they are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change” (“vol VI” 186), which seems to apply to books about Dickinson.

Biography is influenced by the biographer and the choices he or she makes in the process of research and writing: Lyndall Gordon, for instance, argued that much of Dickinson's life of seclusion was because she was an epileptic. Her proof was that she took medicine given to

¹⁶ John Evangelist Walsh, *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971); Helen McNeil, *Emily Dickinson* (1986); George Frisbie Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (1938); Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive biography* (1955); Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974); Cynthia Griffin Woolf, *Emily Dickinson* (1988); Alfred Habegger, *My War Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2001); Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* (2010).

people with epilepsy – but almost immediately, medical historians pointed out that the medicine was given for all sorts of other things as well, including bad skin. And as we have seen, Aífe Murray writes a book about Dickinson and her Irish maid which includes scenes that she makes up. In other words, the gap between biography and biographical fiction may be less than we think – especially when the subject is long dead.

Biographical fiction

History

In her essay, “The Art of Biography,” Virginia Woolf concludes that “fact and fiction refused to mix. Elizabeth never became real in the sense that Queen Victoria had been real, yet she never became fictitious in the sense that Cleopatra or Falstaff is fictitious” (“vol VI” 184). There is a difference between biography as craft and fiction as art, and these are according to Woolf impossible to fuse – in the end she considers art as the most durable (which rings true if we consider Dickinson’s own production versus her biographies). Woolf claims that fiction and facts cannot be blended because writing fictionally about a real person – with his or her proper name – is impossible. To her, the mere idea of biography rejects fiction.¹⁷ Michael Lackey on the other hand has taken on this literary genre in his book *The American Biographical Novel* (2016) and says it is precisely the opportunity to relate to the characters and novel that makes it believable – fact and fiction are inseparable (29). The “postmodernist shift made the committee understand and appreciate a hybrid aesthetic form such as the biographical novel, which is why we could say that the biographical novel was becoming formally and officially recognized by 1999” (Lackey 29).¹⁸

What we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist’s vision of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person’s life. Put differently, biographical novelists differ from biographers, because, while authors of traditional and fictional biographies seek to represent the life (or a dimension of a life) of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world.
(Lackey 28)

¹⁷ Woolf did however play with the genre in amongst others *Orlando: A biography* (1928), *Flush: A biography* (1933), *Roger Fry: A biography* (1940), and arguably, *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

¹⁸ In 1999 two out of three nominated novels for the Pulitzer Prize were biographical novels: the winner was Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* (1998) about Virginia Woolf (Lackey 28).

This is not entirely true, of course. If a writer of biographical fiction just wanted to “project their own vision of life and the world” they could write fiction. The fact that they write about an historical personality must mean, or might mean, that they feel they understand something about this author that no one else does. And when they write about authors they are uniquely positioned to get into the head of that person because they are authors themselves. The difference from fiction is that they have to persuade readers that they are “right,” in a way – authentic or accurate.

One issue with biographical fiction seems to be how to categorise it. According to Lackey, critics and scholars seem to try to place the biographical fiction in the category of biography, whereas every author he refers to explicitly state that their novel is a work of fiction and should not be misinterpreted as a biography (27): they write a biographical fiction, not fictional biography (24). Herein lies the difference: biographical fictions are first and foremost works of art with an obligation to entertain. Biographical fiction often alerts us to its fictional status, that is also true of these texts that they enact their fictional status in different ways. Joyce Carol Oates opens her most celebrated work of biographical fiction thus:

Blonde is a work of fiction. While many of the characters portrayed here have some counterparts in the life and times of Marilyn Monroe, the characterizations and incidents presented are totally the products of the author’s imagination.

Accordingly, *Blonde* should be read solely as a work of fiction, not as a biography of Marilyn Monroe. (Oates, “Blonde” blurb)¹⁹

Lackey quotes Russell Banks, author of *Cloudsplitter* (1998),²⁰ and says that for him, “authors make a tacit contract with their readers. If a work is called a novel, then that implies one type of contract,” and introduces by that an “implied truth contract” (241). This contract considers to what degree a biographical fiction satisfies readers’ expectations based on a previously accepted truth.

In this thesis I am interested in looking at the degree to which these authors make use of the conventions of biography – for example the biographical subjects, own materials, as well as interviews with friends and family and historical information. What I will be looking for and

¹⁹ All other references to Oates are from the novel *Wild Nights!*

²⁰ A biographical fiction about the abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859), another finalist for the 1999 Pulitzer Prize.

focusing on initially are the kind of things that one expects for biography like letters, diaries, journals – documented sources, in other words. To some extent I am interested in the differences between biography and fiction: Emily Dickinson is obviously dead, as are her family and friends, but it would be fascinating to see to what extent these authors attempt to compensate for these absences by fictionalising information about the poet from family and friends – do they attempt to invent what is normally authentic? The idea that there may be things Dickinson experienced that she did not write down – things that these authors now invent and narrate on our behalf.

Possibilities and challenges

This thesis will look at four Emily Dickinsons, portrayed by Jerome Charyn, Judith Farr, Nuala O'Connor and Joyce Carol Oates. As the poet left much work behind for these authors to interpret, it is necessary to point out how Dickinson, with the exception of around 11 poems,²¹ died unpublished, and that her work has mostly been read and interpreted long after being written.

The challenges of biographical fiction begin with its obligation to entertain. Consider a funeral where the priest talks about the deceased's life – how much more alive it becomes by narrating it as a story rather than naming things he or she did. Biographical fiction at its best is credible, entertaining and consuming, whilst blurring the lines of fact and fiction so smoothly that the reader does not know where one ends and the other begins. Which is why there lies responsibility also as a reader of biographical fiction, to be aware that not everything is literally true: Dickinson did not visit drinking houses in Amherst or help a murderer to escape justice. But such scenes appear in the works about her, and perhaps they tell us less about her than about what the writers would have liked for her – a more active, social, life with more experiences and adventures.

Looking at biographical fiction that is both biography and fiction: what does it do that also biography does? The fictional part is that it gives us potentially unmediated access to the poet's thoughts – it gives us the allusion of Dickinson herself. Therefore it is problematic as the novels can add to a misunderstanding of its subject. This is all the more true, the less the reader knows about the subject. A person unfamiliar with Dickinson who picks up one of these four novels, is bound to take away some strong impressions of the poet. Which is why these novels in particular are so very interesting: they all portray a fundamentally different Dickinson. Why

²¹ A list of these can be found in R.W. Franklins *The Poems of Emily Dickinson III*, pp. 1531-2.

did these authors choose the “Queen Recluse”²² – what is it about her story that enticed them to write a biographical novel? The four chapters will look at the novels separately and discuss how these influence us and add to our knowledge of Dickinson.

Lastly, the vast possibilities of biographical fiction lie in all the material Dickinson left behind. There are opportunities to narrate a believable and vivid story filled with authentic details and paraphrases that fictionalises a poet we did not know before. This thesis will thoroughly look at the tools the authors use when narrating their Dickinson story, and attempt to provide an ethical discussion of these tools’ consequences. As Lackey asks: “since they author novels rather than biographies, they are free to take considerable liberties with their subjects. But how many and what types of liberties are ethically justifiable?” (241). This thesis will look at what the authors invent and discuss why, and what image the biographical fictions give us about Dickinson: what do we learn about her, and does it change anything that is previously known? To what extent do they challenge the image of the recluse, which is both factually proved and part of the Myth: Dickinson’s withdrawal is of course legendary and like all legends it contains an element of truth as well as falsification. Finally, this thesis will also argue that there are two ways of narrating biographical fiction: one dependent on the subject, and one where the subject is used as a symbol and the story is thus not reliant on a biographical person.

In discussing which of the autobiographical novel and the autobiography is truer, Philippe Lejeune’s conclusion is neither: “autobiography will lack complexity, ambiguity, etc.; the novel, accuracy” (27). Emily Dickinson’s creative life was vivid, exploratory, daring, dark, comic, filled with life, nature and love. Despite the – frankly patronising – efforts of her biographical novelists to compensate for a life lived indoors based on unsubstantiated speculations about the reasons for her withdrawal: that she was secretive married and had a child, was abandoned or rejected by a male lover, or female lover, that she had a powerful religious experience. There’s a conclusion that Dickinson could not have been happy living on her father’s premises. But another way to look at it is that it is reflecting greater degrees of imaginative social and political freedom today which Dickinson might have enjoyed.

Why these novels

Many of Dickinson’s poems are undated, as are many letters she sent. Almost none of the letters she received are preserved after her sister Vinnie burnt them, making it hard to discern some of

²² Samuel Bowles called her that in a letter to Austin (Habegger 447).

her replies and thereby relationships (Habegger 628). Habegger says her reclusiveness also left an obvious dearth in recordings. “Any honest attempt to narrate her life, especially certain phases, ought to begin by acknowledging such difficulties” (xiv). Michael Lackey says the “contemporary biographical novel is one of the richest and most promising aesthetic innovations of the last fifty years, and we are still trying to come to terms with its uncanny power to simultaneously picture the past and the present and to critique the political” (38). These four novels add to the discussion: in their diversity they prove that a simple definition of biographical fiction is not easy, but that the attempt is worth making.

The authors have in common that they use Dickinson and her history as a tool to tell something else: whether it be about the maid, her sexuality, Sue, outdoor life, and her motives for writing. Within this is a separation between stories that are dependent on the subject, and those that are not. Charyn and Farr’s novels would not stand without Dickinson, whereas O’Connor and Oates’ novels could have existed without her but are arguably better for having included the poet. This does indeed refer back to Sir Sidney Lee’s truthful transmission of the personality they see, or want to see. The poet wrote “The soul selects her own society,” (Fr409) probably not foreseeing how her society would be selected by everyone else.

The tacit recognition that our reading of Dickinson *is* an intrusion has all along contributed to her appeal. One of the reasons readers at all levels respond to her with passionate enthusiasm is that, knowing something of her life and character, they approach her work with these in mind. Again and again, readers feel that, remote and difficult as she is, they are on the track of *knowing* her. [...] Sadly, this way of reading is generally a mistake, especially if we succumb to the illusion that we can zoom into her life and penetrate her secret being. (Habegger xii-xiii)

The poem this thesis opens with indicates that she wrote her letter to the world and that her poems were to outlive her, a thought she seriously started contemplating in 1858 (Dickinson, “Emily Dickinson Selected Letters” 140 and 166). She sent out so many poems and letters in her lifetime that posthumous recognition, as already stated, was inevitable. It was the letters she received from others that she wanted burned, because they belonged to others and were therefore not hers to give, to allow to be seen. But she left no instructions to the same others that her own letters be burned. In other words, it is not certain that she would have approved or disapproved of people writing about her life. We will probably never know.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson died 15 May 1886 in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Chapter 1: Jerome Charyn – The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson

The author

Born in the Bronx, New York, Jerome Charyn describes Emily Dickinson as “the first poet I had ever read, and I was hooked and hypnotized from the start, because in her writing she broke every rule” (Charyn 11). His authorship spans more than four decades, he is a PEN/Faulkner Award finalist, a Rosenthal award winner, and Michael Chabon calls him “one of the most important writers in American Literature” (Charyn 349 and cover). *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* is not Charyn’s only attempt at biographical fiction; he has also written *I am Abraham*, about the President who held office during the Civil War. “Everyone says I’m crazy. Not only are you writing about Lincoln, you’re writing about Lincoln in his own voice. But I love to do the impossible” (Jack Ford). Charyn does the same in *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*, and in the author’s note he writes “I wasn’t interested in writing a novel about a recluse and a saint” (11-12). Charyn breaks with convention in promoting a socially and sexually active Dickinson, and attempts to make this convincing by copying her style:

The novel will be told entirely in Emily’s voice, with all its modulations and tropes—tropes I learned from her letters, wherein she wears a hundred masks, playing wounded lover, penitent, and female devil as she delights and often disturbs us, just as I hope *my* Emily will both delight and disturb the reader and take her roaring music into the twenty-first century. (Charyn 14; my emphasis)

In an interview with his publishers Norton & Co he says: “Perhaps I would fail and never capture Emily. But it was worth the risk” (“Reading Group Guide”).

Narration

The novel begins in 1847 with Dickinson at MHFS in South Hadley. She is away from home, and the first sentence is: “Tom the Handyman is wading in the snow outside my window in boots a burglar might wear” (Charyn 17; my emphasis). The emphasis is on outside before we get to know anything about the inside. It also plays with the traditional idea of Dickinson inside looking out, at nature and life as something that happens to others. And also at a man whom the first-person narrator in the next sentences reveals she is attracted to: “I cannot see the Tattoo on his arm. It is of a red heart pierced by a blue arrow if memory serves, & if it does not, then I

will let Imagination run to folly. But I dreamt of that arm bared, so help me God, dreamt of it many a time” (17).

Crucially, Charyn focuses on a time when Dickinson is forced to be social, and to be part of a crowd. He is already introducing elements that seem to contradict the traditional view of the poet. This choice of place is significant; she is not alone when writing and this says something about what is to come in this novel. From her window she watches Tom the Handyman save a baby deer,²³ and according to Charyn “[t]hat image of Tom wading in the snow with the baby deer in his arms will haunt her entire life. Tom will later morph into a burglar, a draft dodger, and a circus clown” (W. W. Norton & Co, “Reading Group Guide”). Charyn uses Tom the Handyman as a red thread connected to Dickinson’s life outside, but also lends a side note to the Madwoman in the Attic as Dickinson’s psyche is questionable throughout the novel as these meetings happen. There may be suggestions too of Dickinson’s poem “My life had stood a loaded gun” (Fr764) where a Master figure comes and carries her away on adventures.

A life outside

The subheading and locations of the novel’s seven parts are: “Mount Holyoke Female Seminary,” “Amherst College and Township,” “The Homestead and the Evergreens,” “86 Austin Street,”²⁴ “Amherst,” “The Homestead, the Evergreens, and the Circus Grounds,” and “The Homestead.” Three of the seven refer to the Homestead, but only one solely to it. This is in every way a story of Dickinson outside, not only evident in Dickinson’s physical locations, but in how she speaks of life outside when inside. It is evident too in how she gives people places as nicknames, like Sue the Vesuvius, Samuel Bowles the Arabian, Brainard Rowe the tutor from Mars. These are also references to nature, one of the major themes in Dickinson’s poetry.²⁵

²³ Poems mentioning deer: “A wounded deer leaps highest” (Fr181) and “This merit hath the worst” (Fr844).

²⁴ In Cambridgeport.

²⁵ Other details of authenticity and references to nature include mentioning feathers at least fourteen unique times (pp. 149, 157, 207, 208, 223, 254, 257, 284, 286, 288, 291, 303, 325, 331), as well as sparrow’s feet, sparrow’s steps, horses, bears, a deranged falcon, snails, porcupine, antelope, wolf, rabbit, “cats, cats, cats!”, plenty of birds and even a *boda fide* bird-woman (pp. 288, 289, 230, 243, 70, 180, 256, 251, 254, 261, 101, 308, 274, 275).

Rebecca Fiske is a teacher at MHFS and the first woman Dickinson meets who writes poetry.²⁶ This is a trigger so that Dickinson will talk about poetry, an activity that is mostly non-existent in the novel.

I do not hate Rebecca. I watch her in wonder. I have never met a Poet. Her lines are like little panthers poised to strike. She's an assassin who could harm & hurt with one of her panthers, and & I a baker of bread, who should worship at her feet. (Charyn 29)

The two novels in this thesis that narrate the poet during her time at MHFS both have added a teacher as an enemy. Consider how the poet reacts to Rebecca Winslow:

My crying stops in an instant, as if my tear ducts were scorched with fire. This is the Rebecca I know, with acid in her veins, always wearing that ruffled ruche round her neck & her yellow gloves; her eyes are pale, & she has a cruel, tight mouth. She could be one of the female assassins that Elizabeth of England kept around her. (29)

But despite the theme of teaches disliking the poet (repeated in chapter 2), Dickinson standing alone in rebellion is an exaggerated one, as Habegger reveals quoting Letter 20 from 17 January 1848: "I love this Seminary & all the teachers are bound strongly to my heart by ties of affection" (Habegger 204-5). Charyn needs to place her in opposition to others in order to emphasise her modernity, but she did not have enemies, nor did she find any great friendships at Mount Holyoke. However, what Charyn does is also to create catalysts who bring out a violent language and opens up for the rebel he will soon portray, contrasting the fragile, homesick girl we initially meet.

But it is Zilpah Marsh who is the main nemesis in *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*: "Emily's 'ghost,' Emily's double, a woman of real intellect who happened to have been born on the wrong side of the road in Amherst" (W. W. Norton & Co, "Reading Group Guide"). Marsh can be seen as a live representation of the inner life Charyn is creating for the poet. "I wasn't certain if she was friend or a foe. Perhaps she's a little of both" (Charyn 59), in a way what the poetry was as well. Marsh is the character that out of poorness is free to do as she pleases, something Dickinson never could. An example of independence and a symbol of

²⁶ Mary C. Whitman was the teacher in charge of the Middle class at Mount Holyoke during Dickinson's year there, but there was a Rebecca W. Fiske who taught there whom Charyn may have found inspiration in the name from (Habegger 195 and 209).

Dickinson's poetry in how they both write with their blood: Marsh literally, Dickinson figuratively (W. W. Norton & Co, "Interview"). Marsh is the Madwoman in the Attic representing art and feminism. And a fuse that lights the fire in Dickinson.

College Hill and Jane Eyre

Part two of the novel takes place during Valentine Season 1850, and the first chapter is set in Johnson Chapel on College Hill: crucially, it takes place outside.

Austin's own brothers from Alpha Delta Phi, a few select Seniors from some other secret society, a couple of Tutors, two or three of Amherst's most stunning belles, and plain little Emily, who might never have been invited to this elite and wicked soiree had she not been related to Austin *and* the Squire, who, as College treasurer, was chief of the Charity Fund that helped some of the Seniors pay their bills. (Charyn 75)

The setting of College Hill is of importance. Samuel Fowler Dickinson was a leading figure in the founding of Amherst College, and both he and his son Edward were treasures of the College (Habegger 11 and 88). College Hill belongs to Amherst College where the first woman applied for admission in 1871: it was not until 1975 that the first woman was accepted (Amherst College, "An Amherst Timeline"). Here Dickinson is a feminist trailblazer and partakes in something women would not be allowed to participate in for yet a century. The other women present are invited as potential matches for the male students: they are only there by virtue of their appearance, whereas Dickinson uses her voice, personality and intelligence in the discussions of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the sex of Currer Bell. "'No simple Authoress,' I say with a certain air, 'could ever have endowed Jane with so beguiling voice,'" (78) says Dickinson to the men's great pleasure. It is Brainard Rowe from Yale who disagrees with all of them, and Dickinson is immediately drawn to this man who she compares to Rochester himself (97).²⁷

Dickinson compares herself to Jane Eyre both in her plainness, but also other matters: "And there I was, like Jane herself, hovering between 'absolute submission and determined revolt'" (Charyn 77), and later she holds a full conversation as Currer Bell with Rowe as Mr. Rochester (98). Its eponymous character was a sister figure for Dickinson and it is no coincidence that this is the topic they discuss this night on College Hill. Charyn uses Jane Eyre

²⁷ There was a Brainerd Timothy Harrington who graduated from Amherst College in 1852, and who knew people connected to the Dickinsons (Amherst Biographical Record and Habegger 215).

to emphasise differences, for example by having Dickinson seeking to run away with Rowe even though there is no marriage proposal, whereas Jane Eyre refuses to run away with Rochester even though there is a proposal. There are parallels of similarities in how he makes Carlo the Newfoundland into an important character, not named after Rochester's pilot, but after St. John Rivers' pointer. Zilpah Marsh as the Madwoman in the Attic: a symbol of literature and art, but also the one who holds or steals the love Dickinson wants, both from Tom the Handyman and the Squire. In their discussion about Jane Eyre and "plain Jane's progress," Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that "[e]scape through flight, or escape through starvation: the alternatives will recur throughout *Jane Eyre* and, indeed, as we have already noted, throughout much other nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature by women" (Gilbert and Gubar 341). Charyn emulates this literature by making Dickinson try to escape through flight, but this seems impossible. Most of all is Dickinson compared to Jane Eyre through Zilpah Marsh who truly becomes a Madwoman, like Bertha Mason. The contrast is created when Zilpah still holds the love of Tom and Edward.

A believable character

Charyn makes Dickinson an active agent – someone who moves and takes action. She is rarely still, and there is little stillness in the novel. As he states in the author's note about how the "novel will be told entirely in Emily's voice" (13), Charyn emulates her language by paraphrasing or copying from letters she has written, but other than that the voice does not correspond with the original. In a conversation with Tom the Handyman, Dickinson says: "I have little story to tell. I've been nowhere, Mr. Tom. I haven't traveled much more than the eleven miles between Amherst and Holyoke. I sit with my Bible and my books. I am seventeen, for God's sake, and not one year more" (37). The "eleven miles between" part strikes a false note. Charyn inserts factual information to persuade the reader of his knowledge, but the character is not likely to have been so pedantic. Also, the distance according to Habegger was nine miles (191). Charyn's novel is a story where he tells the reader who his Dickinson is, instead of showing the readers through her actions.

Charyn invokes biographical facts to create a frame of authenticity. Examples of contrasts between biographical facts and fiction are reflected in, amongst others, relationships, for instance with Emily Lavinia Norcross (also repeated in chapter 2). Charyn's cousin moves out of the room she shared with Dickinson, whereas Habegger can tell us that the "two seem to have got on well, the poet pronouncing her cousin an 'excellent room-mate,' one who did 'all

in her power to make me happy.’ At the opening of the second term, Dickinson was relieved when Emily Norcross finally showed up, ten days late” (194). Charyn isolates Dickinson as someone not likeable, someone who therefore searches for the escape – with someone who she hopes will confess their love for her.

During her two periods of medical treatment in Boston for an eye disease, she stayed with her aunt and uncle, Lavinia and Joel Norcross. Though we know from letters that she was largely confined to a dark room and reacted to light, Charyn has her wander around town, and again meeting Tom the Handyman. About this meeting, Charyn says: “But what is so scandalous about that? Couldn’t Emily Dickinson, the maid of Amherst, have been a bit of a voluptuary? Why not?” (W. W. Norton & Co, “Reading Group Guide”) Again, it is interesting that Charyn opts to emphasise the sensual, rather than – say – the political or professional. Why not a secret life of a journalist, a teacher, a lobbyist, an anonymous published poet, an advocate for temperance or literacy – all of which were options for a woman of her class in the 19th century?

Covering up

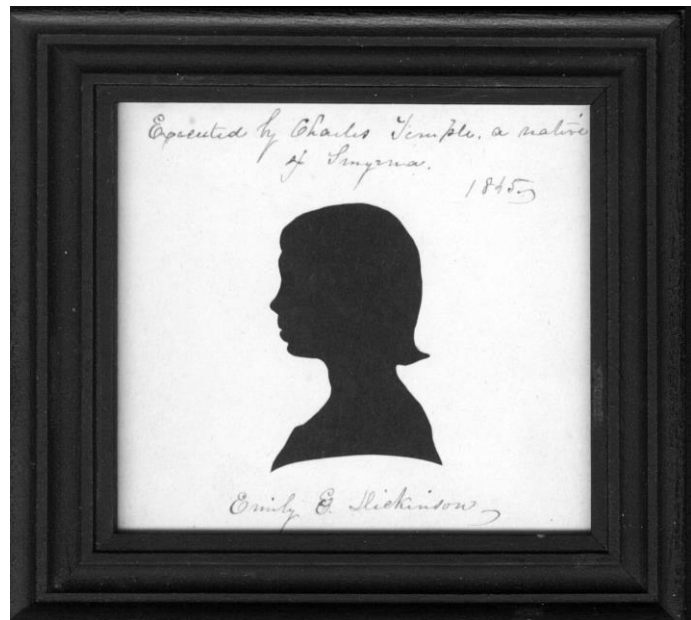
The title of this novel is interesting but also slightly provocative – it promises to reveal unknown aspects of Dickinson’s life in a way that is somewhat like a tabloid, newspaper or magazine. Or rather arrogantly to show what she was really like – as if Charyn is one of the few to know. The cover supports this idea of looking under the mask, how he is not interested in a saint, and just like the title looks to reveal her true self, including her body. It features a young woman with the figure of a modern woman, standing in front of a desk that looks a lot like her original one that is now in Harvard University’s Houghton Library (picture 1). She is wearing a transparent, backlit, dress so that we can see undergarments that look slightly modern – from the 1940s rather than 1840s. Her ankle boots too have a look that seems like a modern take on the Victorian with a high heel which was not necessarily used indoors on a daily basis. The portrayal is rather suggestive: the model has the pen or pencil near her mouth, and there is no sense of poetry or work – the writer is waiting casually for inspiration rather than sitting at her desk composing drafts.

The image alludes to a famous silhouette of Dickinson that Charles Temple made in 1845 (picture 2). Charyn is playing with known images of Dickinson, but directing the focus to the body and waist down, rather than just the traditional head up. The silhouette is also black, contrasting the white she is known for wearing (picture 3). What this cover immediately

suggests is an Emily Dickinson whose sexual life or imagination will be in focus. The cover leaves us with questions. One wonders where the precedent is in Dickinson's work for the "inner voice" he sets out to emulate. Even today, few women authors would agree to allow themselves to be pictured this way – it is more common for young actors or sportswomen. Scantly clad women sell: the cynic might argue that Norton & Co approved this cover because it was a way of attracting readers. But it is also possible to say that it goes too far, and is typical of a male sexualisation of women generally.



Picture 1: Writing table used by Emily Dickinson. Cherry, pine (secondary wood), brass; maker unknown, ca. 1830. Dickinson Room. Gift, Gilbert H. Montague, 1950 (Houghton Library Modern Boods and Manuscripts Collection).



Picture 2: Silhouette of Emily Dickinson cut by Charles Temple, 1845 (Amherst College, "Silhouette-framed").



Picture 2: Photo: Jerome Liebling, Mt. Holyoke Art Museum (Emily Dickinson Museum).

Sexuality as entertainment

It is necessary for this thesis to look further at how sex and sexuality is used for entertainment and in the promotion of the novel. Moving past the cover and title, the back of the cover quotes Fredrik Tuten saying: “*The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* is astonishing. Charyn gives Emily Dickinson a new life, and one with rush of energy and power. I shall never see her or her poetry the same way again.” This touches upon the challenges of biographical fiction, and makes us look at whether Charyn’s fictional Dickinson can be said to provide new insights into the historical personality of the same name. In Norton & Co’s reading group guide and interview, Charyn says that he was “hoping that [his] novel might create a new form of ‘biography’ and would reveal Emily to us in a way that the objective voice of the biographer never could.” While on the cover it says *A Novel*, there is a breach of contract with the reader when Charyn aspires to reveal what a biography could not – especially when this Dickinson is in such contrast to the biographical personae. Charyn does not seem to pledge his loyalty to neither biography nor fiction, which is when the novel becomes challenging to categorise and, arguably, not as entertaining.

Norton & Co writes on the inside of the cover and on their website, that “Charyn has removed the mysterious veils that have long enshrouded Dickinson, revealing her passions, inner turmoil, and powerful sexuality.” America’s greatest poetess has become the victim of commercialism – sex sells. Inside the book, the reader comes across passages like this about Tom: “I’m ashamed to describe the electricity of my contact with his raw, red skin – my cheeks are ablaze with the delight of it” (38). This is only one of many men the “Queen Recluse” is involved with in this novel. The ethical discussion prompted by the cover, continues here. Biographical fiction has the power to change our opinions and make up new stories. David Ebershoff is the author of *The Danish Girl* (2000)²⁸ and Lackey uses his novel as an example of a successful exploration of biographical fiction: Ebershoff explicitly states that this is a novel and fills the pages with symbols and actions that support the story he is trying to tell, even when this completely departs from biographical facts and “his vision is in deep conflict with his biographical subject” (Lackey 234).²⁹ But according to Lackey, this conflict is not what separates a successfully written biographical fiction from an unbelievable one – it is rather how the genre is used. In Charyn’s case he gives readers the happy ending they often want or expect,

²⁸ About Einar Wegener, the first person to surgically change gender.

²⁹ He changes details like where Einar’s wife is from, how they meet, what happens after the surgery, etc.

and a 21st century happy ending, for a 19th century woman who never married, is to have lots of passionate sex. Making Dickinson a sexual being is not wrong in itself for after all, as the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* states: “Yes, she had a passionate side. Weren’t all those phallic snake poems clear enough?” (James) But Charyn clearly signals that even though this is fiction, he is revealing the secret of a female self best expressed in sexual encounters with men. Is this side of Dickinson the one we most badly need to know about?

Girls just wanna have fun

To put it very simply, this novel is about a girl who wants to have sex. In one way, it can be argued that Charyn uses the poet to tell a story of female sexual liberation, however Charyn is too tethered to details from Dickinson’s life for this story of liberation to soar. It seems more likely that this is the poet Charyn wished was, and now he retells her life through a 21st century man’s goggles. The love interests Dickinson has during the novel include Tom the Handyman, Ben Newton, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, George Henry Gould, Brainard Rowe, Samuel Bowles, and Judge Otis Lord; where Tom is the only fictional character, but the romantic connections to Dickinson is not believed to be true for all the others. Her openness to sex is shown early when Zilpah Marsh tricks Dickinson into thinking the new handyman, Richard Midnight, is Tom. He wants Dickinson to undress, but “I wouldn’t disrobe for Richard Midnight. I might have done so for Tom had he implored me in his own sweet voice, & I would have felt no shame” (63). She actively seeks sexual, dangerous, morally compromising situations – making us wonder if this is what Charyn has to say about the poet. It comes across as slightly boys’ locker room and arrogant to say that this is what we need to know about Dickinson. Consider at the rum resorts with her Domingo, Brainard Rowe, whose name hints at her attraction to his brain, his intelligence; but whose surname suggests also a sexual attraction.³⁰

He has the gall to lean over and kiss me in the middle of my articulation, and it was no polite peck; he burgled my mouth while gnawing at my face, and I burgled back. I must have startled him, because he stopped. I’d been pecked at by one or two of my beaux, but never had I experienced anything close to a burglar’s kiss. My mouth had been sucked raw and quivered with the taste of rum and molasses. (Charyn 99)

³⁰ In Dickinson’s poem “Wild Nights - Wild Nights!” (Fr269) rowing is seen by some critics as an image of intercourse.

When Dickinson passionately kisses an enemy of her brother's fraternity in a rum resort, it marks a turning point in the novel. Now thoughts become actions and Charyn lets his Dickinson physically live out the life he reads in her poems and letters – explicitly narrating his Dickinson and deviating from biographical knowledge.

He laughs with his dark, undamaged eyes, reaches out and swoops me into his arms like the predator he is and seats me upon his lap. I am sick with anger and a crazy, indescribable joy, but no less curious about him. [...] I wanted to sit for a century. I could feel Brainard's manliness against my flanks, like some curious harpoon that swelled and did not sting. But the harpoon went away the moment Breckenridge sounded his alarm, and I felt nothing but a quiver, as if manliness itself could jellify.
(102)

The "harpoon" seems closer to the vocabulary of pornography – John Cleland's "mighty machine" – than reality, but is typical of Charyn's slightly gothic or exaggerated scenes.

After Brainard has to run away, Dickinson goes back to the rum resort where she meets Mr Breckenbridge. She learns he has a message to her from Brainard and in anticipation of it she states "you leave me without hope" (119). From a no-hoper of Christian salvation at MHFS, she now seeks an emotional and erotic salvation. She saw her whole family convert, and had an obsession with "Immortality,"³¹ but this time she is involuntarily left a no-hoper. This bears resemblance to Habegger's "Fighting Years" (1862-5) when the poet was left by Sue, Samuel Bowles and Reverend Charles Wadsworth. Unlike Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning who received their emotional and erotic salvations, this Dickinson is involuntarily left behind watching.

Domesticity and daddy issues

Charyn creates an improbable duality in Dickinson's personality with the recluse vs. the extrovert. In most of the novel there is talk about the outside or the poet is outside – patrolling the town, walking Carlo, visits the Evergreens. But when Sue brings Samuel Bowles over to the Homestead she flees the room because she "cannot bear foreign society or any sudden rush

³¹ The term was introduced to her by Benjamin Franklin Newton (1821-1853). In this novel we meet him in the first of the curious interludes that has a third-person narrator and separate the parts.

of intruders” (153). As if Charyn has to convince the reader that she really is a recluse, when all the other actions he writes about makes her out as an extrovert. It seems that Charyn wants the poet to be the extrovert he reads about in her poems and letters, but when putting this character in the shoes of a real person he also tries to describe, there are inevitable cracks in credibility.

Charyn says: “I felt that her relationships with her father and with Sue defined her and helped shape the Poet she would become, and I tried to render these relationships with my own sense of their sound and fury” (W. W. Norton & Co, “Reading Group Guide”). He claims he needs the Squire and/or Sue to explain how her poetry came to life, but this does not seem true as most of the novel is concerned with sexual liberation. Then it is interesting to see how much space Charyn devotes to Dickinson’s Daddy issues.

“Miss Emily Dickinson, your father might be the earl of Amherst, but Squire Dickinson has no sway here. He has not confessed his faith, but will his daughter reveal her love of God?”

I feel like a winter leaf buffeted about in Lyon’s own storm. But I do not tremble in front of her and our little class of sinners. It is only Father who can make me tremble. He has the wrath of God in his wayward eyebrows. But Father suffers a little without me. He swears to Mother that he can only survive on the Indian bread I bake. He loves to have me near, so I can play the piano, or read him passages from Revelation in the library, or tell him for the hundredth time about the particular boot Lord Byron had to wear on his clubfoot, & he complains that he will have to kidnap me from Holyoke one day soon or starve to death. But he’s mighty slow for a kidnapper. I keep waiting to hear the sound of his chaise & the bells on the reins of Henry the Horse. (23)

Charyn invokes many authentic details from the poet’s life, but this co-dependency that connects her to domesticated life is not in alignment with the extroverted Dickinson Charyn is otherwise portraying. This might be read as an echo of John Cody’s *After Great Pain*, the psychoanalytic biography referring to her tormented upbringing: almost as if he lets Edward take the role of the Master.

Another example of her succumbed spirit, which might appear to contradict Charyn’s rebel:

He is Bluebeard with red side-whiskers, serving up daughters instead of wives. I will never leave this castle. He will decline whatever suitor I bring to West Street. Father might let Lavinia escape, but not me. It's not my Indian bread *per se*. He could find another baker. But Father seems to count on the little storms I create. Perhaps he imagines my face in his own mirror – the hobgoblin with red hair whom he cannot live without. Such an imp can shatter his isolation. I am his Dolly, sentenced to serve him puddings for the rest of his natural life and most of mine. (85)

Gender politics

Sexuality have been discussed thoroughly so far, but a last element evident in Dickinson's poetry and the literature about her, is that of gender politics. Men who steer our minds towards sex, like the cover and title of *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* – fictionalising what they read in her poems. From *New York Times' Sunday Book Review*: "The genre thrives on a contemporary desire to fill in the blanks, and to grant spinsterish ladies the sexual desires they so decorously veiled in their 18th- and 19th-century writing" (James). This thesis wants to draw attention to another publications about Emily Dickinson: Billy Collins' poem "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes", a sexualised title about the white dress and the Myth, and what is hiding underneath when you remove this layer.

In Charyn's novel there are many people described as mice, both by Dickinson and by others.³² In the poem "I started early, took my dog" (Poems 95-6), the person describes itself as a mouse. The poem can be read to be about sex and how imagination can be dangerous or tempting, like Jane Eyre and why she leaves Rochester. The person is at a beach and no man moves her until the tide comes and covers her up past her bodice. The poem is about erotic attraction, but where men often read it as about sexual desire, women read it as about rape. There seems to be a big difference with how men view a (19th century) woman's sexuality, and how women view it. Here, it is interesting to see how Charyn is the only male author, and also the only one with sexuality as a major theme. The challenge of this is that Charyn finds what he believes are proof in Dickinson's poems and letters, but his portrayal is limited and perceived as very male. This part of the novel does not add much to our knowledge of Dickinson as it is so fantastical, but it can still influence how we read this apparently sexualised poet. It can be read as if Charyn's novel is the story he believes as the essential and internal truth of Dickinson's imaginary life.

³² Charyn, pp. 205-9, 212, 214, 223, 229, 230, 233.

Chapter 2: Judith Farr – *I Never Came to You in White*

The author

Judith Farr is a Dickinson scholar, and the author of several academic books on the poet, including *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* which in 1992 was awarded “Notable Book of the Year” by *The New York Times* (Farr cover). She is a professor of English and American literature at Georgetown University, and her main interest is Emily Dickinson’s poetry and visual art, particularly that of the Hudson River and Luminist painters, pointed out in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, and something that is reflected in her scholarship which often combines literary analysis with discussion of visual works.³³

Narration

I Never Came to You in White is an epistolary novel, probably as a nod to Dickinson’s own output as a correspondent. The letters are set in several periods of time, and are mainly about or from her time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847-8. Many of them are “by” Dickinson herself, but we also read the words of her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson (1830-1913); childhood friend Abiah Root (1830-1915); maternal cousin Emily Lavinia Norcross (1828-1852); literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911); headmaster at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary Mary Lyon (1797-1849); as well as a fictional teacher Margaret Mann, whose surname suggests her lack of such gendered qualities as compassion and sympathy. The latter is given the role of a bitter and hateful teacher who in 1891 connects with Thomas Wentworth Higginson after having read his preface to the first edition of Dickinson’s *Poems*.

At one level, the use of the epistolary is interesting because Dickinson herself wrote so many letters. And the epistolary has a long pedigree – it is associated, in the words of Ian Watt, with the rise of the novel form itself. It is also associated with the female voice in early fiction – with Pamela, for instance, and Clarissa.³⁴ But one of the advantages of the epistolary is the sense of immediacy – things are happening almost as they are being written about. In Farr’s

³³ Some titles of her critical essays include: “Disclosing Pictures: Emily Dickinson’s Quotations from the Paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and William Holman Hunt,” “Emily Dickinson’s Garden: The Poetry of Flowers,” “Dickinson and the Visual Arts,” and “Emily Dickinson’s ‘Engulfing’ Play: Antony and Cleopatra.”

³⁴ *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) are both epistolary novels by Samuel Richardson. The first is about a girl who is rewarded with marriage for not falling prey to Mr B’s seduction and eventually his attempted rape; the latter is about a girl who also wants to keep her virtue but is drugged and raped, as her rapist Lovelace is certain that possession of body includes possession of mind.

case, a lot of the drama is watered down because the letters are about things that happened in the past, and there is more distance as a result. Joe Bray says that the “epistolary novel is often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing” (1). Another disadvantage of Farr’s epistolary style are constant shifts from one correspondent to another, which pull the reader out of one story and into the next – partly to defer revealing something “sensational.”

Scholarship

The first thing that becomes obvious when you read this novel is that it seems more factual than fictional. Not necessarily because all the facts are true – a reader of fiction would not be expected to recognise that – but because the facts Farr includes stands in the way for a fictional rhythm. The scholar behind the text comes through: both in factual details, and in how all the correspondents have similar style, as if they are written by the same writer (which they obviously are). This diminishes the difference between the poet with her dashes and the others, and it is possible to argue that there should be a difference in style in order to individuate the voices of the characters. For example, Mann comments negatively on Dickinson’s punctuation – but Farr has given Mann the same kind of punctuation.

Farr seems to have a belief that certain information is key to making her Dickinson authentic and credible. Farr includes details that she finds relevant to the poet’s life based on all her research, but this is more comment than creativity. In this way Farr’s scholarship again and again finds its way into the novel,³⁵ and much like Charyn she is telling rather than showing.

Farr quotes and paraphrases judiciously from the poet’s own letters and poems. For example the opening of Margaret Mann’s first letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Are you too occupied to hear my voice” (2), is an allusion to a line in Dickinson’s first letter to Higginson, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive” (L260). In a letter from Farr’s Dickinson to the “Mysterious Person” in her novel, in all probability based on the Master figure from three letter drafts written by Dickinson, she writes: “It is for You: your shining eyes, your paradisaal Face – glowing at me!” (13) Dickinson wrote to Samuel Bowles, “You have the most triumphant Face out of Paradise” (L489), perhaps alluding to Bowles being the Master.³⁶

³⁵ I a way like William Luce’s play *The Belle of Amherst* (1976) which is an impressive collection of Dickinson’s most famous quotes and characteristics.

³⁶ Farr argues this in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (1992), see section “Sexuality”.

We are constantly reminded not of Dickinson but of what Farr knows about her. For instance, there are six separate references to Cleopatra (and Antony),³⁷ a theme in Dickinson's writing which Farr examines in her essay "Emily Dickinson's 'Engulfing' Play: Antony and Cleopatra." Of course, it is a difficult balancing act between scholarship and literary creation: there is always the danger of simply showcasing your knowledge of the character without advancing the plot. Farr seems to fall prey to this tactic.

Telling, not showing

This letter is from Dickinson to Abiah Root, dated 12 October 1847:

Why have you not sent me an affectionate epistle?

In my last, I wrote to you that I was leaving for South Hadley Seminary and told you all my airy schemes for success here. (14)

This seems artificial: Dickinson is explaining to Abiah what she wrote in her last letter, and this appears unnecessary. Clearly, the synopsis is for our benefit, and we become aware of what Farr is doing, rather than what Dickinson is thinking. It is true that Dickinson repeated some details which might have been unnecessary, but she was not one to summarise the context of her previous letters.³⁸

These synopsis continue to steer the narration towards facts rather than fiction, but are arguably important if someone unfamiliar with Dickinson were to understand the novel. However, they become superfluous, like how Higginson writes to Mann: "According to Genesis and according to Milton, it was Eve's hunger to *know* that made her disobedient" (15). First, it does not seem necessary to inform a teacher of Christianity where to find Eve in Scripture and English, but even more unnecessary is on a few pages later where Mann repeats Higginson's synopsis: "In the Fall of 1847, there were revivals all over New England" (19). Farr the scholar does not seem to trust readers to interpret her story as she wants them to, or she knows her capabilities as a fictional writer are not good enough to narrate details in a subdued way. The result is comments like this where Sue writes to Emily: "Ever since your sister, Lavinia, had

³⁷ Farr, pp. 95, 110, 116, 130, 167, 212. The references are to Shakespeare's play of that name, and often touch on love – or the triangle of Anthony, Cleopatra and Caesar which may represent Emily, Susan and Austin. According to Habegger, Dickinson did not read this until sometime between 1859 and 1864, probably during her first stay in Cambridge (491).

³⁸ For example in Letter 18 to Abiah Root, Dickinson twice in the first paragraph mentions it was six weeks since she arrived at MHFS.

the insight to bring us together in friendly association, I have been much impressed by your gift for language” (59). Perhaps she does not dare to leave details open for interpretation in case she as a scholar is misunderstood, which is why it is so peculiar when she makes scholarly mistakes. Like with Lavinia Norcross Dickinson where, as we know from chapter 1, there is no evidence of any bad feelings between the cousins. However, in *I Never Came to You in White* Emily Lavinia Norcross explicitly rejects Dickinson:

Emily Dickinson may be my cousin, but I don't wish to know her after we part at the term's end. [...] Now, Mamma, does Uncle Edward know all she is guilty of? Is that why she is not returning here? Or are the Dickinsons pretending to take her home for her health? Everyone whispers and gossips about her.

[...] But Emily is not popular, her ideas are too original. She did this, I know, to win some affection. Well, her design failed. (151)

Here Farr grossly exaggerates a climate of hostility towards Dickinson, but this could be argued for as part of the freedom biographical fiction ensues. If we leave how Farr has created a wrongful relationship be, it is much more peculiar that she in the afterword claims that Emily Lavinia Norcross “died, unmarried, in 1852 at the age of thirty-four” (220). Norcross was born in 1828, making her twenty-four at the time of her death (Habegger 633). And the inclusion of that verb “unmarried” between commas is, frankly, mean: it suggests that this unfairly libelled character was herself unlovable (and Farr neglects to mention that Norcross, like her parents, died of consumption).

Examples

It is important to make clear that the details and quotes Farr includes are not “wrong” in themselves, they are as much part of a biographical fiction as fiction is. However, it is as if Farr's attempt to create authenticity through a display of factual particulars, is not translated into fiction – she writes in a wholly different language and one that arguably is not as entertaining as it perhaps should be. For instance, Mann explains how Dickinson “had a racking cough that first day she entered my classroom, which was on the north side of the building and heated only by a small stove” (19). There is no need for Higginson to know on what side of the building the room is, but Farr includes it to show her research.

Sometimes the information is redundant: Mann writes “her parents were Quaker, like myself,” (84) after having already mentioned she is a Quaker four times,³⁹ and she mentions it a sixth time after that, “I am a good Quaker woman” (140). She also tries to smuggle in information about Higginson in all too obvious ways – for why would Mann need to remind Higginson which denomination he belonged to, as when she writes “When a Quaker woman like me knows she has lost her inner light, it is impossible for her not to seek guidance, even from a Unitarian like yourself” (9). Mann also explains that the poet’s name came from the French – a “Medieval French knight called De Kenson. But the Dickinson we knew in Springfield was only a blacksmith” (11). Clearly, some of what Mann says is meant to expose her as a mean and snobbish figure. But we also have the impression that Farr is letting us see how much she herself knows about, for instance, Dickinson’s genealogy and how common the name was in the Amherst area. This does not advance the plot.

Further examples include a 1932 letter from Mabel Loomis Todd to her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham:

Sue had copies of the poems Emily wrote down by hand in what I call those ‘fascicles’ of hers. (You know what they look like – small, rudely made booklets composed of letter paper sewn together with twine, in which she carefully inscribed her heart’s profoundest sentiments. I have showed them to you so often. [...]). (190-1)

If Bingham both had seen them “so often” and knew “what they look like”, why does Todd have to tell her? Again, this explaining to the reader in a way undermines the credibility of Farr’s character.

In a letter from Sue to the poet: “Your piano-playing, your German, how I envy you both! Your indifference to possessions, so praiseworthy! (Though I wonder if you would be so indifferent did your father not have the grandest house in Amherst or had your grandfather not founded the College!” (102) It is not inconceivable that Sue would have poked gentle fun at Dickinson, for Samuel Fowler Dickinson did help to found Amherst College, and built what is believed to be the first brick house in Amherst (Habegger 9). In 1855 Edward repurchased the house and even expensively remodelled it (Habegger 130 and 339). But again, Farr’s way of

³⁹ Farr pp. 9, 20, 23, 84.

giving us Dickinson's family history – and her musical skills and German – seems laboured and obvious.⁴⁰

Predicting the future

One of the great achievements of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), is the use of a child narrator who often does the right thing (helps a slave) while thinking he does the wrong thing (stealing property, because a slave belongs to someone else). As readers, we understand that Huck is right, but feel his pain. In Farr's novel, she often writes about Dickinson and others imagining a future success as a poet, but the tension between wishing for that future without knowing it will happen is never there – we all, including Farr know she is. It is all too easy, as is the following:

- From Higginson to Mann: "To me, she was a kind of genius. Time will tell if I am right" (156).
- Dickinson to Austin: "Now, Milton may be a god; but I am a poet, too, Austin. You must not laugh at me, dear Brother Pegasus, for I know you think of yourself as the only poet at home! But I have a Guardian Angel of Art, a young girl who looks just like me and sometimes a little like Vinnie's friend Sue Gilbert" (54). Here she first predicts her own penmanship, and quotes letters where Dickinson calls Austin "Brother Pegasus" – the horse from Greek mythology that symbolises poetry (L110). Lastly she foresees the influence Sue would have on her art.
- Dickinson to Susan: "Do you know, I sometimes fancy I could be a marvellous poetess, should Someone take an interest in what I do" (57).
- Dickinson to Sue, Thanksgiving Day 1847: "But I am a Bee, not an insect, and an industrious one. How industrious, the Ages will reveal" (66).
- Susan to Abiah Root, 1 April 1891: "I am happy that you admire her poems. If they survive into the next century, something of each of us will survive along with them" (179).

The last quotation is an example of someone who, like readers of the novel, see themselves as associated with Dickinson in some way.

⁴⁰ Other examples include Mann mentioning how Dickinson writes really as "realy" (80), and then some pages later Dickinson writes to Sue, misspelling "realy" for the first time (100). And a letter from Mann to Higginson: "Her cousin Emily Norcross, whom I liked, as I told you earlier" (140).

Enemies

In order to create a kind of tension between Dickinson's hopes for future recognition and the possibility of failure, Farr packs the book with doubters and sceptics, who become straw men – symbols of difficulties in the ways of Dickinson's success, symbols of misunderstanding and rejection. For example Mann: “for she *felt* like no girl I have ever taught” (47), and Emily Lavinia Norcross: “Yet somehow I fear she won't settle down and be happy and normal like the rest of us. There's something *strange* about her” (4-5). It is true that Higginson said “I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much” (Habegger 524), but there are no records of direct dislike for Dickinson. Quite to the contrary, during the 1870s she still had a role in Amherst society and “her messages were seen as worth preserving [and t]heir lapidary brilliance was recognized and appreciated” (Habegger 541). In *I Never Came to You in White* the characters take time to write about the opposite – their dislike for Dickinson. Farr tells the story of a very unpopular Dickinson to suggest that she herself is part of a special minority, who understands her, making her supporters an elite club, into which Margaret Mann and Emily Lavinia Norcross are not granted permission.

Also Sue is pointed as a selfish, bitter character, writing to Abiah Root Strong 1 April 1891:

It is I who best remember her writing them. I helped her with many of them, as the world does not realize (but no matter). Indeed, if Emily fancied herself a poet, I always knew that I was a poet too. There were a great many occasions when, as girls will, we wrote competitively. I would write a poem for Emily to imitate and she would do so. Her very best poems were written that way, as responses to my suggestions. Indeed, I wonder, Mrs. Strong, if you might not like to read some of *my* poems. Let me copy a few lines for you. (175)

Susan is seen as self-serving here, though again biographical evidence complicates this picture. There is a school of thought, led by Martha Nell Smith, which argues that Dickinson and Sue had a kind of poetry workshop. Nell Smith discusses a lesbian relationship, and explains that the “most important characteristic about this powerfully sensual relationship was its very literary nature and the direct impact it had on Dickinson's poetic compositions” (129). As regard to the quote from Farr above, some of Susan Dickinson's poems survive, but they are

more orthodox and sentimental than her sister-in-law's. Farr is making Susan out to have delusions about her own worth, as opposed to being a collaborator.

Margaret Mann

The person who least likes Dickinson is her teacher Margaret Mann, a character who bears some resemblance to Charyn's Miss Rebecca Fiske. Both teachers do not seem to like to teach, particularly not Dickinson, and both have their own poetic dreams and ambitions. Charyn's Fiske is also a one-dimensional character, but she is not given much space in the novel and character development is not as necessary as in the case of Mann. The teacher is the best example of Farr's "flat" characters: in 1891, more than forty years after their year at MHFS, she still holds a grudge for a seventeen-year-old. What can this tell, and potentially influence a reader to think, about Dickinson? The more Higginson and Mann communicate, the angrier she gets. In one of the first letters to Higginson she writes: "If you think *your* first encounter with her poetry was challenging, you will be amazed to hear of my initial contact with her" (9), as if this is a competition she plans on winning. From Farr's afterword:

Because it was common knowledge that Emily's compositions provoked annoyance and envy among both teachers and classmates, I have imagined Miss Mann as hostile to her and I have conceived her as a type of would-be poets and literary experts who scorned Emily Dickinson's work during – and after – her lifetime. (219)⁴¹

Farr has created two teams: those who scorned the poet and were hostile to her; and those who recognised her brilliancy. The characters play roles to symbolise Dickinson's life and heritage, but this is an unrealistic narrow view and way of separating. Mann is wholly implausible and the reader is meant to "team" with Farr, who is quite like Mann in reverse in needing to write to "us" to let us know how much she appreciates Dickinson. She creates an elite club of supporters that began, according to this novel, with Higginson, and continues to Farr who is the one to invite us, the readers, into the club. Farr, the novelist, introduces her readers to the correct Dickinson who Farr, the scholar, studies. Higginson writes to Mann:

⁴¹ The evidence for this claim is not supplied.

I cannot imagine how a pupil might remain in the mind to distress me, even after the pupil is several years dead! It is clear to me that your feelings about Emily Dickinson arise in part from personal unhappiness. (156)

Farr makes Higginson her speaker or representative, telling what she considers to be the truth about the powerful poet, who was partially victimised both in her lifetime and after. Higginson is the counter to Mann and the improbable hatred of the “hostile team”.

Lesbian love

This novel contains a more subdued theme of sexuality. First that of lesbian love where Sue is given space. This love dramatised by Farr is emphasised by quotes like “You must forget about exchanging kisses last summer” (148), and “this letter shows, I know, how exclusively I have cared for *you*, ever since Love first began” (100-1). This “love story” is also narrated through the others in their letters. Like an incident with Sue, witnessed by Mann and told twice, first to Higginson after this letter where she hints at its outrageousness:

In February of that spring term of 1848, we discovered her writing what were even then called “Valentines” – not only to some mysterious person whom she would not call by name, but to a *girl* in Amherst, the same we ultimately caught her with behind a closed door a few days later. What she was doing behind that closed door, I would be sick to tell you. (140)

In the next letter she describes what she saw:

I turned the handle of Emily’s door and when it would not open, at first, I gathered my strength and flung it wide. And then I saw your New England nun, as you call her, locked in a deep embrace with another woman, who was seated by her side in the windowseat. They were kissing on the lips! They were avid with each other. I was shocked to the very marrow of my bones. (165-6)

Mann informs Mary Lyon, head of the school, who writes about this in hindsight to her friend Eustacia Temple. Lyon’s version is however much more innocent, diminishing Mann’s credibility. Here Dickinson was “on her knee before a handsome dark-haired young lady who

seemed to be straining away from her slightly, though she was listening to what was being said to her. Their hands were clasped and a book, opened, lay between them” (162-3). What really happened is never revealed, much like parts about Dickinson’s life. Farr’s character sets in motion the possibility that Dickinson discovered her sexual identity at Mount Holyoke, but by making Mann suggest this, Farr makes us more sympathetic to that possibility, because she is so loathsome.

The second element are the eight letters to “Mysterious Person.”⁴² as they both open and close the novel, they seem to be of great importance. The gender of “Mysterious Person” is not revealed, leaving a space for readers to interpret the correspondence as they want – or as Farr wants. The letters are easy to compare to the Master letters, or drafts, as those too were to a “mysterious person.”⁴³

The third element is Lyon and Temple who in many ways become models for Dickinson and Sue, and also a way for Farr to allow for the possibility that the poet was lesbian, without actually saying it:

The young girl I wrote to you of in January has enticed and received a forbidden visitor here. You know my rules: they are almost the same ones that Miss Vulpet made for us when we were girls at Harrison Sem. [...] Men were forbidden; but it was not forbidden to *us* to do such tender acts as lovers do! I could clasp your hand each morning when we awoke with no fear of reprisal, kiss you endlessly without fear of condemnation! Forgive me for remembering, but there are days when I can almost *feel* your hand in my hair, Eustacia, days when at the least convenient moment ([...]) I feel your gentle hands caress my breast and I can think of nothing but you (161).

It is difficult to say if Farr is using Lyon and Temple as distractions – it is they who are the lesbians, and not Dickinson and Sue – or if she is acknowledging that 19th century women were able to enjoy profound emotional and erotic attachments without thinking they were wrong, because sex was something that always involved men.

⁴² Farr pp. 1, 13, 56, 120, 127, 135, 185 and 210.

⁴³ The three Master drafts from around 1861 (Habegger 416), are pleading, demeaning, as if a school girl is addressing someone far older and superior: “God made me – [Sir] Master – I did’nt be – myself” (L233). Farr’s letters to “Mysterious Person” carry a very different tune of decisiveness and talks to this person as if he or she is familiar with people in Dickinson’s life. “To you, I will speak in the hard plain tongue of my Soul. You will not mind if I am passionate” (1) and “I think I do not sufficiently seduce you. How may I do so? Am I not a wise young lady in some ways?” (125)

In *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (1992), Farr writes that “Emily Dickinson’s worksheets or fascicles give evidence that she was writing poetry about two different figures in the same interval of time” (189) – one for Sue, and one for Master. She argues that there are similarities in some of the iconography, but the poems for Master “moves boldly into a different and new design[, that of] Master’s face and a vision of him as the source of light and salvation” (190). These are poems for a man whom Farr identifies as Samuel Bowles. This is however proven wrong by Habegger who explains that Reverend Charles Wadsworth is the one of Dickinson’s known correspondents most likely to be Master (416-21 and 427).

With this scholarly work preceding *I Never Came to You in White*, this thesis proposes that Farr fictionalises Dickinson’s two cycles of love poetry in this novel. Therefore the letters to Sue and “Mysterious Person” not only could be read sexually, but must be.

Ethical responsibility

The introduction of this thesis opened with a quote from Farr’s afterword:

This fiction is based, with some variation and compression, upon actual events. In the words of Emily Dickinson’s poem, I have tried to “Tell all the Truth” about her inner life [...] but I have chosen to do so in the “slant,” fictional way that she herself preferred. (219)

This quote in combination with the obvious scholarship that sometimes, as I have shown, is not correct, invokes a quote from Lackey: “My claim is that authors who make responsible and illuminating changes produce truthful fictions, while those who make irresponsible and confusing ones misappropriate a life (this is a form of identity theft)” (221). Farr comes close to eliding the boundaries between herself and Dickinson, claiming to write in the same way. And like Charyn she advances herself as one of the few who truly understand the poet.

The ethical responsibility discussed in the introduction does not seem to concern Farr. By replicating Dickinson’s own way of communicating, it is hard to encourage readers to a critical and just read – and why should they be so critical? This is fiction, and we should not be made so aware of the scholarly author, or have to consume what is served with a critical eye. Farr seems more concerned with her understanding of Dickinson rather than how this influences non-scholarly readers. Whom, after all, are those she is trying to reach with a novel, and not her usual scholarly work?

As a scholarly writer authoring such a one-dimensional novel, it might be that Farr was looking for the freedom in biographical fiction to tell a story she does not have enough biographical material to support. This is based in part on how she supports claims she makes in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*: like the pictures at MHFS, Thomas Cole's series *The Voyage of Life*, which she argues "may have hung on the seminary walls" (Farr, "I Never Came to You in White" 111 and "The Passion of Emily Dickinson" 70-1).

It is possible to argue that the weakness in Farr's novel is that she adds too many academic details, and that her characters as a result never come to life – they are "flat." Her unpacking of information seems very close to literary analysis (explaining the meaning of a line, like a teacher) rather than successful characterisation. On the back of the book's cover Diane Wood Middlebrook is quoted saying: "This work of fiction – meticulously researched, delicately attuned to the language of the times – provides an explanation more persuasive than any biography ever will." It seems perfectly allowable to claim that fiction might create the illusion of personality better than biography. But that it more accurately explains a character, seems less justifiable, and certainly subjective.

"When we are done we have shared in a wondrous mystery, for we are the only ones allowed to know who Emily Dickinson was: these letters are written to us" (Farr inside cover). Virginia Woolf's opinions on the blend of fact and fiction are, as this thesis mere existence proves, not necessarily applicable to all biographical fictions, but in this case there is an element of truth regarding Farr's novel: "If [Strachey] invents facts as an artist invents them – facts that no one else can verify – and tries to combine them with facts of the other sort, they destroy each other" ("vol VI" 184-5).

Chapter 3: Nuala O'Connor – *Miss Emily*

The author

Born in 1970, Nuala O'Connor is an Irish author and poet, also known as Nuala Ní Chonchúir: her name was anglicised for her third novel, *Miss Emily* (O'Connor blurb). She was born in Dublin, but lives now in East Galway. *Miss Emily* is her second to last publication, and her U.S. debut. Her previous work has collected several awards and nominations, and so did *Miss Emily*. Alex Preston from *The Guardian* places this novel amongst “a hybrid literary form with which we are increasingly familiar – the fictional biography.”⁴⁴

Nuala Ní Chonchúir is the only non-American author out of the four this thesis discusses, and she is from Ireland – a country which is represented by fictional and historical characters in Charyn and Farr. And, as mentioned earlier, Aífe Murray in *Maid as Muse* argues that Dickinson's half-rhymes and some syntax were influenced by the way that the Dickinson's Irish servants, and especially Margaret “Maggie” Maher, spoke.

Narration

As an author and not a scholar, Nuala O'Connor is in many ways Farr's opposite. Here the narration creates an authentic, fictional story, and she is showing, not telling: weaving in details of the life without explaining them in the sort of obvious ways that Farr does. She lets the story unfold and it breathes its own life, interspersing quotes from poems and letters, and introducing people, and without overworking them, events. For example: “I don't mention that my mammy always told me that recently dead smell of hyacinths as it seems a morbid thing to say when little Ned is not well” (152), informing us of Ned's illness with no further explanation.

The novel is narrated in the first person, alternately by Dickinson and Ada. Every other chapter is told through each of the women's eyes. This makes it possible to observe Dickinson from the outside in interesting ways.

I was surprised to find Miss Susan visiting so soon after the confinement, but it seems the pair of them would do anything for one another. Mister Austin and his wife may be more burdensome to wait on than the other Dickinsons, but they are certainly fond of Miss Emily and always go out of their way for her. And they produce gorgeous

⁴⁴ Termed here as “fictional biography” though the emphasis is on fiction more than biography and the genre should therefore be called biographical fiction.

children; Little Ned is a star of a child and Miss Martha is as placid a babe as any mother could hope for. (O'Connor 67-8)

O'Connor uses the Dickinson family as a historical backdrop to narrate the life of an Irish maid in the US after the Great Hunger, as it is known in Ireland, from 1845-52. It is not a sentimental portrait: the Irish are not all portrayed positively and Ada faces particular challenges because she is a woman. Through observing, the poet and Ada can tell each other's story in a much more animate way than the novels previously looked at in this thesis. Because there are more events in the 18-year-old Ada's life than the 36-year-old poet's life, the action revolves around her, making the Irish woman the main character. Natasha Solomons is a *New York Times* bestselling author and says that "for me, the real triumph is the character of Ada, Emily's young Irish maid. It's Ada who is the heart of this novel."

By calling the novel *Miss Emily*, O'Connor is mirroring the difference that a servant has to show an employer in the 19th century. There is difference, personal integrity, distance, and a politeness which is arguably admirable. And also a kind of tip of the cap from the author to historical women – a sign of respect and acknowledgment.

The novel begins with a reference to the air of July, and little Ned is mentioned, who was born in 1861 (Habegger 431 and O'Connor 7). On the same page Sue and Dickinson discuss their friendship and how they have known each other for twenty years, since forty-six. Shortly afterwards, Dickinson mentions how Austin and Sue have been married for ten years, which makes the date July 1866 (8). O'Connor uses the conventions of biography – real people, places, dates, and events – accurately and effortlessly to establish a sense of authenticity.

Similarities in characters

To intertwine their stories, O'Connor draws attention to similarities shared by the women despite differences of age, heritage, class, ambitions, and so on. They are both born 10 December and come from families with a dominant father but mostly female members (77). O'Connor also includes connections that are less obvious, such as when Dickinson says: "The arrows tell me to complete my circle as I begin it. For life – and writing – is a neverending loop of begin, push on, end, begin again" (38). This can be said to represent the process of writing (poems), as well as a reference to Ada's comment about her dead aunt: "To not be buried from the church you were baptised in. It's like Auntie's life went in a line, not a circle, as it should have" (53).

Ada has a very creative language, just like Dickinson, with a great deal of imagery that at times sounds poetic.

- “I am as pleased as a dog with two pockets” (47).
- “Kindness is as rich as a yolk in him” (125).⁴⁵
- “The bat thinks the fox cannot see” (157).
- “Now it is a burden, for its walls seem to scream my sin to me, night and day” (177).
- “But canned fruit costs and Mrs Dickinson is one grouse who likes to spare the heather, so I hesitated” (193).
- “I was probably only ever the dirt before the broom anyway, Miss” (205).
- “We stand at the ship’s rail and watch it sheet across the sea from Kingstown; it moves towards us like a great travail, the sorrows of the country and our own sorrows made into weather” (232; my emphasis).

The duality in the narration creates similarity: by placing the strong, independent and brave Ada together with Dickinson, the poet is also portrayed as such. At the age of 36, Dickinson came out of her “fighting years,” her most productive period, and had begun her withdrawal. There is a shift in her life, also with Carlo’s death, and Dickinson entered a less productive period, poetically, as she was needed in the household which was without steady domestic help (Habegger 498). This is where O’Connor begins narrating, and introduces us to a Dickinson who prefers to stay inside her house. The narrated Dickinson is much more welcoming to the maid than the rest of her family, which the introduction showed might be close to fact with a distant father and illness-ridden mother.

Lastly, Ada and Dickinson are like yin and yang. Ada works with her body, Dickinson works with her mind. Ada’s life is drudgery, Dickinson’s is poetry: Vinnie says, “‘Less poetry, more drudgery, please, Emily.’ [...] ‘The opposite is my life’s hopeful refrain these days, Vinnie. “More poetry, less drudgery.” Perhaps I could compose a verse on that’” (10).

A class act

The UK cover shows a female body in a white dress. She wears pearls, a silver necklace and her hands meet at the front, holding an embellished purse.⁴⁶ In the background is a smaller

⁴⁵ Hens and their laying of eggs seem to be a theme, and this is where O’Connor manages to recreate a sense of a rural existence, with chickens, cows, fruit and vegetables, without making it overly scholarly: what they say reveals how and where they live.

⁴⁶ The word “pearl” along with variations of “gold” is much used in Dickinson’s poetry and letters.

woman, also without her head depicted. She stands in the dark and is wearing a simple lavender coloured cotton dress with a green apron. Class is effectively apparent. The cover hints at the white Dickinson supposedly chose to wear in her reclusiveness:

“From now on I shall only wear white,” I say. I do not know where this sentence – this decision – has descended from. It is true that I love white – my favourite dress is a snowy cotton wrapper with mother-of-pearl buttons and a pocket; I feel such ease in it, such freedom. But to forego all colour? (O’Connor 118)

White is also an important image in the book, being referenced many times through snow, cotton, and the colour itself.⁴⁷

Ada Concannon is a fictional character, but she is linked to the real maid, Margaret Maher. In reality Maggie Maher was born in the Irish county of Tipperary, who left for America and ended up working for the Dickinsons for 30 years. “Humble and honest, loyal, eager to serve, she committed herself to a lifelong relationship defined partly by the labor market and partly by family ties and Irish and Yankee ideas of class, subservience, and patronage” (503-4). Habegger points out a mix of “close affection and inequality,” and quotes a letter where Dickinson compares Maggie and another hired man “with draft animals and pets” (504). This makes it clear that the friendship of O’Connor’s Dickinson and Ada is made possible only because both women always know their different stations, but choose sometimes to ignore them when convenient or necessary.⁴⁸ Aífe Murray offers proof of this convenience: “After 1870, Emily began writing increasingly on the kinds of scraps that gather on kitchen counters: the backs of recipes, grocery lists, circulars, and food and medicine wrappers make it clear that she was composing in the pantry while her maid stirred the pot” (52). The women share many similarities so it is the major difference of class that is the driving force of the story, but interestingly also what makes us see the similarities, as we shall see.

In *Miss Emily* Margaret “Maggie” Maher is the mean and jealous cousin of Ada, and daughter of the much kinder Auntie Mary who is married to Uncle Michael. It might seem as if Mary Maher who is both older and much kinder than her daughter, is closer to the Maggie

⁴⁷ For example on pages 27, 79, 80, 95, 118, 119, 120, 125.

⁴⁸ Ada as a servant is proven in these quotes: “And there is much to be done besides” (127), and “I am up to my shoulders in work” (125). She also makes food: “Mrs. Dickinson comes in and asks me to make an Irish soda bread—she fancies something different, being more used to yeast bread—and I am happy to oblige” (43), but her duties in the kitchen exceeds only making food: “The egg sets me back for finishing the plucking, which sets me back for getting the slops, which sets me back for starting the wash, which in turn means I will have less time to plan the Christmas feast” (86).

Maher described by Habegger. This is interesting because O'Connor chooses to stay away from Murray's sentimental narrative of Maher as Dickinson's confidante. It may be that O'Connor was afraid of plagiarising, because Murray's book already contained fictional passages about conversations between Maher and Dickinson. So in order to avoid such charges, she makes Maggie a meaner, harder character, and creates her own version of her instead.

Body vs. mind, and sexual assaults

"No, but when you carry a baby, you change. You become a remote Madonna, wandering the world slowly with head held high. You're unreachable in that state" (62). Dickinson says this to Sue, perhaps alluding to a sort of Madonna-whore complex. Consider the poet as Madonna the virgin, whereas Ada is the epitome of body and is thus regarded by some as a whore: she is 18 years old, does manual labour, and has a special way with the hens to make them lay eggs. She is lusted after by another Irish Patrick Crohan, an intentionally flat character who is after nothing else than Ada's body. There are shades of *Jane Eyre* here, but perhaps more of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* – Ada's chapters are told almost as they happen so there is a similar sense of danger. The Irish lead segregated lives – Austin is hostile, Edward distant – which can be argued to also represent this separation between mind and body.

Crohan rapes Ada and she is left feeling shameful and shamed by men – a whore. When Austin finds out about the "incident," he visits her in her room and says he will get her whatever they use to cause an abortion these days. Then he "leans in close to me. 'You will take it and we will say no more of this indiscretion'" (148-9). In fact, Ada is traumatised.

The hurt he caused my body is one thing but he has disordered my mind in a way that I cannot make peace with. I don't trust my own thoughts for the terrible memory of him comes unbidden and chokes me at all times of the day and night. I swallow cups of tansy and, with the horrible taste of it, I try to douse him out of me. (149)

An indiscretion is an error of judgement, as if Ada was guilty of poor behaviour, not the victim of a violation. Tansy is toxic if taken in large doses, and its use has to be carefully regulated. It was traditionally used against worms and parasites, and perhaps to induce abortions. It tastes very bitter and O'Connor gives a good portrait of how women relive the trauma of rape long after the event itself – Ada is trying to purge herself of the memory. O'Connor sheds light on a misconception in society up to this day, namely that a woman has some responsibility for her

own rape. The focus is on the victim and what she did or could have done differently, rather than on the perpetrator who is rarely faced with the consequences of his assault. Ada is shamed by her rapist, by Austin, by the doctor, and like most rape victims, by herself. As a catholic Ada wishes to confess and her uncle Michael takes her away to a church in Chicopee. Almost as a Madonna: even though a sin she did not commit Ada is expected to, and does, confess and seek absolution. It is Ada's responsibility not to get raped:

The priest sighs and puts his hand to his forehead. "Henceforth, protect your chastity strongly. Say the rosary each morning and night for a year. *In nomine Patris et fillii et Spiritus Sancti.*" His hand flutters again and he bangs shut the small door between us. I stay where I am for a moment, then steal from the box and out of the church. (168)

Ada busies herself with work, so that her mind does not catch up with her body. She also avoids Daniel Byrne as he reminds her of her body, and thereby her shame. In the end, her mind catches up with a little help of the Mind, Dickinson:

"Did he do more than hurt you?" I say.

Ada's blue eyes meet mine. "What do you mean, Miss?"

"Patrick Crohan. Did he attack you in a profounder way than you have told me, Ada?"

"He about broke me, Miss," she says, and tears rush down her cheeks. She swipes at them with the back of her hand.

"Come with me around the orchard, Ada, and tell me what happened. All of it."

"I need to make lye for soap, Miss. I have spuds to peel." Her voice is flat. Dogs raise a cacophony of barks nearby, making us both jump.

"Walk with me, your work can wait a little."

"Your mother said I need to turn over a new leaf." (188)

They walk and Ada admits to the rape. O'Connor's Dickinson is portrayed as more inexperienced in this novel than in Charyn and Farr, but she is not entirely naïve or without knowledge. She rather seems more optimistic and hopeful that such crimes are not possible. This further establishes the associations of Dickinson with the tropes to virginity, whiteness, reclusiveness, and innocence: the poet here is a tool to enhance the effect of Ada's story by being her opposite. Here Dickinson has chosen to dedicate her life to her art, not as a result of disappointment in love. She is the Madonna but as Ada has shown us about the whore, there

are many more layers than the simple stereotype. Dickinson's dedication is so great that she will not go outside as it interferes with her creativity. She seems much more an introverted poet than a "Queen Recluse," in contrast to Charyn's extrovert, showing how differently these authors respond to the same coordinates of a life.

The contrast between the Madonna and the whore is also represented in locations in *Miss Emily*: Ada is often outside, travels to Boston, Mount Norwottuck, Chicopee, and even Ireland, and speaks of locations like Mount Slievenamon. Dickinson lives largely in the two stories of her father's house, but this is traditionally seen as from where her imagination travels.

Feminism and heritage

It is in the two strong, female characters that O'Connor develops layers and depth. There are feminist themes with women who find solutions, resolve problems: after Ada's rape she is determined to get better; when Daniel Byrne kills Patrick Crohan, Dickinson takes charge;⁴⁹ the women take action in the kitchen. Ada professes hope, strength and determination throughout the novel: "For the first time ever I am on my own; I do not have the crutch of family to hold me up. And I like the powerful feeling that gives me – it brings a rare contentment" (68), and "I am getting better. I will get better. I will *be* better. When I put on my apron each morning, I feel a little whole again. I am getting better. I will get better. I will *be* better" (164). But she also has short bouts of doubt, admitting that "I – normally as tough as teak – am bending under the weight of a few smells" (177). But in the end, the tone of Ada's character – and with it the novel's – is hopeful and resilient: "I am feeling strong and determined; my mind is rushing forward to the future and to all that might happen, all the pleasing things that are yet to come" (232).

The men are given just enough space to be believable but are largely one-dimensional, flat characters. Like for example Austin who Dickinson describes as haughty (122).

"You have a venereal disease, Miss Concannon. The French Disease or the clap, one of the two. I am sure of it."

That is what he said to me and he was angry, and I disliked his anger because there was blame in it. Even still, I felt I deserved the blame for I am choked with guilt. I pray in my mind to the Holy Mother to help me. (159)

⁴⁹ "Mrs Gertrude Vanderbilt of Flatbush, New York, was wounded in the side by a bullet aimed at her domestic, Ann Walker, by Irishman William Cutler about ten o'clock on Sunday evening March 20 1864. Cutler had been rejected by Walker, and intended to murder her. Both women were wounded, but survived" (Mitchell).

Austin Dickinson is merely a patriarchal tool in the book, and directing the focus towards feminism. What we get to see, through his eyes, is that it is not class that creates the biggest difference between people – gender does. Differences in class can on the contrary play with our preconceived ideas. Ada's heritage is of one of women made strong by hard work, resourcefulness, courage, and lineage. The touches are light here: there is the superstition associated with Irish Catholic culture, and references to Mammy, Auntie, and Granny rather than Mother, Aunt, Grandmother.

I sit on the end of my bed and grease my boots with butter, my hand acting as a last. They were Mammy's boots before they were mine and the furrow of her toes still occupies the leather. It is asking for ill fortune to wear another person's clothes, I know, but boots are different, surely. I love that the ghost of Mammy's foot walks with me wherever I go. When I slip my feet into the boots, I feel her wrap herself around me and give me strength. Even the smell of the butter brings her near to me; it was she who taught me to churn and it was Granny Dunn who taught her before that. The butter I make is the daughter of Mammy's butter just as I am hers. (197-8)

Class and ethnicity are suggested here – but also a sensitivity to touch, to smell, and an awareness of pattern – the mother in the shoe, the grandmother and personal history is the butter. And the last sentence is metaphorical, suggesting Ada's strong imagination.

St. Brigid, or Brighid, is Ireland's most important female saint and importantly her name is associated with a very powerful female Celtic deity associated with water and wetlands. She is mentioned five times in the novel,⁵⁰ along with St. Rita who is mentioned in Daniel and Ada's wedding in Ireland: "Before she became a nun, Rita suffered a violent husband. I will have the opposite—a decent, gentle husband, despite all" (236).

On the opposite side you have Dickinson's relationship to her mother, who is a paler, weaker figure. For example, when the poet announces she is going to visit her sister-in-law, her mother becomes excited presumably because social visits are one of the social duties of a woman and this represents conventional behaviour.

⁵⁰ O'Connor pp. 88, 89, and three times on page 133.

I now wish I had not mentioned my plan, for Mother is overly excited at my leaving the house and Vinnie is put out that I will not let her come with me. Why can they not be more like Father – somewhat indifferent to my movements? (131)

This is a very different attitude than that of Ada to her female relatives though it has to be said nevertheless that Ada has left her family: she has something of Dickinson's independence about her, though even more so. Further Dickinson describes her mother and family like this:

Father wanted a friend for life in Mother and that he got. He is fond of saying, "There is no place for argumentative women in this world. None at all!" and Mother obeys and does not quarrel. Are they equals? I think not. Poor Mother, she has been saddled with an opinionated husband; odd, independent, single-minded daughters; and a son who drifted from sunny to haughty. But she must take at least part of the blame for all of us. (122)

For Dickinson, inheritance is related to biology rather than character: "My skin is shirred and white; my nails wear neat crescents at bed and tip. These are my mother's hands and it has only occurred to me that I have inherited something of hers after all" (203). The presupposed idea might be that being of a higher class is good, but in this case it results in distance and, arguably, weakness. Dickinson finds her strength outside of her family (but crucially not outside of her house), in her bond to Ada – another woman. "I close my eyes and think of Ada, of her distress. My breast aches when I think of how she has been violated. No matter what happens, I will aid her; that is my resolution" (203). This universal sense of feminism is also suggested by a reference to an Irish mountain made by Ada when she and Daniel are on an excursion and she is homesick for Tigoora:

"No it's a country, but near enough the city. Not like my Mammy's first home, in Tipperary, where my aunt and uncle are from too. They all lived under Slievenamon."
"Slievenamon. It's such a lovely name. Tell me what it means, Ada."
"It means 'women's mountain'. It's very peaceful there. Very safe." (109)

In Irish Slievenamon is written Sliabh na mBán and means Mountain of the women (Murray 29 and 33).

Female affection

O'Connor does not make Dickinson overtly sexual, unlike Charyn and Farr. Sexuality is mostly associated with Ada, the body. *Miss Emily* contains moments between Sue and Dickinson that could be interpreted as sexual but probably only because we as readers are familiar with this relationship and read more into than O'Connor writes.

Miss Susan is talking urgently: "But how can you truly understand me, Emily, as you claim to? My arms, my mind, all of me, is glutted with duty: to the children, to my home, to Austin, to our friends. You please no one but yourself."

"But I please you, do I not?" Miss Emily murmurs.

"Of course you do, my dear. But you see me as others do not, as no mortal could. I am flesh, I am bone. You must not idolise me, Emily."

I open the door and they stand, arms tightly around each other's waists and bodies pressed close, front to front; Miss Emily's head is lying on her sister-in-law's shoulder.

"Forevermore, Sue," she says, lifting her eyes to Miss Susan's face. She startles when she sees me in the doorway and breaks from their embrace. "Ada! Why do you sneak around so?" (98)

As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues in "The Female World of Love and Ritual," it was not uncommon in the least for women friends (or men) to be physically affectionate in the 19th century, so Dickinson being startled here suggests that she knows her feelings for Sue would not be approved of. Then again there is a sense of a 21st century consciousness misreading a 19th century scene here. This is not to say that encounters like this one took place – they certainly did. But embraces were not seen as suspect, according to Smith-Rosenberg. But certainly, Susan Dickinson was very busy at times with her infant children, so that the discussion here sounds very probable. Sue is a possession of all the things she is enslaved by, and she, like Ada, is also body – flesh and bone. But she is more so with Austin than Dickinson. Sue is given little space as a romantic partner and when the situation above takes place it is not further developed other than Ada telling Daniel about it, concerned about the poet being angry with her.

“I’m grand,” I say. “I think I upset Miss Emily, though, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since. Not alone, anyway. She’d normally be under my feet in the kitchen most of the day.”

“What happened?”

“It was nothing really. I interrupted a private scene. A conversation. I don’t know. She barked at me.” I twiddle the edge of my apron for I am still trying to fathom why she got so annoyed. “It’s not like her to be snappish.” (104)

Sue is not more important in this novel than as an example of an intelligent and cultured woman enslaved by her “duties” as wife and mother. Her heterosexuality is implied by the poet’s observation of a replica of Canova’s ‘Psyche Revived by Cupid’s Kiss’ (picture 4), an erotic statue depicting a woman experiencing a sexual awakening:

Surrounded by her things, her taste, I think about Susan, about her elegance and her learning. Some, I know, find her haughty and frivolous but they have her wrong. She is sensitive and cosmopolitan; she is imagination itself. Sue is luminous; a living Psyche. Though I would never style Austin as Cupid – her match. (O’Connor 190)⁵¹

Dickinson may be alluding to herself as a better match for Sue, but O’Connor does not take it further. There is a contrast here between Charyn’s license to imagine Dickinson’s erotic attractions, and O’Connor’s tact: it is as if she respects, even at this distance, the poet’s personal boundaries. There are hints, but her privacy is left alone. This is not a story about Dickinson’s sexuality, or the lack of it – it is a story of female strength, and thereby sexuality, in several forms.

⁵¹ There was a “statuette of Cupid and Psyche in rapturous embrace” at the Evergreens (Habegger 429-30).



Picture 3: Antonio Canova's "Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss", exhibited at Louvre (Canova).

Chapter 4: Joyce Carol Oates – *Wild Nights! Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway*

The Author

Joyce Carol Oates is an American author, and Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University. She started writing as a teenager and has published much more than a hundred novels, short story collections, non-fiction works, novellas, anthologies, young adult works, poetry, plays and children's books. "As novelist John Barth once remarked, 'Joyce Carol Oates writes all over the aesthetical map'" (Princeton).

The genre of biographical fiction that Joyce Carol Oates explores in *Wild Nights! Stories about the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway*, is one she also experimented with in *Blonde* (2000), a biographical fiction about Marilyn Monroe which became a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2001, shortly after the acknowledgement of this genre in 1999.

As a professor of creative writing, an author of mostly fiction, and writer of previous biographical fiction, Oates is well aware of the possibilities and challenges biographical fiction offers. She claims no scholarly knowledge or motives in the fields of Dickinson, Poe, Twain, James or Hemingway. Oates is a creative, not a critical writer, and this is further established by the text on the inside of the cover of the book: "*Wild Nights!* is Joyce Carol Oates's most original and haunting work of the imagination, a writer's memoirist work in the form of fiction."

Oates is a feminist, and this collection is read as a commentary on the roles of women in society. Fellow professor at Princeton Roger S. Berlind opines:

The dramatic trajectory of Oates's career, especially her amazing rise from an economically straitened childhood to her current position as one of the world's most eminent authors, suggests a feminist, literary version of the mythic pursuit and achievement of the American dream. Yet for all her success and fame, Oates's daily routine of teaching and writing has changed very little, and her commitment to literature as a transcendent human activity remains steadfast. (Princeton; my emphasis)

Narration

The story of Mr and Mrs Krim, a couple living in a dystopian future in “the suburban Village of Golders Green” (Oates 39), told in the third person. It begins and ends with “So lonely!” (39) which frames the action. The narrative starts as omniscient before it shifts to tell the story through both Madelyn and Harold’s perspective. Its future setting is first sensed through the 1984-esque way the couple live their life, as told on the first page where they eat dinner in silence, as if they are waiting for something, or as if something is missing. The wife mentions RepliLuxes, and the husband immediately replies according to her wishes.

For in her heart she’d long been yearning for *more life! more life!*
Nine years of marriage. Nineteen? (Oates 39)⁵²

What seems to be missing is happiness, joy; and it appears that they are waiting for their loneliness to cease. In the quote above there is also a reference to the poem the collection is named after – “Wild Nights - Wild Nights!” (Fr269)⁵³

Oates also narrates spatially, both in this story and in “Poe Posthumous; or, The Light-House.” Higginson described Dickinson as having a “soft frightened breathless childlike voice” (L342a), and this is replicated in how Oates explores the realm of narration by adding spaces between the written words – influencing how the reader “hears” the EDickinsonRepliLuxe’s voice:

As the Krims turned to leave they heard for the first time the small whispery voice of
EDickinsonRepliLuxe, only just audible: ‘Yes thank you mistress and master
I am very grateful.’ (48)⁵⁴

A dystopian world

The Krim Household is a five-bedroom house occupied by two people who do not even share a bed. Unlike the Dickinson Household of 4-5 inhabitants in addition to maids working there, this is a lonely, cold “English Tudor house at 27 Pheasant Lane” (58). So even the home is a replication of English suburban existence – not the real thing but an American copy. At the

⁵² Shorter quotes are also indented in this chapter to better show what they look like in the book. Oates narrates also through layout.

⁵³ The beginning and ending circled by “So lonely!” might also be a reference to the poem.

⁵⁴ Also on pp. 60, 61, 64.

RepliLuxe outlet, the Krims meet all sorts of copies, and there is already a sense of dystopia or a missing connection to reality. The husband wants a manly artist, like Edward Hopper, but he is not available due to copyright restrictions. None of them want Whitman whom they suspect was gay; nor Plath, Rothko or Van Gogh who were all depressed and committed suicide. Though already here the wife reveals her distorted view of reality as she is certain Plath never would do such a thing in their household (41). Here they embody the stereotypical opinions of entitled, white, middleclass Americans. Then the wife remembers Emily Dickinson, and she decides that she is the one they have to get. The dynamics of marital power remains the same – the husband pays for things, the wife decides about domestic interiors. She spells the poet's name to the salesman who lets them know she is on sale: Emily Dickinson is neither important nor famous in this dystopian world.

The RepliLuxe salesman tells the Krims that EDickinsonRepliLuxe lives from age 30 until her death at 55, meaning she starts as Dickinson was in 1860/1861 when her reclusiveness had begun and as she entered her most productive period. The salesman informs them of how the United States government forbids RepliLuxes going outside. This is a problem as the most popular RepliLuxes are those of male athletes, i.e. virile, sexual alpha-males, associated with the outdoors. “But your poet is ideal, it seems ‘Emily Dickinson’ never did go outdoors! Congratulations on a wise choice” (42). The salesman's unfamiliarity with Dickinson allows the writer to reference the Myth and the theme of reclusiveness. So far in the novel the readers have not even met Oates' version of Dickinson, but are already familiar with who she must be – a recluse, and who she cannot be – male, virile, driven by action.

The EDickinsonRepliLuxe

What the RepliLuxe *is*, technically speaking, is a brilliantly rendered manikin empowered by a computer program that is the distillation of the original individual, as if his or her essence, or “soul” – if you believe in such concepts – had been sucked out of the original being, and reinstalled, in an entirely new environment, by the genius of RepliLuxe. (43)

This is the future that for a long time has been predicted and feared – robots as humans: but in the Krims' world the robots are not enemies, they are remedies. Oates imagines a time when loneliness and separation will grow in magnitude, as our worlds become narrower and more

self-enclosed. In that sense, the choice of Emily Dickinson as a household companion is a perfect symbol of isolation. But the word “soul” (put in scare quotes) asks us what distinguishes human and artificial life, and even what life without a soul might be like. It also suggests how loneliness transcends time and place.

At one level Oates is describing a robot, but these are also biographical details. Like how the EDickinsonRepliLuxe jots down lines and phrases which would later be used in letters and poems: “Emily would pause to scribble down a few words on a scrap of paper, quickly thrust into an apron pocket” (50), to descriptions of “a ghostly figure [...] sheltered young woman of the 1860s” (57) who disappears from sight the second she is noticed. She has a “curious uninflected voice” (57), and resembles more the “wizened corpse of a child-nun than a woman-poet of thirty” (46). The EDickinsonRepliLuxe takes almost on a role as a servant, like Ada in chapter 3, which indeed does bare resemblance to Dickinson’s situation in the Homestead, particularly during her mother’s bouts of illness. This compressed portrait of the poet’s situation is terribly close to the reality. This story observes many of the conventions of biography in using details in the life, while at the same time it is more than evident that this could not be the poet – because she is a robot.

What is interesting nevertheless is how many of the outward details of the Myth that are also replicated, which makes it clear that Oates is dramatising themes – loneliness within marriage, differences between men and women – rather than Emily Dickinson, the poet: she is closer to O’Connor’s method of using biographical fiction, rather than Charyn and Farr. This dystopian future is so distant from our reality that we recognise Dickinson as a device or symbol – her purchase, made to bring the couple together, exacerbates their divisions. Lackey explains author Russell Banks opinion when he says that changes in biographical facts “is permissible for novelists, because it enables them to communicate a more important symbolic truth” (241). And the themes of loneliness, the lack of joy, trust, love, are so close to us that we can recognise, in particular, Mrs Krim’s despair.

There is a tension here, between RepliLuxes whose closeness to the originals they replicate is strictly regulated, and the dry, almost robotic, lives of the people who buy them. And Oates nicely anticipates some of contemporary discussions about the ethics of robotic usage, as we shall see.

Distance

Of the four works we have looked at so far, Oates' story is the one that clearly creates the most distance: the Dickinson figure is a robot from a future time, and the book's blurb reinforces this distance with stating that "*Wild Nights!* is a work of fiction. The characterizations and incidents presented are totally the product of the author's imagination and have no basis in the real lives of the authors depicted." One of the questions we are left with here is why Oates invokes Dickinson when writing about a robot. Perhaps because this enables her to give us insights into the constraints that were placed upon women in the 19th century, and Oates successfully makes us see just how odd her life is by making her an alien. She succeeds in showing us the constraints of a 19th century woman's life: she is fairly privileged, but she says she cannot leave the house because her father is used to her bread. And after her father's death in 1874, her brother owns her house and she had to go to him to ask for money for flour and sugar. Even paper, and there is an irony in having the best poet of the 19th century have male people buy her paper.

The distance is made clear by the many scarce quotes Oates uses, like in the first description of what a RepliLuxe is:

It could not be said that the figures were "life-like" for they were no taller than five feet, their features proportionately reduced and simplified and their eyes glassy in compliance with strict federal mandates stipulating that no artificial replicant be manufactured "to size" or incorporate "organic" body parts, even those offered by eager donors. (40)

Also the RepliLuxes in themselves demand distance in how their robotic features unfold:

But you must not expect from your RepliLuxe anything like a "real" human being, as of course you know, since you've read our contract, that RepliLuxes are not equipped with gastrointestinal systems, or sex organs, or blood, or a "warm, beating heart" – don't be disappointed. (44)

This, however, becomes a prophecy of what the Krims will come to expect.

Loneliness and confusion

Oates' way of playing with the scenario she has created is intriguing. Consider Dickinson the recluse who received no public recognition in her lifetime, who is now living with two strangers who address her as a famous poet. The line between fiction and reality is not only blurred for the readers of this biographical fiction, but also for the Krims. Madelyn thinks of the EDickinsonRepliLuxe as mind – a poet, a friend or sister, a companion. Harold looks at it as body – his possession. Mrs Krim confuses the RepliLuxe for the real poet and thinks it will recreate everything the real Dickinson did at the same age:

The wife discovered this poem in the *Collected Poems*, written when the poet was thirty-four years old. Which might mean, Emily wouldn't write it, in the Krim household, for another four years! (60)

The only one that seems well aware of the realities of this situation, is the EDickinsonRepliLuxe herself:

“Accelerate, Mistress. Lift the wand and – there's freedom!”⁵⁵

The wife was stricken to the heart. The poet should not have known about *accelerate* – or *sleep mode* – how had she come to such knowledge? (71-2)

It is the Krims who are victims to Dickinson's Myth, more so than the poet. They live like emotional recluses and do not know it. The Krims whose last name invokes an idea of crime, and in a Yiddish dialect it means “crooked”, “bent” – in Norwegian “krum” (Ancestry).

Oates plays with notions of realities in these five short stories: in addition to the RepliLuxe, Edgar Allan Poe goes crazy as a lighthouse keeper and hides with a “*Cyclophagus*” when men of his “kind” comes to rescue him from the island; Samuel Clemens is a (paedophile?) collector of friendship with girls between ten and sixteen; Henry James is gay and volunteers at a hospital in London during WW1 where he forms friendships with dying soldiers; Hemingway has questionable mental state and tries to commit suicide, and he rejects his wife in search for solitude although he loves his fame as Papa. Oates shows how the human mind is susceptible for being fooled in the hope or prospect of filling the void of loneliness,

⁵⁵ This is a reference to something Dickinson is reported to have said to Martha Dickinson. The poet would imagine a key in the door and say “It's just a turn – and freedom, Matty.” (Habegger 603).

which might explain her choice of title for the collection. The poem “Wild Nights - Wild Nights!” (Fr269) can be read as being about desperate loneliness, and the search for a company that would be the end of this loneliness. There is a restlessness, an inability to be calm, whereas if a lover was with the poem’s narrator, there would be settlement. There is also imagery of a boat at rough sea, and the light guiding the soul to safety, like Edgar Allan Poe in the story about him.

Girlfriends

Mrs Krim is pleased to find “springs of yellow-budding forsythia in vases! – evidence that Emily was not such a recluse, but capable of stepping outside the Krims’ house, to cut forsythia branches in the backyard unobserved” (50) but evidence too that the robot shares the poet’s horticultural skills. The wife wants the EDickinsonRepliLuxe to be her confidante, her friend in her loneliness, and looks for these signs of life and realness.

For Emily had always to be busy: housecleaning, baking bread (her speciality, brown bread with molasses) and pies (rhubarb, mincemeat, pumpkin), helping the wife (who’d once had lessons at a serious cooking school in New York City but had forgotten most of what she’d learned) prepare meals. (50)

In a way, Oates is here adding details of authenticity in a way similar to Charyn and Farr. But the purpose is not to prove what she herself knows, but rather creating a character in Madelyn Krim who is so forlorn that she has memorised these details, convinced of it being proof of her and Dickinson’s friendship. Women in the same households who find solidarity or mutual support at times of oppression. In other words, this is close to biographical details: the relationship of Madelyn and robot emulate the relationship of Sue and Dickinson. Together they share a bond but in this retelling of the relationship they are able to overcome early misunderstandings, and in the end find a mutual solution which is flight.

After a while with her in their household the wife observes the EDickinsonRepliLuxe and tells, or orders, her to come sit with her:

The wife took note of the petite woman who sat quivering beside her, yet with perfect posture; the wife took note of the glisten of her fine dark hair (that seemed to be genuine, “human hair” and not synthetic) and of her startling smile, the suddenly bared

childlike teeth that were uneven and discolored as aged piano keys. There was something almost carnal in the smile, deeply disturbing to the wife for whom such smiles had been rare in her lifetime and had long since ceased entirely. (51; my emphasis)

Here we see the beginnings of a shift that appears to justify Mrs Krim's belief in the EDickinsonRepliLuxe as real and bodily, not a robot, and as a true companion: "Eagerly the wife waited for the poet to share her poetry with her. For the two were soul mates after all" (50).

Mrs Krim takes up her creative writing from twenty years back. She composes poems she gives to the EDickinsonRepliLuxe for feedback:

The wife's heart beat hard in apprehension, her lower lip trembled. How audacious Madelyn Krim was, to hand over her poems to the immortal Emily Dickinson! Yet, the gesture seemed altogether natural. Everything about *EDickinsonRepliLuxe* in the Krims' household seemed altogether natural. In fact, the wife had ceased thinking of her poet-companion as *EDickinsonRepliLuxe* and when the husband referred to their distinguished houseguest in crude terms, not as *her* but as *it*, the wife turned a blank face to him, as if she hadn't heard. (63)

Mrs Krim rejects facts that contradict her needs – Dickinson's unreality, her husband's crudeness – and instead directs her energy towards creating a sisterhood with a robot. The wife looks at the EDickinsonRepliLuxe as one who shall become her entrusted friend and artist. "Imagining that one day, when she and Emily were truly close as sister-poets" (56), and:

The wife felt a small mean thrill of satisfaction that the poet so clearly preferred her to the husband; there was the unmistakable sisterly rapport between her and Emily, in opposition to the husband who was so obstinately *male*. (63; my emphasis)

When the EDickinsonRepliLuxe does not immediately love and praise Mrs Krim's poem, she is hurt and feels abandoned. Her escape from those feelings is to hide behind her husband (patriarchy), steadily verifying the stereotypical woman/wife, and says: "You know that Harold finds it annoying, and so do I" (64). Mrs Krim does not dare to stand or be alone so when the poet apparently rejects her, she seeks her husband's companionship and support. We

do not find out what the RepliLuxe thinks of the poem, but Mrs Krim assumes the worst: “So, the veil of hypocrisy has been stripped away. ‘Dear Emily’ is not my sister after all” (64). Mrs Krim would rather feel lonely with the immobile Mr Krim with whom she has shared this lonely life with for nine or nineteen years, than risk being alone if the EDickinsonRepliLuxe really rejects her. This seems like a comment on feminism and the safety which is traditionally provided by men, and can perhaps be compared to Dickinson’s safety in her father’s house.

Possession

Mr Krim is an insecure businessman trying to live up to his idea of an alpha male. “They’d said of Harold Krim that he was middle-aged as a boy, which was cruel, and not-true” (66). With the purchase and ownership of the EDickinsonRepliLuxe, Harold can then be the man he thinks he wants to be. He is the monetary provider for the household and according to the contract, the EDickinsonRepliLuxe is his property. At first he is not pleased with the choice: “Why had he given in to his wife’s whim, in the RepliLuxe outlet! He had not wanted to bring a neurotic female poet into his household, he had wanted a vigorous male artist” (48). He undermines the seriousness of his wife’s needs (they are “whims”), and emphasises his view of women as neurotic and men as virile. But the RepliLuxe makes Harold become the alpha male he has dreamt of, and it is clear that also Mrs Krim is in some ways his property, and someone he is advantageous of.

On the stairs, the wife clutched at the husband’s arm so tightly he felt the impress of her fingernails. Breathlessly she murmured, “Only think, Emily Dickinson has come to live with *us*. It can’t be possible and yet, it’s *her*.” The husband, who was feeling shaky and unsettled, said irritably, “Don’t be silly, Madelyn. That isn’t ‘her,’ it’s a manikin. ‘She’ is a very clever computer program. She is ‘it’ and we are her owners, not her companions.” The wife pushed at the husband in sudden revulsion. “No! You’re wrong. You saw her eyes.” (49)

Whenever he can Harold flees to his corporate office, a place associated with male power, i.e. a different kind of community and validation, but an authority he wants to have at home too. The stereotypical behaviour continues with comments like: “I hate riddles. I hate ‘problems.’ I’m going to bed” (62). Harold does not deal with insignificant problems that he associates with women. This is living in a man’s world:

This house she'd come to haunt. *His house.*

As *EDickinsonRepliLuxe* was *his property.*

I can “return” her if I wish. I can “accelerate” her and be rid of her. If I wish. (65)

This disturbing aspect of possession is made clear in the RepliLuxe’s terms and conditions, which has an unsettling overlap with women’s rights within marriage in the 19th century.

RepliLuxe models are copyright by RepliLuxe, Inc., and protected from all incursions, appropriations, and violations of United States copyright law. All RepliLuxe models are the private property of their purchasers and have no civil rights under the Constitution, nor any right to any attorney. RepliLuxe models are barred from seeking residences or “asylum” outside the private domicile of their duly designated purchasers. (65)

This piece of paper underlines to Mr Krim what society already knows – that the male, historically, had ownership over women in marriage. So Harold’s mastery is not based on physical, moral or intellectual superiority – he is the master simply because he owns her.

Male entitlement

“He was five feet nine inches tall, he towered over the poetess who roused him from his torpor of decades by murmuring *Master* and fixing him with eyes of girlish adoration” (67). Standing outside her door – or his as he thinks it really is – Mr Krim enters the RepliLuxe’s room to have sex, i.e. to rape her. In the room he contemplates his loneliness in the form of how he has never been invited into her room. As the readers remember and Harold eventually finds out – it is not possible to rape the RepliLuxe as she has no sex organs.⁵⁶ That makes a very uncomfortable reading, as do the references to Master: “Master, no – this is not worthy of you, Master – ”.⁵⁷ Mr Krim compares himself to a bear on his hind legs but without guilt for the fear she feels for

⁵⁶ Jonathan Glazer’s movie *Under the Skin* (2013) is about Scarlett Johansson as “The Female” – another woman with no sex organs. She wants to find out what it is to be human and questions arise about how much or our identity relates to our given sex. If we do not have one, then who are we? This takes part in modern discussion but also robotic future. What is being? What is it to be alive? What is it to be human?

⁵⁷ There are three master letter drafts, previously mentioned in chapter 2. It is not known for certain who they were for, or if they were sent, but the imagery of these letters is often masochistic and pleading, much like this sentence.

this attack. He removes himself, the perpetrator, from the equation, as is standard in rape stories.⁵⁸ And it is precisely her powerlessness, her helplessness, which arouses: Oates chooses not to give her character a sexual organ because rape is ultimately not about sex, but about power:

The husband liked it that the poet's voice was not coy now, not teasing and seductive but pleading. To be called *master* was an incitement, an excitement, for of course in this household *Harold Krim was master*, a fact to be acknowledged. (68)

This is also a comment on the Monster myth: the idea of a perpetrator as a hooded stranger with a knife, attacking and raping a woman or girl in a back alley.⁵⁹ This Monster barely exists and statistics tell us that 9 out of 10 perpetrators are known to the victim (BBC Newsnight). As with Ada Concannon in chapter 3, this is a comment on a serious problem in today's society. Oates' comment is one way of telling this feminist story of male entitlement.⁶⁰ Harold Krim feels he has been kept from his rights as a married man for many years, and "it was offensive to him that the poet tried to escape from him" (68). He invokes the 19th century condition of hysteria: "the husband knelt above her, a knee on her flat belly to secure her, to calm her, to prevent her from injuring herself in her hysteria" (69). With the EDickinsonRepliLuxe being given no real voice in this attempted rape, the scene replicates that of a thousand assaults before it. We are left with a feeling of wrongness that any rape ever should provoke.

In a rage the husband tore at the [cotton undergarments], he was owed this, he had a right to this, he'd paid for this, under U.S. law this model of EDickinsonRepliLuxe was his possession and he was legally blameless in anything he might do with her or to her for he hadn't even wanted her, he'd wanted a virile male artist, if it hadn't been *her*, this wouldn't be *him*, and so how was he to blame? *He was not to blame*. [...] he was empowered by the authority of possession, *she was his to dispose of as he wished*. It was in the contract, he was a man of the law and respected and feared the law and he was within his legal limits and not to be dissuaded. (69)

⁵⁸ The 2017 book *South of Forgiveness* written by Thordis Elva and her rapist, Tom Stranger, discusses how to make the perpetrator a part of the crime.

⁵⁹ As discussed by Thordis Elva and her rapist, Tom Stranger, on BBC Newsnight. Also, a very similar comment to mine was published in *Aftenposten* Monday 6 November 2017, "- Jenter tåler dårlige sjekketriks, men #metoo handler ikke om fomlete flørting" by Anders Veberg.

⁶⁰In October 2017 the #metoo movement started on social media, with women telling stories of sexual assaults with the hashtag Me Too. As of 8 November the hashtag has more than 553.000 posts on Instagram.

This unfortunately sounds all too familiar and a replication of a story told a thousand times; perhaps the reason for the name, RepliLuxe. And perhaps this is part of the point: a 19th century poet is exported as a robot to a future time where women are still seen by men as objects – and though the legal aspect of marriage and society have changed, male attitudes remain very similar: how else do we explain domestic violence, the possessive viewpoint of ex-boyfriends and husbands (stalking, threatening, even killing), or the spreading of confidential pictures online after a breakup (revenge porn)?

In terms of biography, however, it is possible to argue that we learn a great deal about Dickinson – as a domestic, unpaid, worker; as someone who had very few rights in her father’s home (taken over by her brother after the father’s death in 1874); as someone who had her poems altered by male editors. But we also get a picture of Dickinson in the future as someone who her readers identify with and presume to know – who they too seek to make into what they need. Like Mrs Krim’s vision of the poet and the relationship that is first rejected by Dickinson, but ends up with a possible female elopement. There is an open ending in whether they leave together or separately but it is an interesting contrast to what always happens – namely that women are left behind. Consider Huckleberry Finn who says “Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it” (Twain 188), William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning,” Tennessee Williams’ play *The Glass Menagerie*, or Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Men leave and women are left behind. What is new and exciting about Oates’ story is that now it is a man that leaves home and the women escape. In this thesis we have seen a similar process where the historical Dickinson repeatedly ventures outdoors to greater personal freedom and fulfilment. In this way the authors write a Dickinson for our time, a Dickinson where she and other women authors are no longer confined to their father’s premises but can come outside “into the world of light.”⁶¹

After the rape, Harold sleeps on a couch and runs away for work early in the morning, physically and mentally running away from his crime. Upon his return at night he knows something is wrong as the entire house is dark. The wife is not waiting for his return as has been a task in her life for nine or nineteen years. Mrs Krim and the EDickinsonRepliLuxe have run away, and are no longer possessions of Harold Krim.

⁶¹ Poem by Henry Vaughan, a poet Dickinson enjoyed (Habegger 546).

Conclusion

In this thesis we have seen that different authors use the tools of biography to a greater or lesser extent. They picture an historical personality who lives in Amherst, Massachusetts at the same time period as the original, and they have settings that correspond with her life at various points in terms of schooling, visits to Boston for medical treatment for her eyes, her mother's neuralgia, Valentine Season 1850, publishing posthumously of *Poems: First Edition*, father's periods in Washington, and so on. There are relationships with family and friends – and in one case her relationship to a family servant from Ireland (though this character is fictionalised). They make excerpts of her letters and poems, describe her clothing, domestic interiors and interests – there is much here that is not fictional, that belongs to the realms of fact. At one level these are incorporated into the text in order to create authenticity and above all credibility – that this is at some level a truthful depiction of the poet. Charyn emphasises this by using particular dates and places for chapter headings. But at another level this information is given to us by the author to make her or him look like scholars in a way – like people who are thoroughly acquainted with and able to quote from the letters and poems of Dickinson. Farr often appropriates Dickinson more than the others – she weaves passages of writing into her own fiction which are very close to the original, but slightly tweaked. In short, the facts of Dickinson's life and writing are used by these authors to make them into spokespersons on her behalf – they are promoting themselves as worthy agents.

Do we gain any insights into Dickinson's life from the fictionalising that we did not know before? There may be things she experienced or that happened to her that she did not write down. Things that these authors now are revealing to us. What we learn about biographical fiction is that it is seen as a necessary compensation either for absences in our knowledge about the biographical subject, or as alternative biography – not the life as it was but the life as it should or might have been. Yet for the most part these books do not add to our knowledge of Dickinson's life, but they might in some cases be said to add to our understanding of her writings, which is valuable. Charyn, whose work is probable the one that departs most from the facts of Dickinson's existence, where social contact was strictly controlled and often limited to correspondence, in the sense that she has erotic and dangerous adventures with more than one male figure. These sexual encounters in Charyn's novel include obviously fantastical elements like semi-gothic figures who are on the wrong side of the law, dangerous, almost fantasy or sci-fi figures, and these erotic adventures are with powerful men always outside the home. But he can also be said to draw inspiration from Dickinson's own writing, and as Paula Bennett's book

Woman Poet (1990) shows there is a wealth of sexual imagery in Dickinson's letters and poems that suggest no lack of fulfilment in her imagination or in her life. Such as "I started early - took my dog" (Fr656) which is about an adventure in a port-setting with a personified Sea who almost rapes the speaker, and where there is an audience of mermaids. Dickinson's writings are full of dangerous and sometimes erotic encounters between flowers and bees, or boys and snakes, or a pair of rowers on a stormy sea, and she often uses overtly sexual imagery. To that extent, Charyn is advancing a picture of Dickinson not as a victim of patriarchy but as an adventurer who is not afraid to take risks – the pity is that those risks are usually sexual rather than (say) imaginative or social or ideological. This is Dickinson in bed rather than on the barricades, in a way.

Out of the four authors covered in this thesis, Judith Farr has chosen one of the two genres in which we read Dickinson today. Where Charyn by and large impersonates Dickinson through a first-person narrator: trying to emulate the poet's personae but he does not succeed and we always know that she is the fictional embodiment of tendencies, ideas, emotions, and desires, who gets her expression mostly from the poems. Farr blends sequences of Dickinson's own writing in letters with her own, and there is an uncomfortable sense at times that she is trying to show that she can replicate Dickinson's actual thoughts and language – not the imaginative expression of the personae in the poems.

The extremity of Mann's hatred and the dislike of others make it sometimes closer to a melodrama than a believable biographical fiction. It might be that Farr's wish to distinguish Dickinson as *sui generis* and as misunderstood, has been exaggerated and in this process Farr's voice comes through, more so than Dickinson's voice. It is clear that the novel is wholly dependent on Dickinson as a subject – Farr is not telling a story, she is trying to tell us something about Dickinson. There is a great deal of factual detail, but the characters are flat, and the drama is that of a morally outraged teacher writing about supposed injuries of the past: she seems like a straw man who is used to reaffirm our own sense of Dickinson's superiority. This makes very little or no contribution to our understanding of Dickinson, but Farr does at least show how Higginson, sometimes maligned by Dickinson readers for not having helped her publish (which presupposes she would have wanted to publish in the first place), is shown to have been a loyal and sympathetic supporter who fulfilled an important need in the poet's life: he was there for her, and sometimes that is enough. Farr's Higginson writes to Mann: "But [Emily] was gentle and receptive beyond one's most delicate imaginings, shy and ethereal and like one of her poems you *would* appreciate about rare field flowers" (69).

O'Connor gives a nuanced picture of Dickinson as kind and thoughtful. In the last ten years of her life, Dickinson wrote many notes especially to neighbours, thanking them for, or sending her own, gifts of fruit or flowers or books, consoling them for deaths, sympathising with them during times of illness or danger (from fire, or burglary), or recording Northern lights, weather, sunsets, and visits. In other words, we think of Dickinson as a recluse, but in fact she was a very active member of Amherst society, and her notes were so well appreciated that, as previously mentioned, people recorded the dates on which they arrived and preserved them – which is why we have so many letters today. O'Connor brings out this aspect of Dickinson's personality while also recording the difficulty of her situation at home, where her father and brother had a great say in her life, and where her mother was often ill. At the same time, O'Connor is also interested in giving us more information into the "life" of an Irish migrant woman at that time, even where the conditions of employment were fairly generous as they were with the Dickinsons. There is much more nuance here than in other, more factual treatments, of the life of the Irish servants, in part because O'Connor does not sentimentalise them: the servants are very aware that they belong to a different class,⁶² and Austin is shown to be hostile to them;⁶³ the Irish themselves are made up of various characters, some of whom are very unappealing.

Oates is using the future in clever ways to show us how few rights Dickinson had in her own home, where her father and then (after June 1874) her brother were her legal guardians, and where she had no independent means of her own. At home, she was expected to bake bread daily, to make cakes, to entertain, to play music and read for her parents, to start the fires in the morning, to look after her mother during two long periods of illness (1855-8, 1875-82) and to help with other housework. Although this short work appears to have the least to do with the actual Emily Dickinson, it does help us focus on her social and economic situation, and is very valuable for that. Like Harold Krim says: "She is my property. *It* is my property. Let the poetess scribble a coy little poem out of *that*" (Oates 66).

This quotation brings us back full circle to Dickinson herself – to what extent are these writers obliged to remain true to the facts of her life? First, the facts themselves, though well established, are still controversial (did she love a male figure; a female figure; both? Did she

⁶² "Yesterday Mrs. Dickinson came in and asked if I was able to read and then seemed affronted when I said I was" (O'Connor 32), Ada says; and "[Austin] looks down on Ada. 'You are not in my father's home that his family may purchase leisure,' he says. 'You are here to assist and, for that reason, I do not wish to find you idling on my parents' time'" (50).

⁶³ "Mr. Austin glanced around the kitchen, as if trying to find something to fault, but all was neat and ordered. 'Very well,' he declared, and he was gone as quick as he came" (O'Connor 41), said by Ada.

want to publish, or was her correspondence an alternative form of publication?) – Dickinson’s epistolary production is much used when trying to dissect her inner life, but it is important to remember how fragmented this production really is. There are ethical questions that need to be asked when we deal with this rich and aesthetically promising innovation, as Lackey calls the genre, and this responsibility lies with the reception and perception.

Second, all of the writers make us aware in one way or another that their figures are fictional – O’Connor by using “Miss” in her title, an honorific, and a sign of class and historical distance, Oates by using a robotic Dickinson copy made in the future. It is perhaps Charyn and Farr who are the most suspect in this sense, because they clearly believe that they in some way speak for and almost as Dickinson. And it is this attitude of emulating Dickinson, “Tell All the Truth,” which seems to make Charyn and Farr’s novels more challenging. As Lackey argues about David Ebershoff’s 2000 novel: “it is precisely because of his flagrant reconstruction of the historical record that *The Danish Girl* is an exemplary model of an ethical and responsible biographical novel” (233). Ebershoff changed details to tell something else or more than just biographical facts. This description seems to apply more to O’Connor and Oates’s novels which as this thesis has observed, has made them far more entertaining reads. The diversity in these four novels has proved how difficult it is to define the genre in itself, but also its consequences and realms.

Although it might seem that biographical fiction is a wide open genre filled with opportunities for the author (which it is), there are, as we have seen, challenges and responsibilities and these influence not only the ethicality and discussion around the novel, but also its entertainment value. This thesis’ goal is to be a contribution to the future of this no doubt significant genre.

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