

# Identity and isolation from society: evaluating emily dickinson's poetry and 'spi...

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An individual's sense of identity is shaped by many contributing factors, including interactions with society, as well as self-isolation, both which play a fundamental role in strengthening one's sense of individuality and self-representation. Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst during the 19th century at a time when Puritan values dictated heavily on an individual's life. Through her poems *The Soul Selects her Own Society*, *This is My Letter*, and *I Had Been hungry All the Years*, it is evident that both society and isolation as well as her choices influenced Emily's development of identity. Similar ideas are presented in Hayao Miyazaki's 2002 film *Spirited Away*, the female protagonist, Chihiro, strengthens develops her identity by being forcibly isolated from her own society when she is trapped in that of the Spirit Realm.

When an individual's interaction with society involves challenging the social and cultural norms their sense of self flourishes as they recognise their individuality and embrace it. Through Emily Dickinson's poems it is clear she challenged the cultural norms of Puritanism, as although she was an avid church goer through her early 20's, by her early 30's she embraced Transcendentalist values and turned to nature rather than religion. This is evident in her poem *This is My Letter*, in which she writes: 'this is my letter to the world, that never wrote to me', in which the word 'world' is a metonym representing society, conveying how the persona feels she cannot identify in society, which is emphasised by the high modality language 'never'. Society is the dichotomised in the next line with nature, 'the simple new that nature told with tender majesty', whilst nature is personified lending it a relatable and caring tone, allowing the audience to understand the persona's close knit relationship with nature, whilst detachment from

society, conveyed through dichotomy. This reflects Emily's Transcendentalist views, as she embraced nature rather than religion, hence challenging the social norm to embrace her true self.

Similarly, in *Spirited Away* Chihiro also challenges social norms which contributes to her maturation and strengthening her sense of self. The Spirits in the bathhouse are very materialistic and especially have an affliction to gold, a recurring motif throughout the film representative of greed. Chihiro is offered gold by No-Face: '[offering a bowl of food] Try this. It's delicious. Want some gold? I'm not giving it to anybody else! What would you like? Just name it...', this list-like dialogue demonstrates the criteria of the social norm of society, to want material possession, and the use of short clauses creates tension and sense of urgency, as Chihiro is rejecting the social norms. Chihiro replies to this: 'I would like to leave, sir; there's some place I need to go to right away, please.' By challenging the norms of her society and rejecting the gold, Chihiro rejects the idea of using material objects to construct the worth of herself, instead focusing on her own values and what is important to her to develop her identity. In both texts, interactions with society which involve challenging the social and cultural norms allow the individual's sense of self to flourish.

Through isolation one strengthens their sense of individuality and self-presentation. Emily Dickinson decided to withdraw from society and by her early 40's confined herself almost entirely to her bedroom. As a recluse Dickinson is able to perceive the customs of society from a different perspective, and focus on what is important to her, not what society dictates.

The poem *The Soul Selects her Own Society*, depicts the persona in isolation, 'the soul selects her own society then she shuts the door', as 'shutting the door' is metaphorical for the persona's isolation from society. The repetition of the words 'unmoved' emphasises her stubbornness and resilience in her choice of isolation. Even when 'an emperor is kneeling/upon her mat', an emperor, essentially the ruler of society and a symbol for temptation, the persona remains unmoved thus she strengthens her belief in herself and preserves her individuality. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's isolation from her own society when she is in the realm of the spirits, allows her to go on a journey of self-discovery and maturation. This journey is epitomised by a compilation of scenes in the text where Chihiro is travelling on a train surrounded by water to save her friend. This scene is a physical representation of her journey into maturity. Panning causes the water to seem to be infinite, emphasising her isolation. Water is also a symbol for rebirth and growth, and the train is literally travelling through the water. The scene visually depicts how isolation has resulted in Chihiro maturing and becoming more independent and individual. Ultimately, regardless of the influences of society it is the choices of the individual which determine their identity.

Emily Dickinson's identity was influenced by society, however it was her own choices which dictated who she was. This notion is conveyed through *I Had Been Hungry All The Years*, as Emily uses the extended metaphor 'hungry' as referring to the desire to be a part of society. However, by the conclusion of the poem the persona discovers that she is no longer wishes to be accepted by society - 'nor was I hungry, so I found'. This reflects that

Dickinson made the choice herself to not be accepted by society, thus she embraced her Transcendentalist values, become more individualistic and strengthening her sense of identity. In the poem *The Soul Selects her Own Society*, it is once again the choice of the persona to decide her 'own society' as the title suggests, thus it is the choice of the individual which ultimately shapes their identity. In the first stanza of the poem, 'the soul selects her own society/ then she shuts the door', Emily uses sibilance to emphasise the metaphorical language, 'shutting the door' meaning cutting herself off from society, once the soul's choice has been made. Hence it demonstrates the persona makes her own choices to shape her identity. Both of these poems reflect that it is the individual's choices which determine their identity.

An individual's identity is influenced by many contributing factors, and can be enhanced through interaction with society especially when this involves challenging the social norms which results in the individual embracing their own views, thus strengthening their sense of self. Through *Spirited Away* and poems by Emily Dickinson, it is also clear that isolation is important to develop an individual's own ideals. However, it is ultimately the choices of the individual which shape their identity.