The Soul selects her own Society

POEM TEXT

The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door —
To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —
At her low Gate —
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

I've known her — from an ample nation —
Choose One —
Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone —

SUMMARY

The soul chooses her own company, then closes the door on everyone else. She's no longer available to most of the world.

She's not swayed by elegant carriages waiting outside her humble gate, and she wouldn't be swayed even if a powerful king knelt down on her doormat to beg for her company.

I've known her to choose one single person out of a whole country's worth, and then shut down her notice of anyone else, firmly as a stone.

THEMES

SELF-RELIANCE AND INDIVIDUALITY

In “The Soul selects her own Society,” a speaker justifies her decision to lead a mostly solitary life. The speaker argues that the soul (functioning here as a kind of stand in for the speaker herself) naturally rejects the outside world in favor of her own inner circle. In doing so, the speaker champions individuality and self-reliance in a society that often values neither of these qualities.

The speaker begins by claiming that the “Soul selects her own Society”—in other words, that the soul chooses its own companions. These companions could be actual people or a metaphor for the speaker’s thoughts. In either case, the soul then “shuts the Door” in the face of “her divine Majority,” closing herself off from anyone not in this inner circle, no matter how "divine." By casting out the majority of people and ideas, no matter how important they might seem, the speaker chooses a life of relative solitude.

This speaker can't be swayed from her resolve by any worldly power. She comments that the soul is “Unmoved” by “Chariots—pausing— / At her low Gate," and won't open the door even if an “Emperor be kneeling / Upon her Mat.” The fact this speaker wouldn't even let a powerful emperor in shows that she's truly indifferent to prestige. The people and thoughts that make it through the soul's gate are granted access based on the soul's own criteria, not the values of society at large.

All this doesn’t mean that the speaker is totally alone, however. She says at the poem’s end that she will “Choose One” companion from “an ample nation” before closing the “Valves of her attention.” This “One” might be a lover or a close friend; what’s clear is that the speaker is very choosy about who that person will be.

On a metaphorical level, the act of choosing one from “an ample nation” could also be an image of the creative process. The soul might be just as idiosyncratically selective about the ideas that catch her fancy as the people. In either reading, the speaker demonstrates her strong sense of independence and her ability to thrive according to her own rules.

Overall, then, the speaker celebrates the capacity for self-reliance in a society that often values more public virtues like status, wealth, and power. "Unmoved" by these values, the speaker is free to embrace the strength and pleasure of her own tastes and preferences.

Of course, there might be a downside to all this self-reliance. Some readers might take the fact that the speaker closes herself off “Like Stone” to mean that she’s a little too rigid and unyielding in her refusal to engage with the outside world. Then again, maybe she’s simply secure in her convictions. And by describing the soul as a *separate* being from herself, perhaps the speaker shields herself from seeming a little too much "Like Stone" to the uncomprehending world. This, she seems to say, is just the way the *soul* behaves; don't look at me.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

The Soul selects her own Society —

Then — shuts the Door —

"The Soul selects her own Society" starts in the middle of a strange scene. A personified "Soul" chooses the company she prefers, then firmly and unapologetically "shuts the door" on everyone else.

This "Soul" is both decisive and abrupt, and the shape of the lines mirror her attitude. The poem begins with a line of steady iambic pentameter—five da-DUM feet in a row. This is one of the most common meters in English-language poetry, and might set the reader's ear up to expect a familiar form, like a sonnet. But then comes the short, sharp second line: iambic dimeter, a mere two da-DUM feet, like this:

Then — shuts the Door —

This short, crisp line is only emphasized by the strong dash in the middle. That caesura creates a tiny moment of suspense, suggesting that the people outside the soul's "Door" might be waiting to see what she's going to do next. If they're hoping to get in, they're only going to be disappointed. The sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds of these first two lines makes it sound as if the soul has opened and shut her door so fast that the people outside can hear the breeze whistling past. This soul, the reader can already tell, has a firm and uncompromising sense of the company she wants—and doesn't want.

But whose "Soul" is this, anyway? The speaker here writes as if she's a third-person observer, looking on at this soul's unaccountable behavior. But already there's a sense that this speaker might know the soul she describes rather more intimately. Placing herself at a little distance from her own soul, the speaker seems to claim plausible deniability. It's not *me* who chooses only a friend or two and then shuts everyone else out, she suggests: it's just my soul, doing what souls do.

LINES 3-4

To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

It seems that more than a few people wonder whether the soul is going to let them in. There's a "divine Majority" standing outside her "Door," waiting.

"Majority" might mean "most people," but it also has political connotations. A "majority" can be a term for the party in power in a parliament or congress. And if it's "divine," it's a pretty special majority, one with some claim to holiness (or at least to splendor).

But the soul doesn't care about any of that power or glory at all, and seems to scorn it. Even the speaker's use of the term "divine Majority" feels a little tongue-in-cheek, considering the soul has just firmly "[shut] the Door" in that majority's face. Neither this crowd's divinity nor its scale makes any difference at all to this idiosyncratic soul.

The meter reflects this soul's independence. These two closing lines move from iambic tetrameter (four da-DUMs) to another abrupt line of dimeter—and this one's even stronger than the dimeter in line 2. "Present no more" moves from a trochee (DA-dum) to an iamb (da-DUM), putting a firm stress right out in front. No matter how "divine" that "Majority," the soul has emphatically withdrawn from it, obeying only her own rules.

LINES 5-8

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —
At her low Gate —
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

Having shut out a "divine Majority," the soul refuses to host a whole procession of noble visitors who don't meet her private standards. A parade of elegant "Chariots," and even a doorstep visit from a pleading "Emperor," aren't enough to sway her. She doesn't choose her company based on power or status, it seems; her judgments aren't like those of the wider world.

The speaker's anaphora on the word "Unmoved" underlines the soul's queenly disdain for the people who come begging—and further personifies her. She's emotionally "unmoved," certainly, not touched by the appeals of those who long for her company. But perhaps the reader can also imagine her *physically* unmoved, standing by her window watching the wealthy and powerful pass by, but never moving a foot towards her locked front door. Even the "Emperor" who might "be kneeling / Upon her Mat" can't touch her. Perhaps that kneeling emperor, begging for an audience, hints that the speaker isn't moved by romance any more than she's moved by power.

Caesura strengthens that impression: when the speaker observes how "Unmoved || — she notes the Chariots || — pausing—", those mid-line dashes give the reader the sense that the soul is taking a moment to get a good look at these visitors, and then firmly refusing them.

The soul's house feels like an incongruous place for all these visitors. It's a perfectly ordinary home, with a "low Gate" and a humble "Mat" in front of the door. All the soul's power seems to come not any external source, but from her own internal constancy and certainty. Groucho Marx once joked that he wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have him as a member; this soul's parade of fawning admirers suggests that just the opposite is true, too. Everybody wants to belong to a club that refuses to have them as a member, and this soul's stalwart refusal to bend gives her her own quiet power.

LINES 9-10

I've known her — from an ample nation —
Choose One —

Up to this point, the speaker has been a third-person observer. Here, she becomes a character, an "I" who knows the soul like a friend. In the past, it seems, the speaker has watched as the

soul chooses "One" single friend to admit into her inner sanctum. Again, there's an image of the world around the soul as a populous, political, powerful place: a whole "nation" waits on the soul's decisions. But she's interested only in this "One," and she doesn't give her reasons.

Here, the personification of the soul really comes into focus. Casting herself as a separate character observing the soul's ways, the speaker disavows any responsibility for her own selective standards. Observers can't blame the *speaker* for being reclusive or arrogant: it's just that rascally soul, doing what souls do!

But a reader who knows anything about Emily Dickinson might suspect not only that this speaker and the soul she describes are a lot closer than the speaker lets on, but that this poem might be a self-portrait. Dickinson was infamously reclusive, actively avoided literary fame during her lifetime, and developed few but passionate friendships. This poem's speaker seems to cast all such choices as the actions of the soul that knows itself and lives only by its own rules.

That self-knowledge shows up here in the bracing meter. Line 10 uses a rare line of monometer: just one ambiguously-stressed foot (readers might stress either "Choose" or "one"—or even both), as firm as the soul itself, as singular as the "One" she chooses from a whole nation. That monometer will pop up again in the poem's last line.

LINES 11-12

Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone —

Having turned aside from the "ample nation" that waits on her, the soul here closes herself off again. But where in the first stanza she "[shut] the Door" in the faces of the crowd, here she closes "the Valves of her attention — / Like Stone." These final lines use a complex blend of metaphor and simile.

First, consider the metaphor. The "Valves" of the soul's attention suggest a switch has been flipped—an impersonal, mechanical change. But it also suggests that the soul's attention itself is a fluid substance, flowing elsewhere, rushing into the center of her house, where her chosen "One" sits.

Those valves, when they shut down, shut down completely and firmly, "Like Stone." Or is it the *soul* who is "Like Stone" here? The structure of the simile makes both readings possible at once. Either way, the soul, who has been like an immovable queen, now becomes a creature who, from the outside, looks cold as a stone or a machine. That closing line of iambic monometer ("Like Stone") makes the transformation sound firm and final.

But this soul doesn't seem truly stony. She seems to keep her choice of "Society" close to her, near her heart: she's only like a stone to the "divine Majority" that waits outside, longing to know what on earth is going on in there. And the very images of this poem, from the gilded "Chariots" to the begging "Emperor," suggest that this soul's inner world is a highly colored one. Her exterior might be stony, but her insides are full of imagination and passion—and she knows exactly the "Society" that suits that energy.

SYMBOLS

THE EMPEROR

The imagined "Emperor" who comes to beg for the soul's favor (and the "Chariots" that herald his arrival) symbolizes worldly power and success. The soul doesn't care two beans about this emperor when he comes calling, suggesting she has little time for the things the outside world might consider important: wealth, status, and acclaim mean nothing to her. Perhaps there's a hint here that the soul isn't moved by romantic gestures, either: the kneeling emperor might be asking (unsuccessfully) for her hand in marriage.

While the world has no power over the soul, the soul seems to have some power over the world! After all, the "Chariots" and "Emperor" are abasing themselves in front of the soul's humble house, with its everyday "low Gate" and "Mat." Perhaps the sovereign soul has a power beyond the worldly, as well as in opposition to the worldly.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing — / At her low Gate — / Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling / Upon her Mat —"

THE SOUL'S HOUSE

The speaker uses an extended metaphor comparing the soul to a house. More specifically, the soul seems to *have* a house, with doors, a gate, and a doormat, but the soul also seems to *be* that house, with the power both to let people into her inner world, and to keep them out.

This house metaphor, in turn, reflects the way the speaker perceives of the soul: as something closed off and self-contained, with the capacity to shut out unwelcome guests. The idea of the soul being/having a house also evokes the symbolic comfort and intimacy of the home.

Also note that this house isn't fancy: it has only a "low Gate," not a drawbridge, and there's a perfectly ordinary "Mat" out in front for visiting emperors to kneel on. But its normalcy is also part of its power. While the soul's house isn't anything special, it's also completely her own.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “shuts the Door —”
- **Line 6:** “her low Gate —”
- **Line 8:** “her Mat”

POETIC DEVICES

SIBILANCE

The sibilant opening of "The Soul selects her own Society" set the tone for the whole poem. Sibilance comes in different flavors: it can be soft and delicate, or menacing and snaky. Here, both of those tones come into play. Listen to the repeated /s/ and /sh/ sounds in the first two lines:

> The Soul selects her own Society —
> Then — shuts the Door —

This is a poem about the power of a quiet life, and that power is evident in the very sounds of these words. There's a hint of a whisper in those sounds, but also the hint of a hiss: the "Soul" the speaker describes is shy and retiring, but forceful, too, in her own strange way. The repeated /s/ sounds here make it seem as if the soul isn't just politely shutting the door, but closing it so fast that the reader can hear the breeze whistling around its edges.

But this sibilance is also hushed and private, suggesting that while there's plenty going on behind the soul's closed door, it happens very quietly indeed—and its power might not always be evident to the "divine Majority" standing outside.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Soul selects,” “Society”
- **Line 2:** “shuts”

PERSONIFICATION

The soul is personified throughout this poem as a "she": a queenly figure with her own ideas about how one should live one's life. This reclusive, exacting "Soul" doesn't seem troubled by the outside world's opinions. She's "Unmoved" by emperors and chariots, and she's unwavering in her decisions, shutting down "the Valves of her attention" as soon as she's satisfied with the company she's selected.

Of course, there's something odd about personifying a soul, since the soul is *part* of a person. If the "Soul selects her own Society," isn't the person to whom the soul *belongs* selecting that society?

The poem's speaker is well aware of this, and she's playing a sly little trick with the personification here. By insisting that it's the "Soul" who does all this selecting and shutting out, she absolves herself of any accusations of stoniness or haughtiness that the "divine Majority" might care to throw at her. But she also suggests that the soul, the deepest part of the self, truly does have its own unaccountable, unconquerable ideas about what it likes and dislikes.

Personification here gives the soul a grandeur and weight that perhaps the speaker couldn't claim if she were speaking as a regular Jane.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

CAESURA

Dickinson often uses caesura for dramatic effect, and "The Soul selects her own Society" has some particularly strong examples. Here, caesura emphasizes the soul's unwavering commitment to her own ideals.

Consider, for starters, the caesurae in the second stanza. Each time the speaker says the soul is "Unmoved," the dash that follows suggests that the soul has taken the time to look out her window at the "Chariots" or the "Emperor"—and then rejected them as unworthy of her inner sanctum. It's not that she's too shy to let the "Emperor" in, or that she doesn't realize he's there: she's thinking it over for a second, and then dismissing him.

In the first stanza, meanwhile, the little break between "Then" and "shuts the Door" evokes anticipation, as if the "divine Majority" is waiting on tenterhooks to see if anyone else is going to get into the soul's private chambers. They're about to be disappointed.

Caesura appears again in line 9, where it stresses the idea that the soul will pick only one friend from a whole "nation." And finally, in line 11, caesura creates a mood of queenly consideration as the soul shuts down "the Valves of her attention," unhurried but adamant.

Across the poem, then, caesura evokes both the soul's quiet, regal power and the breathless attention of the world outside.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “Then — shuts”
- **Line 5:** “Unmoved — she,” “Chariots — pausing”
- **Line 7:** “Unmoved — an”
- **Line 9:** “her — from”
- **Line 11:** “Then — close”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora adds a dramatic flourish to the poem's second stanza, in which the personified soul roundly rejects all who try to beg their way into her inner circle:

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —
At her low Gate —
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

The anaphora here puts the word "Unmoved" right at the front of these two sentences, underlining just how imperturbable this soul is. Most people might be at least a little interested if a procession of chariots rolled up to their gate, but this soul doesn't bat an eyelid. She's "Unmoved" emotionally, but perhaps also physically: she doesn't seem to be rushing to the door to get a look at all the people begging for her attention.

The anaphora also creates a feeling of escalation. The soul is first unmoved by "the Chariots — pausing — / At her low Gate," by ornate carriages pulling up outside. But then she's equally unmoved by "an Emperor [...] kneeling / Upon her Mat"—a much more personal, up-close appeal! By putting these two scenes right next to each other and shaping them in the same way, the speaker insists that the soul won't budge for *anyone* who doesn't meet her inscrutable standards.

Anaphora thus draws attention both to the soul's stillness and to her independence.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Unmoved"
- **Line 7:** "Unmoved"

METAPHOR

The poem uses an extended metaphor that compares the speaker's acts of self-reliance to not letting people inside a house—to metaphorically shutting the door in others' faces or keeping them waiting outside this house's gates. The soul in the poem also seems to *be* a kind of house, which speaks to the way the speaker perceives of the soul: as something intimate, self-contained, and wholly personal. (For the symbolism of the house, the chariots, and the emperor, take a look at the Symbols section.)

A more discrete metaphor and its cousin simile appear at the end. In the final lines, the speaker writes of the way the soul shuts down once she's found her single favored friend:

I've known her — from an ample nation —
Choose One —
Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone —

Here, a simile follows close on a metaphor's heels.

First, there's the metaphor of the soul's attention as an instrument with "Valves," devices that control the flow of air or liquid. There's something both mechanical and magical about this image. If attention has "Valves," it's just a machine, and can be switched on and off at will. But there's also the suggestion here that attention is the mysterious fluid *within* that machine, an element like air or water. The reader might imagine this fluid attention rushing into the secret chambers of the soul's house, where she hosts her few confidants.

The soul doesn't just close down those "Valves," she shuts them "Like Stone." This complex simile might refer to how tightly those valves lock down—or it might refer to the stony resolve of the speaker herself, who knows exactly what she does and doesn't want.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Then — close the Valves of her attention —"
- **Line 12:** "Like Stone —"

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in "The Soul selects her own Society" features a dash, one of Dickinson's most-loved punctuation marks; readers can find plenty of dashes in just about any Dickinson poem they'd care to seek out. In this poem, dashes bring the lines to a halt, but, given that many lines' syntax stretches across the break, they *also* give those lines a strange momentum, urging the reader on. There's a push and pull between end-stop and actual syntax here, with the speaker inserting pauses between lines that seem like they *should* run smoothly together (i.e., be enjambed).

For example, take a look at the end-stops in the first stanza:

The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door —
To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

The phrase "shuts the Door" is a complete phrase in its own right, but it's also cut off from the preposition that elaborates on the thought. It's not just that the Soul "shuts the Door," but that she shuts this door *in the face of someone*: "To her Divine Majority." Something similar happens between lines 5 and 6; the sentence could end after "Pausing," as the dash seems to imply it does. Yet line 6 seems to retroactively enjamb line 5, adding the prepositional phrase that details the scene more fully. These "Chariots" aren't simply "pausing," but rather pausing "At her low Gate."

Why is the speaker doing this? Well, keeping each line contained with an end-stop lends the poem a sense of control and containment—the same sense of control and containment that the "Soul" exerts over her house. At the same time, the fact that many lines complete their thoughts only after a line break adds momentum and anticipation to the poem. It also perhaps suggests the breathless energy of the "divine Majority" as they wait to see whether the soul will "select" them—and the soul's

silent deliberation over whom she's willing to admit.

Lines 7-8 are the only ones that don't use an end-stop:

> Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
> Upon her Mat —

The enjambment here breaks from the established pattern. As one line rolls easily into the next, the reader gets the sense that it's similarly easy for the soul to decide not to let this emperor in.

Overall, the end-stopped lines here give the poem a push-pull rhythm that mirrors the ebb and flow of attention and desire the poem describes.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Society —"
- **Line 2:** "Door —"
- **Line 3:** "Majority —"
- **Line 4:** "more —"
- **Line 5:** "pausing —"
- **Line 6:** "Gate —"
- **Line 8:** "Mat —"
- **Line 9:** "nation —"
- **Line 10:** "One —"
- **Line 11:** "attention —"
- **Line 12:** "Stone —"

VOCABULARY

Society (Line 1) - Here, "society" means the company of other people.

Majority (Line 3) - Most of something—in this case, most of the people in the world. This can also mean "the party with the most seats in government," suggesting that the soul is unmoved by power!

Chariots (Line 5) - A two-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle, often used in ancient warfare and racing.

Emperor (Line 7) - The ruler of an empire.

Ample (Line 9) - More than enough, plentiful.

Nation (Line 9) - A country, or a country's people.

Valves (Line 11) - Devices that stop or start the flow of a substance through a pipe or a hole.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Dickinson's poems, "The Soul selects her own Society" doesn't use an existing form (like the sonnet), but invents its own. This brief poem uses three quatrains (four-line stanzas), almost every line of which ends in one of Dickinson's favorite punctuation marks: the dash. (See the Poetic Devices entry on end-stopped lines for more on those dashes.) Dickinson's unusual choices around meter and rhyme here also contribute to the poem's idiosyncratic effect; read more about that in the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections.

There's a simplicity to these three punchy quatrains that mirrors the personified soul's matter-of-fact rejection of the "divine Majority." The soul gives no explanation for her choices: she simply makes them. The poem's brief and unusual form reflects this soul's unapologetic independence.

METER

"The Soul selects her own Society" uses an unusual, irregular meter. This meter takes a moment to reveal its strangeness. The first line is perfect iambic pentameter—that is, five da-DUM feet in a row, like this:

> The Soul | selects | her own | Soci- | ety —

This is one of the more common meters in English-language poetry. But the speaker follows it up with something much less predictable:

> Then — shuts | the Door —
> To her | divine | Major- | ity —
> Present | no more —

While the feet stay predominantly iambic, there's also a trochee (DA-dum) in there at line 4, and the meter is all over the place, with a pair of two-beat dimeter lines and a single four-beat line of tetrameter.

The rest of the poem follows a similar (but still unpredictable) rhythm, moving back and forth between longer and shorter lines. That pattern gets even more pronounced in the final stanza, when the speaker uses two lines of rare iambic monometer, just one da-DUM: "Choose One" and "Like Stone."

This peculiar meter mirrors the poem's emotions. Just as the soul reaches out to "select her own Society," then "shuts the Door" on everyone else, the meter answers a long, reaching line with a short, thumping retort. That retort only gets firmer at the poem's end: those lines of monometer are as heavy and lone as the "One" and the "Stone" they describe.

RHYME SCHEME

Like many of Dickinson's poems, "The Soul selects her own Society" uses an irregular rhyme scheme. But the first stanza might lull the reader into a false sense of security. It runs like this:

> ABAB

ABAB rhyme schemes are pretty common in English-language

poetry, so no surprises there. But things get weirder in the second and third stanzas. These still follow an ABAB scheme, but all of their rhymes are slant, like the partial match between "One" and "Stone," or the even more distant and tenuous connection between "pausing" and "kneeling."

Perhaps these almost-rhymes suggest the soul's selectivity. The rhymes of the first stanza, in which the "Soul selects her own Society," match perfectly, but in the following stanzas, in which the soul unflappably shuts out her unchosen visitors, are all just a little out of joint. This is a "Soul" who will admit only the best-matched company to her inner circle.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Soul selects her own Society" tells the reader a lot about herself without describing herself directly at all.

At first, the poem's speaker seems to be a third-person watcher, describing the ways of the personified "Soul" from a slight distance. But then, in the last stanza, the speaker suddenly becomes an "I," someone who *knows* the soul she's been describing. While this seems to put the speaker at a distance from the soul, the reader gets the distinct sense that soul and speaker might actually be parts of the same being—not least because this reserved soul seems to have a lot in common with the shy, reclusive Dickinson herself.

Perhaps distancing herself from her own soul gives the speaker impunity to be as choosy about her company as she likes: after all, it's not *she* who refuses to admit any more people into her life, but her *soul*.

If this speaker and this soul are indeed one and the same, then this speaker is solitary, queenly, and unflappable. Worldly power doesn't seem to mean much to her; she's happy to ignore an "Emperor" in favor of her own choice of friends. She seems to find power and pleasure in her solitude and selectivity. Her images of emperors and chariots also suggest that she's got a vivid imagination to keep her company!

SETTING

This poem isn't set in any specific physical place, but in a metaphorical one: a locked house from which the "Soul" rejects unwanted visitors. In the first stanza, the soul merely "shuts the Door" on those visitors; later, she watches "Unmoved" as they loiter hopefully outside "her low Gate." Something about the procession of "Chariots" and the desperate "Emperor" suggests that the soul's house is fit for royalty. But then, the lowness of that gate and the everyday "Mat" in front of the door also hint that this house is a perfectly normal and humble one. The soul's home, the poem suggests, doesn't have to be a palace to be under a queenly command.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Like the reclusive "Soul" of this poem, Emily Dickinson led a quiet life away from the public eye, never seeking literary fame. Although Dickinson printed a few poems anonymously during her lifetime, no one knew the scope and greatness of her work until after her death in 1886, when her sister found a secret trove of poetry in her room. Many of these poems were published in an 1890 collection, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, which included "The Soul selects her own Society"—a poem written many years earlier in 1862.

Dickinson was a strikingly inventive poet, and her work stands out from that of her mid-19th-century contemporaries. She did, however, share an interest in the sublimity of nature with Transcendentalists like Walt Whitman, and the earlier English Romantics (especially William Wordsworth) had a big influence on her deceptively simple style.

"The Soul selects her own Society" is a prime example of Dickinson's willingness to play with rhyme, meter, and diction. But these innovations weren't always welcomed: Dickinson's early editors aggressively reshaped her poetry to make it more palatable to the public. It was only in 1955, when the scholar Thomas H. Johnson published a more faithful edition of the complete works, that readers could fully appreciate Dickinson's ingenuity.

Dickinson would become one of the most important figures in American poetry in the generations following her death. Writers from Sylvia Plath to Evie Shockley—among many, many others—have claimed her as a major influence on their work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Soul selects her own Society" was written in the early 1860s, right in the tumultuous heart of the American Civil War. This era was the most productive period in Dickinson's career: she wrote nearly half of her poems over the course of the war. While "The Soul selects her own Society" does not directly address current events, Dickinson was certainly aware and involved, and even contributed a few poems to a newspaper promoting a fundraising effort for the Union Army.

A Massachusetts native, Dickinson was firmly on the Northern side of the conflict. Although "The Soul selects her own Society" doesn't make any direct allusions to the world around Dickinson (and, indeed, seems keen to shut the world out!), perhaps the deep ethical divisions between Americans during this period influenced the poem's interest in self-reliance and choosing one's company carefully.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recitation of the poem by reader Julie Harris. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz4leqvo0tI)
- Dickinson's Biography — Read a short overview of Dickinson's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson)
- Emily Dickinson Museum — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum. (https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/)
- Dickinson at the Brooklyn Museum — Learn about a Dickinson exhibit at a feminist art installation. Here, Dickinson (among other notable women) is commemorated with a place setting at a massive triangular table, representing women's creative power through history. (https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/emily_dickinson#:~:text=Dickinson's%20poems%20have%20had%20a,seems%20to%20defy%20its%20restrictions.)
- Emily Dickinson's Letters — Investigate Dickinson's correspondence with her close friend and editor Thomas Higginson. (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/10/emily-dickinsons-letters/306524/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- A Bird, came down the Walk
- A narrow Fellow in the Grass
- As imperceptibly as grief
- Because I could not stop for Death —
- Hope is the thing with feathers
- I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
- I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
- I'm Nobody! Who are you?
- I started Early — Took my Dog —
- I taste a liquor never brewed
- Much Madness is divinest Sense -
- My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun
- Success is counted sweetest
- Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
- There's a certain Slant of light
- This is my letter to the world
- Wild nights - Wild nights!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Zevanove, Samantha. "*The Soul selects her own Society.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Oct 2020. Web. 6 Jan 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Zevanove, Samantha. "*The Soul selects her own Society.*" LitCharts LLC, October 1, 2020. Retrieved January 6, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/emily-dickinson/the-soul-selects-her-own-society.