

Dickinson: a haunting of the social self

Literature



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Dickinson: A Haunting of the Social Self Many of Emily Dickinson's poems can be seen as a struggle between two senses of "self." These two "selves", "the social self" and "the poetic self" are present in poem #670, "One need not be a Chamber - To be Haunted." In this case, the primary "self" is "the social self." This poem is the description of the struggle "the social self" has with "the poetic self."

In the first stanza of the poem Dickinson says, "One needs not be a Chamber - To be haunted - The brain has corridors - surpassing - material place" (Dickinson). Dickinson is using imagery in this stanza to compare the internal confrontation between "the social self" and "the poetic self" to the haunting of a house. The corridors of the brain are being compared to the vastness of an empty house, haunted by a ghost. In this poem, the primary self is "the social self" and the ghost is "the poetic self." The relationship between the two exists internally.

"The social self" feels a need to be accepted by society. It is aware of what is considered to be normal and works hard to maintain that image.

Unfortunately, the internal presence of "the poetic self" is working to counter the efforts of "the social self." "The poetic self" thinks things and does things that are not generally accepted by society. By being haunted by her "self", "the social self" is unable to escape from the haunting.

The second stanza of the poem reads, "Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting - Extended Ghost - Than its interior confronting - That Cooler Host"

(Dickinson). "The social self" is obviously more afraid of this internal haunting than it would be by the actual presence of a ghost in the house.

The third stanza furthers the claim that "the social self" would rather have an actual person or ghost chasing them than an internal opposition

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impossible to escape. It also explains the loneliness that exists behind closed doors, with the presence of the negative, disturbed "poetic self."

The fourth stanza is even more disturbing than the previous three. It is clear that the presence of "the poetic self" has really penetrated the mind of "the social self" because the narrator has gone from comparing "the poetic self" to a ghost to comparing "the poetic self" to an assassin. In fact, according to this stanza, the narrator would actually prefer the presence of an assassin to that of "the poetic self."

The fifth and final stanza represents the culmination of the internal struggle between the two "selves." In this paragraph it could be interpreted that "the poetic self" has been so successful in penetrating the mind-frame of "the social self" that "the social self" has actually gone crazy and is looking for a method of escape. Because it is an internal haunting, "the social self" has come to the conclusion that the only way to escape is to become free of the bodily form. To do this, "the social self" is considering resorting to suicide as a means to vanquish the presence of "the poetic self."

Emily Dickinson has mastered the usage of imagery in her poems to translate a deeper meaning within the two "selves." Poem #670 is about much more than a simple haunting, it is about the opposition many people have between the person they are inside and the person that is socially acceptable. When these two "selves" are not in agreement, as they clearly are not in this poem, they can cause intense conflict within the bodily form of the person and virtually make that person a little crazy, as happened to the subject of this poem. Although "the social self" is the primary "self" in this poem, it is "the poetic self" that seems to be victorious by the end of the poem.

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Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. "One need not be a Chamber - To be Haunted." *American Poems*. 11

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