

Isolation and Identity in Dickinson: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Emily Dickinson's poem *The Soul Selects Her Society* through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens, with particular focus on the portrayal of identity. Using Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche, the id, ego, and superego, this research investigates how the soul's selective withdrawal functions as a defense mechanism for preserving selfhood. The analysis interprets the poem not as a mere act of social retreat but as a conscious assertion of individuality, in which the ego regulates instinctual desires and resists external pressures. Findings reveal that the soul's rejection of societal appeals reflects the ego's effort to maintain psychological boundaries, safeguard authenticity, and establish identity. Connections to Dickinson's reclusive lifestyle and poetic style further demonstrate how her personal life resonates with this act of inward loyalty. Ultimately, the poem emerges as a literary articulation of the psyche's negotiation of selfhood, showing identity as an active construction achieved through autonomy, resistance, and self-protection.

Keywords: Ego, Emily Dickinson, Freud, Identity, Psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

Poetry often serves as a medium for articulating inner experience, allowing writers to translate psychological struggles into artistic form (Abrams, 1971). Emily Dickinson, one of the most introspective poets of the nineteenth century, is particularly known for exploring themes of identity and selfhood. In *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*, Dickinson presents the soul as deliberately choosing its relationships and shutting out others, a gesture that foregrounds self-definition over social conformity (Kusumaningrum & Yastanti, 2023).

Previous scholarship has frequently addressed Dickinson's identity from symbolic or biographical perspectives (Doost & Jamili, 2014), but its psychological dimensions remain less examined. By employing Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this study shifts the focus inward, analyzing how the poem dramatizes the psyche's negotiation of identity through the interaction of the id, ego, and superego.

Through the imagery of selection, resistance, and final closure, the poem conveys identity not as a static trait but as a conscious construction. The act of the "Soul" shutting its door reflects the ego's role in asserting boundaries, rejecting the demands of the id and the impositions of the superego in order to preserve individuality. This inward stance resonates with Dickinson's own secluded lifestyle, suggesting that her poetic voice becomes a site where identity is deliberately affirmed against external expectation.

Thus, the central question guiding this study is How is identity portrayed in Emily Dickinson's *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory? Through the poem's imagery and tone, Dickinson presents identity as an active, deliberate construction. The "Soul" is portrayed as aware of both the internal self and the external world, making choices that align with her true nature and rejecting those that do not. This conscious stance mirrors Dickinson's own life decisions and affirms her as a poet whose work reflects a deeply formed identity. Viewed through Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the interaction of the id, ego, and superego, this process of identity formation can be understood as a dynamic negotiation between instinctual drives, moral values, and the conscious self that chooses authenticity.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach through close reading of Emily Dickinson's *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*. Primary data consisted of the poem itself, complemented by biographical insights into Dickinson's life. Secondary sources included scholarly works on psychoanalysis in literature and prior Dickinson criticism. The analysis applied Freud's structural model of the psyche, id, ego, and superego, to interpret the poem's psychological dimensions. Textual evidence was examined to reveal how imagery, diction, and structure reflect the ego's role in regulating internal impulses and external pressures. Thematic interpretation was then connected to Dickinson's personal context, highlighting how her poetic practice mirrors the identity-building process reflected in the text.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Soul selects her own Society (303) Emily Dickinson

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 —

The opening stanza of *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* establishes the soul as a self-determining entity:

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

The imagery of choosing and closing indicates a conscious assertion of boundaries. In Freud's structural model, this act may be read as the ego asserting its role as mediator between instinct and social demand. Freud (1923, p. 25) states that "*the ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id which contains the passions.*" The "shutting of the Door" functions as a symbolic act of ego defense, preserving stability by regulating the terms of engagement with the external world. Biographically, this aligns with Dickinson's own life, which, as Habegger (2001, p. 314) notes, "*cultivated withdrawal not as weakness, but as strength, the means by which she preserved her creative authority.*" Thus, both poem and life situate identity not as passively inherited but actively constructed through boundary-making. Erikson's account of identity reinforces this point, arguing that "*the sense of ego identity is the accrued confidence that one's inner sameness and continuity are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others*" (1968, p. 208). Dickinson's emphasis on selectivity suggests that the "sameness" she sought was internal coherence rather than external affirmation. The second stanza intensifies this assertion of independence by staging the soul's refusal to be swayed:

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

Here, even the highest figures of power and prestige fail to elicit response. In psychoanalytic terms, the "Chariots" and "Emperor" may be seen as projections of id-desires (ambition, recognition) and superego-demands (obedience to authority, deference to hierarchy). Freud (1923, p. 40) characterizes the superego as "the representative of the moral demands of society." Yet the poem emphasizes that the soul remains "Unmoved," signifying the ego's refusal to capitulate either to desire or to authority. Bennet (2010, p. 88) describes this refusal as "psychic autonomy emerging through acts of resistance against the seduction of external validation." Dickinson's personal decision to reject publication during her lifetime illustrates this same refusal; as Cameron (1992, p. 55) observes, "her refusal of the marketplace was itself a mode of authorship, a way of preserving her own terms of identity." The poem, therefore, mirrors the lived strategy: the safeguarding of identity by privileging inner truth over external acclaim. The closing stanza brings this autonomy to its most decisive form:

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

Here, the narrowing of choice to "One" and the image of "Valves" closing "like Stone" dramatize a final, unyielding closure. Freud (1930, p. 69) describes sublimation as "the process by which instinctual energies are diverted into culturally valuable achievements." Dickinson's selective withdrawal can be read as sublimation: the outward energy of social connection is redirected into the inward work of poetic creation. The image of "Stone" emphasizes permanence and defense, underscoring what Johnson (2016, p. 142) calls "an act of sovereignty, preserving the sanctity of her inner realm against the claims of society." Yet Freud (1923, p. 32) warns that ego defenses can become excessively rigid, producing isolation instead of integration. This tension is embedded in the poem itself: identity is preserved, but only at the cost of near-total exclusion.

Taken together, the poem moves from selective assertion, through resistance to external seduction, to final closure. This progression mirrors Dickinson's own trajectory, as she gradually withdrew into her Amherst home, cultivating an inner life over social engagement. Sewall (1974, p. 213) remarks that her seclusion "was not the absence of life but a reorientation toward the life within." In psychoanalytic terms, the poem dramatizes the ego's successful mediation, which ensures survival of identity against the competing claims of id, superego, and external pressures.

Thus, the findings show that Dickinson's construction of identity emerges through a psychoanalytic process of negotiation. The poem depicts the ego not as passive mediator, but as an active architect of selfhood, setting boundaries, resisting allure, and closing itself into permanence. Identity, for Dickinson, is not fluid accommodation to society but an act of sovereignty achieved through deliberate isolation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Emily Dickinson's poem "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" portrays isolation not as mere withdrawal, but as a deliberate psychological defense shaped by the interaction of the id, ego, and superego. The findings demonstrate that the id's impulse for freedom and authenticity drives the soul to seek independence, while the superego's demand for conformity and societal approval is firmly rejected. The ego mediates by affirming the soul's final decision to close itself off from the world, illustrating how isolation becomes both a self-protection strategy and a way to preserve personal identity.

The findings also show that Dickinson's choice of words like "shuts the door" and "divine majority" emphasizes a final, irreversible decision that reflects her refusal to let external voices dictate her inner life. This aligns with Dickinson's personal experiences of seclusion, where she isolated herself not out of weakness, but to safeguard her individuality and poetic voice. Thus, what is discovered here is that isolation functions as an active assertion of identity rather than passive retreat, allowing Dickinson to negotiate between inner desire and external pressures.

In essence, the research uncovers that Dickinson's poem embodies the psychoanalytic conflict between self and society. Isolation becomes the resolution of this conflict—where identity is preserved through withdrawal, and individuality is sustained by refusing the intrusion of external expectations. This illustrates how the poem is not only a reflection of Dickinson's life, but also a psychological case study of the human struggle between authenticity and conformity.

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