

Before You Read

The Soul selects her own Society

Make the Connection

This poem is about making choices and the mysterious instinct that leads each one of us to prefer certain things and cherish certain people above all others. In Dickinson's view, his instinct has less to do with the discriminations of the mind than with the yearnings of that spiritual part of us that some call the soul. How do you think most people select their friends—with their minds (thoughts), with their souls (feelings), or with a combination of the two?

Literary Focus

Slant Rhyme

Not long ago exact rhyme was part of every poet's craft. **Exact rhyme** occurs when the accented syllables and all following syllables of two or more words share identical sounds, as in the words *free* and *bee* or *mixture* and *fixture*. Today exact rhyme is still the most familiar aspect of sound in poetry. Over the years, however, exact rhyme has

fallen out of favor with many poets. One reason is that many poets feel that the exact rhymes in English have been used over and over again. Another reason is that imposed rhymes can act as a constraint and can limit expression. As a solution some poets have abandoned rhyme altogether. Other poets, like Dickinson, use slant rhyme.

Slant rhyme is a close, but not exact, rhyming sound. Word pairs like *society/ majority* or *nervelove* are examples of slant rhymes. Slant rhyme makes many readers uncomfortable—in the way that a sharp or flat note would disturb a listener who wasn't expecting it.

Slant rhyme is a close, but not exact, rhyming sound.

For more on Slant Rhyme, see the *Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms*.

The Soul selects her own Society

Emily Dickinson

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

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

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



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Dickinson

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Literary Skills

Understand
exact rhyme and
slant rhyme.

Before You Read

If you were coming in the Fall

Make the Connection

Poetry is called metaphysical when the simplest thoughts and emotions are described using fantastic and often highly intellectual imagery and figures of speech. In metaphysical poetry, private emotions, such as unfulfilled love, take on the importance of great and profound events. See if you think this poem qualifies as metaphysical.

If you were coming in the Fall

Emily Dickinson

If you were coming in the Fall,
I'd brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.

5 If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls—
And put them each in separate Drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse—

10 If only Centuries, delayed,
I'd count them on my Hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into Van Dieman's Land.¹²

15 If certain, when this life was out—
That your's and mine, should be
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity—

20 But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—
That will not state—it's sting.

12. Van Dieman's (de'mənz) Land:
former name of Tasmania, an island
that is a state of Australia.

Response and Analysis

The Soul selects her own Society

Thinking Critically

1. Dickinson uses **personification**, attributing human feelings, thoughts, or attitudes to a soul. What does the soul do in the last stanza of the poem?
2. *Majority* has at least two meanings: "the greater part of something" and "having reached full legal age." An older, obsolete meaning of *majority* is "superiority." What do you think *majority* means in this poem? What kind of person does the adjective *divine* suggest?
3. Do you think the phrase "Valves of her attention" is derived from organic things (valves of the heart) or mechanical ones (valves of a faucet)? What do you picture happening here?
4. Dickinson's early editors changed the word *Valves* to *lids* in line 11. How does this change the **metaphor**? How does it change what you see?
5. Look at the **meter** of lines 10 and 12. How does their rhythmical pattern differ from the corresponding lines in the first and second stanzas? What is the effect of this difference?
6. Dickinson gave very few of her poems titles. (The titles in this text are the first lines of the poems.) Her early editors called this poem "Exclusion." In what ways does this title apply? In what ways is it a limiting title?
7. An example of **slant rhyme** in this poem occurs in the third stanza, where Dickinson rhymes *stone* with *one*. Why is it important that the word *stone* be emphasized? To hear the difference, imagine that Dickinson had ended her poem with the words "And be done."

Find another example of slant rhyme in this poem.

8. Do you think the "soul selects her own society" in the strict way that is described in the poem? Do you think that most people make choices the way the speaker in this poem does? Explain your response.

If you were coming in the Fall

Thinking Critically

1. How would you describe the speaker's situation? How does she feel about it?
2. What two things are being compared in the **simile** in the first stanza?
3. In the second stanza, what domestic articles are the months compared to? Why does the speaker put them in separate drawers?
4. Van Dieman's Land, besides being the old name of Tasmania, also refers to those places on the globe farthest away from the United States. Given this information, how would you **paraphrase** the third stanza?
5. How would you describe the speaker's **tone** in the first four stanzas? How does the tone change in the fifth stanza, where her exaggerations disappear? What goads, or pushes, her against her will?
6. In folklore a goblin is a tormenting creature. What might Dickinson be suggesting when she says that the bee is a goblin and will not "state" its sting?
7. Do you think the hopes expressed in this poem are fairly common, or are they rare or odd? Explain your responses.



Literary Skills
Analyze exact rhyme and slant rhyme.