

## Readers and “The Soul Selects Her Society”

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the reader’s role in interpreting Emily Dickinson’s poem 303. In “The Soul Selects,” Dickinson manipulates and puzzles her readers through the use of ambiguity and indeterminacy. She deliberately made her poetry hard because she wanted only elite readers to read and get her. Poem 303 supports this idea about Dickinson because it mentions an act of selection that is performed by a certain soul. As the reception history of the poem demonstrates, many readers have approached the poem with curiosity and with the hope that he/she could reveal the referent of the “soul” and the “society.” Those many interpretations, however, do not help us establish the “real meaning” of the poem. Rather, they help demonstrate the poem is about reading itself and that the act of selection is a figurative reference to the act of reading and interpreting as practiced by different critics and readers.*

### 1. Introduction

Reading Emily Dickinson’s (ED) poetry is a very intriguing experience for any reader. Her poems are open to various interpretations yet they lead the reader throughout by dropping clues that make it possible to link the poetry to multiple but very different meanings. “The Soul Selects Her Own Society” (303) is a revealing example of what Wolfgang Iser (1993:6) calls a “performative utterance” in which the subject of the poem is the creation of the reader, not the reflection of an objective reality that the careful reader can grasp. Iser argues that reader participation in creating meaning varies from one text to another depending on the degree of indeterminacy in the text. The more indeterminate the text is, the greater the effort the reader has to make. This is because, unlike “dyadic interaction” in social contexts, the interaction between reader and text is characterized by the total lack of the possibility of “verification,” that is, resorting to the other interlocutor to clarify any ambiguities. This lack of verification is particularly relevant in the case of Emily Dickinson who did not publish in her lifetime, a situation that resulted in the impossibility of having dialogue with her readers.

Reading literature, then, is particularly difficult because of the special nature of creative writing. But what happens if the poet uses her/his talent to intentionally write difficult literature – that is, when the

poet’s main interest is to create difficulty and enhance ambiguity? ED belonged to this category of poets. She wrote difficult poetry as an expression of her elitist artistic talent. As Betsy Erkkila (1992:20) argues, ED adhered to “an essentially aristocratic and Carlylean notion of literature as the production of mind and genius for eternity.” According to elitist views, great poetry could be understood only by an exclusive intellectual class sophisticated enough to appreciate the intricacies of the text. We could assume that ED shared such ideas about literature because she wrote poems that consisted of layers of signification which lead the reader to confront many possibilities and interpretations. ED believed that only an intellectual elite could tackle her poems. It is not that these readers would grasp the hidden meaning of the poems, but they would realize the greatness of the poet. They would be obsessed with the poet, read and write more about her. This way the poet will live through these readers. Working from Iser’s theory of reading, I argue in this paper that “The Soul Selects” is an enactment of ED’s poetics. The poem addresses the difficulty of reading great poetry. However, ED does not do so by stating the idea directly but, true to her own belief, by writing a poem that is an example of her own technique. The poem is about reading poetry. However, because of the ambiguity in the text, the act of “choosing a reading” is expressed in a way that could be compared to other acts of choice such as the speaker’s choice of God, of a lover, of her decision not to publish, or to all or some of these factors. The poem does not give answers, but it seduces the readers and arouses their curiosity to unravel the mystery of the soul. The poem thus becomes a material example of ED’s ability to manipulate readers and puzzle them through the use of ambiguity and indeterminacy.

## 2. Ambiguity in “The Soul Selects Its Own Society”

Starting with the text of the poem is the best way to pinpoint the possible reasons for ambiguity in the poem:

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— (l. 1-12)

Literally, the poem says that there is a certain soul that selects its own society then would not admit anyone else to that society. However, this literal meaning cannot be established decisively because of the ambiguity that is inherent in this poem. First, it is syntactically indeterminate. Is “Present” a verb or an adjective? And are “Shut” and “close” transitive or intransitive verbs? Then there is the problem of choosing among variant readings of the text. Should one choose “Lids” or “Valves”? “Obtrude” or “Present”? “mat” or “rush mat”? The greatest mystery, however, lies in the “society” and the “one” referred to by the speaker. The poem opens with the definite article “the” which indicates that the “Soul” was mentioned before or will be modified by a phrase or clause. “The Soul,” however, remains indefinite. It is an extratextual soul spoken of as being understood by the reader. This definite soul, which is actually indefinite, chooses a “One,” any one. Thus the poem becomes a riddle that invites critics to puzzle it out. Regardless of the interpretation, readers feel that the “Soul” is very exclusive and selective in her choice. Readers feel the majestic atmosphere surrounding the soul and they wish to join that exclusive class of “chosen” people. The relationship between text and reader becomes, argues Robert Smith, a relation between a seducer and a seduced. The reader becomes personally involved and experiences “all the attendant misery that accompanies an insoluble *personal* problem” (Smith 1996:99). The reader’s obsession with the poem may make him/her turn to the life of the poet in the hope of finding the solution to the mystery. ED, Smith argues, “become[s] the object of her reader’s desire. Disembodied, she turned herself into a pure appearance, a useful artificial construct with which to trap the desires of the amazed other” (*ibid.*:15). We always desire for the things that are out of our own reach. The poem poses a challenge to the reader’s intelligence. As ED says in poem 1222, the puzzle has to be very hard lest the reader know it easily and then dismiss it.

The riddle we can guess  
We speedily despise—  
Not anything is stale so long  
As Yesterday’s surprise— (l. 1-4)

ED, then, wrote with the intention of concealing rather than revealing. She wrote riddling poems that are open to different interpretations because of their syntactic and semantic indeterminacy. In the following section, I will look at the influence the poem’s indeterminacy had on the way critics read it throughout the twentieth century.

### 3. Reception History of “The Soul Selects Its Own Society”

Because of the ambiguities of the poem, it is no wonder that many critics have viewed it as a biographical riddle to be solved. For example, many have attempted to identify the “One” whom the soul selects. Father Simon Tugwell argues that the soul selects God and rejects the rest of the world. Tugwell (1969) prefers the variant “Lids” to “Valves” because the former indicates the closing of the eyes in death which takes the soul to God. Charles R. Anderson (1960) supports the religious reading of the poem too and argues that the word “divine” indicates that the capitalized “One” is God. The “rush mat” suggests a nunnery, suggesting that the poet prefers the God of Heaven to earthly kings. But then he adds that the “One” could also refer to the Muse and to ED’s decision to start writing poetry. This afterthought demonstrates that perplexity of a single critic over the poem. Robert Luscher reads the poem within the context of an essay by Emerson on “Friendship.” Luscher (1984:115) states that “the poem may dramatize the soul selecting from an ample nation of texts the very essay by Emerson.” Judith Farr (1992) sees the one as being Sue, Dickinson’s sister-in-law and very close friend. Many other critics have tried to find links between the poem and choices made by ED throughout her life.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the indeterminacy of the poem, it is no surprise that critics have come up with such contrasting interpretations. These readings cannot be simply dismissed as unfounded because the poem is linguistically open to all these readings. The religious reading, for example, is a sound one. Father Tugwell saw the “One” as God. The poem definitely abounds in religious terminology. Words like “divine” and “select” evoke the language of Puritanism. At one level, the poem can pass for a religious one; however, the poem disturbs the religious reading by the reversal it effects to the process of selection.

It is the soul not God that chooses; she assumes the power of God in choosing the elect among the “ample nation.” In Isaiah 26:2, God addresses the people of Israel, “open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.” The soul, however, decides to shut the door. The poem seduces the religious reader by bringing in religious diction. But the poem also contains other levels of signification that render the religious reading incomplete. ED uses religious imagery to talk about her experience. ED, Farr argues, seems to have been fascinated by the image of a God who is himself a recluse, a God who arouses his subjects’ curiosity by keeping aloof. ED felt angry in some poems about the teasing effect of a heaven that is not realized, and a God who is not seen. ED transferred the anxiety she felt to the poem and she herself played God to the reader. Biographical readings, then, can get into a vicious circle with no hope for establishing

the significance of the poem. This deficiency made critics look for other approaches.

The first two stanzas of the poem give an image of the soul selecting someone. In more recent criticism, the act of choosing itself came to the foreground. Critics wonder why should the soul select a limited society. Was it a psychic need? The soul is defiant and shows indifference to others' opinion. The soul's courage in making its own choices made the poem a favorite of feminist critics. Cynthia Wolff observes that the soul "rebels against the passivity that is mandated for women by the conventions of classic courtship" (Wolff 1986:119). Similarly, the twentieth-century American poet Amy Lowell speaks in a poem entitled "Sisters" of ED as one of her "spiritual relations":

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot  
 We women who write poetry. And when you think  
 How few of us there've been, it's queer still.  
 I wonder what it is that makes us do it  
 Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,  
 The fragments of ourselves.  
 ... ..  
 ...I go dreaming on  
 In love with these my spiritual relations.  
 I rather think I see my self walk up  
 A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell  
 And send a card in to Miss Dickinson (qtd. in Young 1991:81).

The speaker in the poem sees connections between her and Dickinson that transcend the obvious differences between the two women who belonged to very different worlds. What they have in common, though, is the fact that they dare to transgress social limitations and do something that is "man-wise." However, some critics of feminism argue that feminists read into ED revolutionary ideas that are not supported by biographical evidence.

David Perkins<sup>2</sup> and Betsy Erkkila oppose the feminist reading. Erkkila (1992:23) argues that "Dickinson might be celebrated as a kind of literary terrorist—a 'Loaded gun'...but the facts of her life show that ED's "poetic revolution was grounded in the privilege of her class position in a conservative Whig household whose elitist antidemocratic values were at the very center of her work." Erkkila adds that unlike French Feminists, American Feminist critics give priority to gender over class relations. It is true that ED belonged to the middle-upper class but does that cancel out the fact that she was a woman? Although Erkkila's observations are credible, they cannot explain why women identify with ED's poetry. For example, Carmella Lanza argues that she feels offended when she reads ED's racist remarks on immigrant Irish boys. An Italian immigrant herself, Lanza argues that she could have

been the subject of such a racist attack. ED’s personal prejudices, however, did not make Lanza give her up. Lanza (1998:84-5) expresses the influence of reading ED on her as a woman:

I have heard that poem, “The Soul Selects her own Society,” in my head many times- times of loneliness, of depression, of strength, of feeling for a moment that I really knew who I was. I know that voice; it sinews the multiple voices of who I am: I will not settle for less; I will be alone; I am that queen who refuses what she believes is false or cheap or shallow.

Lanza shows great interest in the poetry and the poet. She reads ED with commitment and identification, which are important characteristics of a good reader of poetry. However, one could argue that Lanza is projecting her own feelings onto the poem which could have been the result of such a powerful and seductive poem. It is a piece of poetry that suggests different things to different people but, at the same time, remains very difficult to grasp. In that sense, reading poem 303 could be best described by another ED poem: her poem 842 in which reading is likened to hunting an elusive fox that keeps escaping the hunters. Only an adept reader, whose ear is “not too dull,” can cope with her difficult poetry. ED says in that poem:

Good to hide, and hear ‘em hunt!  
Better, to be found,  
If one care to, that is,  
The Fox fits the Hound — (l. 1-4)  
.....  
Can One find the rare Ear  
Not too dull (l. 7-8)

ED, it seemed, believed it was difficult to find a competent reader so she preferred to keep her poetry to herself and her friends who appreciated it. It is in “The Soul Selects,” I believe, that ED declares her views on publication and her decision not to publish her work. But again, she declares it in her own exclusive way.

The connection between “The Soul Selects” and the issue of publication is established in the incident John Walsh cites. He points out that Sue, Dickinson’s sister-in-law was encouraging ED to publish her work. ED answered by sending Sue the first stanza of the poem (Walsh 1971:167). ED decided to shut the door and not to publish. She chose instead a method of private publication within the circle of her acquaintances. She usually enclosed her poems in her letters to friends. ED also brought together groups of poems in fascicles, a process referred to by some critics as a form of publication (Cameron 1992:7). Sharon Cameron argues that ED refused to publish because she could not present the poems to the publishing press in their fascicle form. In addition to that, a poem was never an end product for her. On certain

occasions, ED returned to the manuscripts years after to change some words in pencil. In their status as private property, the poems were an open workshop for the poet to return to at any time. The reasons Cameron suggests are sound but I agree with Erkkila that the main reason for ED's decision not to publish was her class-consciousness. ED refused to publish, possibly, because she saw the role assigned to poets by society as beneath her. She was not interested in becoming a public entertainer or a moral teacher. A close reading of the poem would reveal the embedded haughtiness and exclusivity of the speaker, and show the connection between the poet's career and her class-consciousness.

The first stanza of the poem is written in an elevated language borrowed from the Calvinist terminology of divine (s)election. The language of the poem, Erkkila (1992:9) argues, "slips between the old and the new, between an aristocratic language of rank, royalty, and hereditary privilege, and a Calvinist language of spiritual grace, personal sanctity, and divine election." In addition to Calvinism, there are also echoes of Emerson in the poem. Emerson expressed in his writing the superiority of geniuses over ordinary persons. He says in one of his essays:

The growths of genius are of a certain total character, that does not advance the elect individual first over John, then Adam, then Richard and give to each the pain of discovered inferiority, but by every thrope of growth, the man expands there where he works, passing, at each pulsation, classes, populations of men. With each divine impulse the mind rends the thin rinds of the visible and finite and comes out into eternity, and inspires and expires its air (Emerson 1969:227).

ED's career was the materialization of Emersonian individualism. The religious terminology in the poem goes hand in hand with the Transcendentalist notions of the self because, as E. Miller Budick (1979:355) argues, "the Puritan-Transcendentalist soul, imaging itself in the likeness of its God, excludes God from its society."

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker declares her exclusivity and selectivity. Erkkila argues that ED's social and religious background affected her decision to keep away from involvement in the world of publication. ED belonged to the conservative New England Whigs who thought of themselves as a select class that had a divine racial right to top the class hierarchy (Erkkila 1992:9). Class-consciousness is visible in ED's letters and poems. In a letter to her friends Josiah and Elizabeth Holland, ED refers to one of her father's workingmen as a "serf" (Erkkila 1992:10). The use of the language of religion is not restricted to "The Soul Selects." In "Mine—by the Right of White Election," ED uses the language of Calvinist election to declare her right to have her lover. Whether in her personal life or her career, the poet believed in high standards based on her class

distinction. Her idea of poetry was an idealistic one that elevated poetry to a high status. ED explained her contempt of the idea of useful poetry as “chirrup” in her letter to Louise Norcross where she says:

Of Miss P—I know but this dear. She wrote me in October, requesting me to aid the world by my chirrup more. Perhaps she stated it as my duty, I don’t distinctly remember, and always burn such letters, so I cannot obtain it now. I replied declining. She did not write to me again—she might have been offended, or perhaps is extricating humanity from some ditch... (Dickinson 1958:1.380).

In this letter, ED refuses to be a public entertainer. She elevates poetry to the status of an elitist activity that should be reserved for a narrow coterie of intellectuals.

In the second stanza, ED moves from the image she had of poetry to the public image of the time. ED rejects the commercialization of literature and writing poetry for profit-making. The language of the second stanza is that of the world of fame and business. Unlike the moving chariots, the speaker remains unmoved by the prospects of fame and fortune that are associated with publication because, as ED explains in poem 709:

Publication—is the Auction  
Of the Mind of Man—  
Poverty—be justifying  
For so foul a thing  
Possibly—but we—would rather  
From our Garret go  
White—Unto the white Creator—  
Than invest—our Snow (l. 1-8)

ED saw poverty as the only justification for publication. Needless to say, she was not needy and thus publication was left to the lower classes of poor women. Just as in “The Soul Selects,” the poet uses the language of Puritanism to show her intellectual distinction. She also refers to her race and stresses her whiteness as opposed to the debasing profession. Joanne Dobson (1989) cites a testimony by one of ED’s contemporaries that stressed the influence of ED’s economic condition on her career. The poet Arlo Bates read the manuscripts of ED’s poetry then told the editors of Robert Brothers Publishing House, “had she published, and been forced by ambition and perhaps by need into learning the technical part of her art, she would have stood at the head of American Singers” (qtd. in Dobson 1989:51). However, I believe ED’s economic independence helped her keep her independent poetic identity. As Dobson (*ibid.*) points out, ED sought to have the status of a “feminine literary amateur” that would secure her the admiration of friends and family. ED’s letters to Higginson show that she enjoyed being an amateur. She wrote to him, “would you have time to be ‘the



friend' you should think I need? I have a little shape—it would not crowd your desk—nor make much racket as the Mouse...will you be my preceptor, Mr. Higginson?" (qtd. in Wilson 1979:460). In their correspondence, ED always emphasized her "smallness, her amateurism, her dependence and her incapacity" (Wilson 1979:460).

Economic factors played an influential role in ED's career. She was writing at a historical moment that witnessed the transition from the old aristocratic system to the new industrial age with its market place values. Her class was endangered by a new capitalist class that earned more money and started to dominate the public scene. The old aristocracy tended in response to take its old class distinction to the cultural arena. Thus by the act of compiling the fascicles, Erkkila (1992:20) argues, ED "was engaged in a private form of publication. Folding, sewing, and binding" the poems, she "converted traditional female thread and needle work into a different kind of housework and her own form of productive industry." ED realized that the new social order made poetry just another commercial activity. She believed that any involvement in the world of publication would subject her to the same criteria according to which writers are judged— that is, how many books they can sell.

In the third stanza of "The Soul Selects," the "One" is introduced. The stanza seems to talk about a lover that the soul chose. I think that the choice of a lover could be an analogy to many parallel situations that might include, but are not limited to, life style choices and literary ones. The riddle-oriented critics tend to read the poem as a narrowing down of selection. These critics argue that the speaker chooses a society then narrows the choice down to a society of one. The speaker, I contend, is figuratively speaking of the kinds of interpretations that readers will ponder and think of, but to no avail.

#### **4. The Reader's Role in Interpreting the Poem**

In all three stanzas that I discussed, the speaker keeps shifting between different worlds (religion, business, love). The majestic air of the poem affects the reader greatly. The poem not only delivers to the reader the sense of the speaker's exclusiveness, but also makes him/her part of the experience. The reader wishes to be one of the soul's society. He/she develops a special interest in the poet because of the mystery surrounding the speaker (who supposedly represents the poet).

One cannot assure that it was ED's intention to affect her readers by being mysterious. She, however, dealt with her male correspondents in this manner. Smith (1996:16) quotes ED who told Judge Otis Lord, "don't you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer—don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we

consign to language”. ED’s friendship with Higginson is a case in point of her method of manipulating readers. In her first letter to him, ED did not write her name on the envelope but wrote it on a card that she put in a separate envelope. She addresses him as “Sir.” In her second letter, she describes herself as being small, weak and dependent and signs the letter, “Your Scholar.” In the third letter, Wilson observes, ED assumes some intimacy and addresses Higginson as “Dear Friend” (Wilson 1979:460). In another letter to him, ED asks him directly to lie in her favor:

Mrs. Jackson of Colorado—was with me a few moments this week, and wished me to write for this—I told her I was unwilling, and she asked me why?—I said I was incapable and she seemed not to believe me and asked me not to decide for a few Days—meantime, she would write me—she was so sweetly noble, I would regret to estrange her, and if you would be willing to give me a note saying you disapprove it, and thought me unfit, she would believe you—I am sorry to flee so often to my safest friend, but hope he permits me — (Dickinson 1958:l. 476).

ED used Higginson to reconcile the two conflicting wishes: the wish to keep her poetry to herself and the wish to share her poetry with the world or, at least, inform the world that a woman was writing poetry in Amherst.

ED realized that to attain fame in her lifetime, she had to compromise her method of writing and become a subject to the public eye. ED sought stability of her status as poet in a changing world. She rejected fame that would not last for ever. She describes fame in poem 1659 as fickle:

Fame is a fickle food  
Upon a shifting plate  
Whose table once a  
Guest but not  
The second time is Set (l. 1-5).

Like the fickle crowds in Shakespeare, fame is too fickle to be trusted. ED thus preferred to be known to the coming generations who would not ask for any concessions.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay does not claim to establish what ED intended. It is not based on a conspiracy theory that ED planned her career by both refraining from contact with the world and informing it about her existence. Looked at retrospectively, ED’s fame worked this way. The interest in ED’s queer life led readers to read her poetry and then they discovered the greatness of that poet, and faced a poetry that is no less mysterious

than the woman who wrote it. The narrator in the third stanza of “The Soul Selects” creates an atmosphere of gossip and rumors. All people are watching the soul and are wondering about her conduct. Every one participates in solving this puzzle, or provides more information about the soul. One person says, “I have known her.” Can any one claim that he /she has known ED? After all, she gives every reader the sense that he/she has grasped what she meant. In poem 738 (qtd. in Smith 1996) the speaker addresses the reader:

You said that I “was great”—One Day—  
Then “Great” it be—if that please Thee—  
Or small-or any size at all—  
Nay—I’m the size suit Thee (l. 1-4)

Reading ED is very seductive. Her poetry entraps readers by giving them a sense that they can understand her by understanding her poetry. When readers finish their reading, they discover that they only read themselves and their desires. However, reading, argues Iser, is necessary for the reader to establish communication with the poem and counterbalance the indeterminacy that abounds in it. (Iser 1993:8). I would add that in ED’s case, establishing communication with the text is vital, otherwise, the reader will experience frustration and, maybe, outrage. The reader approaches the poem in the hope that he/she deserves to join the exclusive club of readers, ED’s society of select souls.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Over the period between 1967-1972 there appeared in *The Explicator* a series of article on the poem that were all entitled “Emily Dickinson’s ‘The Soul Selects Her Own Society.’” In these articles, the writers engaged a dialogue over the interpretation of the “One.” They all used the variant readings to support their views. Bowman, (1970: Item 67), sees the poem as a reference to a person ED knew. Faris (1967:Item 65), argues the one was ED herself, thus the poem is a reference to ED’s loneliness. D., H.E. (1944:Query 7), regrets ED’s loneliness and Jumper (1970:Item 5) considers it an instance of spiritual death.

<sup>2</sup> In *Is Literary History Possible*, David Perkins attacks the feminist views on Emily Dickinson. He points out that in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar projected their ideas of women writers on the nineteenth century women writers. Because the general plan of their book and its title, Gilbert and Gubar felt obliged to transform ED into the mad woman who “yearned for a lost mother country or sunken Atlantis of female community, a land where women authors felt at home” (Perkins 1992:137).