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The Riddle In Emerson's Poem "The Sphinx"

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ABSTRACT

Readers have regarded Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "The Sphinx" as an obscure and enigmatic poem since its publication in *The Dial* in January 1841. To the critic Francis Bowen, the poem "could be read backwards quite as intelligibly as forwards" (*The North American Review* 407) and Hyatt H. Waggoner has called the poem "bafflingly paradoxical" (118). There has been little consensus among the critics about the poem's meaning and its interpretation. "Who or What is the Sphinx? What riddle does the Sphinx pose? Does the poet succeed or fail in his reply to the Sphinx? Does the Sphinx accept or reject the poet's response?" (Reece 12). Thoreau suggested that the Sphinx was "man's insatiable and questioning spirit" (*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau* 229) while Thomas R. Whitaker held it as "one" (184). George Woodberry identifies the Sphinx as "Nature" (171) while Charles Malloy as "the intellect" (275).

KEYWORDS

Sphinx, riddle, clue, puzzle

INTRODUCTION

The clue to the solution of the critical questions posed by the Sphinx lies in Emerson's commentary on the poem, eighteen years after the poem was published. In 1859, Emerson wrote in *The Complete Works*, Volume IX:

I have often been asked the meaning of the "Sphinx." It is this,- The perception of identity unites all things and explains one by another, and the most rare and strange is equally facile as the most common. But if the mind live only in particulars, and see only differences (wanting the power to see the whole – all in each), then the world addresses to this mind a question it cannot answer, and each new fact tears it in pieces, and it is vanquished by the distracting variety. (412)

But Ralph R. Rusk mentioned that it was “over simplified statement” “which does not “fully recognize the contradictory elements in the thought of the poem”(313). The assessment of Rusk undermines Emerson’s statement that is of utmost importance in understanding the poem. The “perception of identity” helps the mid to perceive nature as interconnected and significant rather than separate and detached. The poem asserts Emerson’s principles of reason, unity of nature and oversoul.

The critics who have associated the Sphinx to nature are surely correct as Emerson’s commentary on the poem points to the same direction that it is the world that addresses to the mid of the man. The physical universe, he wrote, “is the standing problem which has exercised the wonder and the study of every fine genius since the world began. . . . There sits the Sphinx at the road-side, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle” (*Works*, I,121). He also refers the universe as an “amazing puzzle” and as an “ancient enigma” (218). The metamorphosis of the Sphinx in the end of the poem shows Emerson’s many changing forms of nature. To Emerson, nature was a “slippery Proteus” (*Works*, IV,121) and a “mutable cloud” (*Works*, II,13). The many forms are of little importance as:

the soul knows them not Genius studies the causal thought, and far back in the womb of things sees the rays parting from one orb, that diverge, ere they fall, by infinite diameters. Genius watches the monad through all his masks as he performs the metempsychosis of nature. (*Works*, II ,13)

In “The Sphinx”, it is a poet who commits to solve just such a riddle. But what is the riddle? Critics have presumed the riddle to be one or the other of the two questions that the Sphinx asks in her extended deliberation. The first of these questions relates to man’s comprehension of his life:

The fate of the man-child,

The meaning of man;

Known fruit of the unknown;

Daedalian plan;

Out of sleeping a waking,

Out of waking a sleep;

Life death overtaking;

Deep underneath deep? (*Works*, IX, 9-16)

The second question is the reason for man’s detachment and isolation from nature:

Who has drugged my boy’s cup?

Who has mixed my boy’s bread?

Who, with sadness and madness,

Has turned my child’s head? (*Works*, II, 61-64)

The supposition that the poem “Sphinx” deals with either of these two questions has led to critical disagreement and one asks if there is any other interpretations of the poem. A reflection of the commentary of Emerson on the poem firmly indicates that there is such a possibility as in his own words, he writes the secrets of nature is “the perception of identity” in all physical things. Such perception “unites all things and explains one by another”; the mind which does not have such perception finds that the world directs to it “a question it cannot answer . . . and it is vanquished by the distracting variety” (*Works*, IX, 412). The answer to the riddle of the Sphinx is then the perception of nature’s “identity”. Nature is a Sphinx, as Emerson puts forward, but a Sphinx in disguise: the first work of one who would work out her riddle is to recognize that she has a riddle. A man of intuition and perception sees nature honestly. Emerson shows his perception of nature by addressing her as “sweet Sphinx” (*Works*, I, 67) and later as “dull Sphinx”(105).

Emerson’s “The Sphinx” focuses on the paradox of nature. Nature is both limiting and liberating and it depends upon how man views nature, whether through reason or understanding. A man who can only see past his senses can answer the questions and the riddle of the Sphinx. Such a man can only answer Sphinx’s questions relating to the purpose of his life and the causes for his detachment with nature. Aware of his incompatibility with nature, such a man can recognize harmony only with the lower orders of nature as nature gives him no proof that his life has correspondence to anything higher than himself. On the contrary, Nature seems to entice him to “descend to the primal harmony of simpler natural entities” (Reece 14).

Emerson, elsewhere in his writing took cognizance of nature’s tendency to demean man by luring him downward. Natural objects, he wrote, “woo and court the eye of the beholder. Every man who comes into the world they seek to fascinate and possess”. Therefore, man should “be on his guard against this cup of enchantments, and must look at nature with a supernatural eye”(*Works*, I 212-13). Much of the ideas of “The Sphinx” is elaborated in a passage that Emerson wrote in his *The Complete Works*, volume II:

The transmigration of souls: that too is no fable. I would it were; but men and women are only half human. Every animal of the barn-yard, the field and the forest, of the earth and of the waters that are under the earth, has contrived to get a footing and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers. Ah, brother, hold fast to the man and awe the beast; stop the ebb of thy soul—ebbing downward into the forms into whose habits thou hast now for many years slid. As near and proper to us is also that old fable of the Sphinx, who was said to sit in the road side and put riddles to every passenger. If the man could not answer she swallowed him alive. If he could solve the riddle, the Sphinx was slain. What is our life but an endless flight of winged facts or events! In splendid variety these changes come, all putting questions to the human spirit. Those men who cannot answer by a superior wisdom these facts or questions of time, serve them. Facts encumber them, tyrannize over them, and make the men of routine, the men of sense, in whom a literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man. But if the man is true to his better instincts or sentiments, and refuses the dominion of facts, as one that comes of a higher race, remains fast by the soul and sees the principle, then the facts fall aptly and supple into their places; they know their master, and the meanest of them glorifies him.(32-33)

The riddle of Emerson’s Sphinx can be resolved: all that it needs is the appearance of a sage who can decipher her riddle and Emerson’s wise man is chiefly the poet. Stanza one of the poem elucidates the Sphinx’s need and yearning for the Poet as a means for her articulation and expression. The Sphinx asks:

Who'll tell me my secret,

The ages have kept?—

I awaited the seer,

While they slumbered and slept;--(*Collected Poems*, 5-8)

This suggests that the sphinx had waited for years for the seer to emerge so that she could tell her secret. The Emersonian Poet is the man who by his uprightness and righteousness says only truth which is past the perception of simple and common men. He is “the healthy, the wise, the fundamental, the manly men, seer of the secret” who “against all the appearance . . . sees and reports the truth”(Works, VIII, 26). In Emerson's words, it is the poet who “turns the world to glass” and “perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidentality and fugacity of the symbol” (Works, III, 20). The universe of material and physical objects, to Emerson, is “the apparition of God” and “the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it”(Works, I, 62).

The poet in Emerson's poem affirms that he is the poet in the highest Emersonian sense. His ability to see the Sphinx from his own experience demonstrates his integrity and character as the Poet who might be the wise man whom the sphinx is waiting to share her secrets. Critic Gayle Smith points out that the Poet's words “prove that he is . . . a lover”(138-43). The Poet is successful in deciphering the riddle of the sphinx due to his love and sensitivity towards the sphinx as “affection blends, intellect disjoins subject and object”. If the Poet had used his intellect only to solve the riddle then he would have definitely failed:

Deep love lieth under

These pictures of mine;

They fade in the light of

Their meaning sublime.(Works, II,69-72)

It is strange that the Sphinx in her own speech has not uttered anything about love but her speech highly suggests her love for mankind is the reason for her questions. The sphinx is a figure of love rather than an ordinary depiction of the inanimate world. She can be associated with the Spirit and the power of love behind creation. Her loving nature merges with the poet's nature as a lover. The Poet's cognizance of this union allow for successful voicing and hence poetry. An analysis of the questions of the sphinx shows her own ability as a poetry and she lets the readers see her questions as poetry. Not only does she see the depreciating state of mankind but she expresses honestly which is another feature of her being a poet. The sphinx sees the truth that always escapes human eyes. The Poet in the poem is aware of the fact that all the entities in the physical world is a manifestation of the Creator's love. He rejects nature's temptation of man of a life of essential harmony with lower objects:

The Lethe of Nature

Can't trance him again,

Whose soul sees the perfect,

Which his eyes seek in vain (Works,II, 77-80).

Man is destined not to go backwards but move forwards consistently to a higher level of spiritual achievement:

To vision profounder,
 Man's spirit must dive;
 His aye-rolling orb
 At no goal will arrive;
 The heavens that now draw him
 With sweetness untold,
 Once found,- for new heavens
 He spurneth the old. (*Works*, II, 81-88)

Though man's fate lies in moving upwards but the poet knows that because of the dispute and conflict in man's own nature, the Spirit's desire to know God can never be realized completely. Hence the phrase, "clothed eternity" (*Works*, I, 119) is used when sphinx describes man. Man can achieve only as incomplete comprehension of God, as spirit alone can know spirit completely and not matter and spirit. The "Universal Power" which the spirit wants, wrote Emerson, "will not be seen face to face" (*Works*, I, 213) but must be indirectly sensed, just as man may "safely study the mind in nature, because we cannot steadily gaze on it in mind; as we explore the face of the sun in a pool, when our eyes cannot brook his direct splendors" (*Works*, I, 197). The unavoidable result of the division of man's nature is that his life is a "flux of moods" in which his awareness "identifies him now with the First Cause, and now with the flesh of his body" (*Works*, III, 72). Hence, man's awareness of God is both entirely valid and at the same time gravely restricted:

How wild and mysterious our position as individuals to the Universe! Here is always a certain amount of truth lodged as intrinsic foundations in the depths of the soul, a certain perception of absolute being, as justice, love and the like, nature's which must be the God of God, and this is our capital stock. This is our centripetal force. We can never quite doubt, we can never be adrift; we can never be nothing, because of this Holy of Holy's, out of sight of which we cannot go. Then on the other side all is to seek. We understand nothing; our ignorance is abysmal,- the overhanging immensity staggers us, wither we go, what we do, who we are, we cannot even so much as guess. We stagger and grope. (*JMN*, V, 307)

With the help of Reason, the study of nature can guide man to the understanding that "a fact is an Epiphany of God" (*Works*, X, 132) but not to the complete knowledge for which his Spirit desires. Every sincerity and truth of man is a limited and restricted truth. It is "the absolute Ens seen from one side. But it has innumerable sides" (*Works*, I, 44). The sphinx contention that, all of the answers of the poet is "a lie" (I, 116) is an expression of this relativism. The Poet's answers are "lies" not in being faulty but in being fractional. It is an omniscient who can know truth completely.

Before the Sphinx response to the Poet's answers is taken into account, one matter needs to be addressed, that is, "What is the relationship to the rest of the poem of the description of man given by the Sphinx in the following lines?"

But man crouches and blushes,

Absconds and conceals;

He creepeth and peepeth,

He palter and steals;

Infirm, melancholy,

Jealous glancing around,

An oaf, an accomplice,

He poisons the ground. (*Works*, II, 49-56)

In the poem, Emerson identifies three definite relationships which may exist between systems of nature and nature in total, structuring them from the simplest to the complex. The first of these relationships written in lines 17-48 is built on forces beneath the intellectual standard. "The elemental harmony which the waves, the palm, the thrush, and the babe enjoy with nature derives from their unconscious obedience to natural law or simple instinct (Reece 16). The second relationship described in Lines 49-56 shows man in a state of discord with nature because of his restraint in understanding of the world. Emerson described them to be "strangers in nature" to whom "all proceedings and events are alien, immeasurable and across a great gulf" (*JMN*, VII, 105). This man is aware of his disharmony with nature but doesn't know to correct it. Emerson has referred to such a man in his commentary in the poem as one whose mind is "vanquished by the distracting variety" of the world which gives to it "a question it cannot answer." Succession, divisions, parts, particles- this is the condition, this is the tragedy of man" (*JMN*, VII, 105). The third relationship is the most desirable relationship to nature is that of the poet to the poem, set forward in lines 67-104. Assisted by Reason, the poet has gained, "the perception of identity", the understanding that helped man to discern the importance of his existence and to be aware of his destiny. Having acquired this understanding, the poet has restored his harmony with nature having his foundation in the knowledge and consciousness of the spirit. To him, nature is no longer a rival, opponent or riddle but is in fact "a minister and a confirmation" (Reece 16). It was of this understanding that Emerson wrote that:

a life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every firm significant of its hidden life and final cause. (*Works*, I, 35).

When the poet is responding to the Sphinx, he is not defending man but is proclaiming his higher vision. He contends that any particular human state is not permanent and that man will evolve. The truth that the Poet states is not justification or confirmation of man's fragility and weakness but as Woodberry has put forward the means of his "deliverance" from them and the promise of man to come (170-171).

The Sphinx's reply to the poet is a complete acceptance that he has seen clearly and spoken honestly. She confirms the poet's words that she, like man, has a spiritual and physical aspect and that she, consequently, has a double kinship with man:

I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow;

Of thine eye I am eyebeam.(II,111-112)

Nature who hides her mysteries from consciousness discloses even her profound secrets to insight and perception. In declaring that, "Thou art the unanswered question"(I, 113), the Sphinx clearly tells that her questions are answered. She validates the poets recognition that having realized nature's identity, he now faces an important challenge of comprehending the limitlessness and infiniteness of his own spirit. The poet's assertion of this perpetual search in Lines 81-88 is summarized by the sphinx:

Thou art the unanswered question;

Couldst see they proper eye,

Always it asketh,asketh;

And each answer is a lie.

So take thy quest through nature,

It through thousand natures ply;

Ask on, thou clothed eternity;

Time is the false reply. (II,113-120)

The changing moods of the sphinx throughout the poem shows the contradiction Emerson understood in the dual role the Sphinx is made to play in her work. Her calm and composed thinking in the first stanza shows her dismay that no man can interpret her mysteries. There is distinction in her mood in the final stanzas when she is full of life, is spirited and energetic when she learns that her riddle has been solved by the poet. A strong bond of harmony and sympathy prevails between nature and man. As man's associate, nature exults in his discovery of truth." Nature", writes Emerson, "stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (*Works*, I,21). On the contrary, the fact that the Sphinx "bit her thick lip" (I, 109), apparently "in discomfiture at man's victory, fits her contrasting, metaphorical role, that of the Theban Sphinx and man's adversary. Such contradiction is inherent in Emerson's decision to frame the poem in terms of the legend, but formal consistency is a small sacrifice for the values of tradition and continuity which the legend imparts (Reece 17).

In her transformation, the Sphinx suggests that man and spirit is united. The Sphinx manifests itself into the elements of water, air, fire and earth:

She melted into purple cloud,

She silvered in the moon;

She spired into a yellow flame;

She flowered in blossoms red;

She flowed into a foaming wave:

She stood Monadnoc's head(II, 123-28).

CONCLUSION

The poem ends with a short summarization by the Sphinx of the philosophical postulation which is a mark of deviation for everything that the poem incorporates:

Who telleth one of my meanings

Is master of all I am. (II, 131-32)

The Sphinx is regarded as the most debatable and mysterious poem of Emerson:

As befits its subject, Emerson's 'The Sphinx' has always been considered especially puzzling, even for the notoriously enigmatic Emerson. Despite the abundance of critical attention the poem has received, scholars continue to debate precisely what the Sphinx is supposed to represent, what her question is, and whether the poet's reply to her is astute or absurd" (Porte and Morris 221).

Emerson emphasized the Over-Soul or the spirit in the Universe and at the same time held an individual or man in high regard. To Emerson, man should strengthen his spiritual life rather than run after material objects: "If man depends upon himself, cultivates himself, and brings out the divine in himself, he can hope to become better and even perfect" (Chang 61). Nature's mystery in "The Sphinx" is her question to man to find a ground. Emerson's emphasis on "perception of identity" is a key to man's comprehension of both nature and himself.

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