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DECONSTRUCTIONIST AND FEMINIST ANALYSIS
OF DICKINSON'S "THE SOUL SELECTS"

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Deconstructionist Interpretation

The poststructuralist thinkers believe that "meaning develops as the reader interacts with the text, for meaning does not reside within the text itself" (Bressler 101). Language is used to signify but the codes cannot always be deciphered; this is Derrida's principle of "undecidability" (116). "Deconstruction theory" posits that a text may intend to say one thing but actually say something else (117). Derrida's concept of *differance* states that we know something only because it is "differs from something else to which it is related" (Bressler 125). Thus all knowledge cannot be understood apart from its context and "all interpretations . . . are possible, probable, and legitimate" (125). The text "becomes . . . a network for the free play of an indefinite number of meanings" (Keeseey 343). According to Derrida, objective reality does not exist. There is only subjective reality and truth is relative (Bressler 99).

Emily Dickinson's poem "The Soul Selects" contains several binary oppositions: feminine/masculine, power/powerlessness, divine/human, unmoved/moved, one/many, closed/open, and exclusion/inclusion. Feminine is privileged over masculine, power is privileged over powerlessness, the Divine is privileged over the human, Unmoved over moved, One over many, closed over open, and exclusion over inclusion.

Dickinson's feminine Soul is privileged over the masculine Emperor. We know that the Soul is female because Dickinson uses the feminine pronouns of *her* and *she* – "*her* own Society . . . *her* divine Majority . . . *she* notes the Chariots—pausing At *her* low Gate . . . kneeling Upon *her* Mat . . . known *her* . . . closes the Valves of *her* attention" [italics mine]. We know the Emperor is male because of the use of the male title of Emperor. Even though the Emperor with

his chariots is powerful and male, he must kneel before the Soul, subjecting himself to her. In this sense, the female Soul exercises traditionally masculine traits of maintaining composure, asserting power and authority, and making definitive decisions. The Emperor on the other hand demonstrates the traditionally feminine behavior of subjection.

Dickinson privileges power over powerlessness in the hands of the female Soul. It is she who “*selects . . . shuts the Door . . . orders that they ‘Present no more’ . . . Chooses One. . . [and] Closes the Valves of her attention . . .*” [italics mine]. She consistently acts. The Emperor, on the other hand, acts only once. The Emperor retains his power as Emperor but he knows when and how to set limits upon it. He has his chariots pause at her gate and comes alone to her door, kneeling to request admission. The Soul acts by omission and commission. Either way she still makes a choice. If she is Unmoved, even if she does not say a word, the door does not open. But if/when she is moved, she opens the door. She resolves the opposition by allowing One into the Door, but even in this case, she retains the power to choose if she will let him enter or who that One will be. What is settled is that the Soul is in power and that she will remain Unmoved as she makes her choice. She remains in control of her own destiny.

The binary opposition of Divine/human is not fully developed. However, the feminine Soul is identified as a “divine Majority” and possesses a delegated authority. The Soul is that part of self that is connected with Spirit. She does not need affirmation from others. She has an internal divine Majority that assists her in confident decision-making. No reference is made to any connection to the divine in the Emperor. He may be simply human, but he may also have a connection to the divine. This is a gap or place of “undecidability” (Bressler 116).

Dickinson describes the Soul as “Unmoved” two times, repeating it the second time for emphasis. She alludes to this trait a third time after the Soul “closes the Valves of her attention . . . *Like Stone* [italics mine]—” Clearly the Emperor is moved enough to kneel before her. On

closer examination, however, we discover that the Soul also is moved. When she is moved (and this is implied because she chooses One), she makes the choice to open the door.

This act provokes a closer examination of the binary of the One/many. She has the privilege of choosing from an “ample nation” and conceivably, she can choose more than one. However, the One is preferable to many and it is for this One that she opens the door. Although she does not name the One she chooses, this author suggests that the One refers to the Emperor. His presence in the poem and his specific behavior of kneeling upon her mat offer an alternative text upon deconstruction. The Soul sees something in him that moves her to open the door and merits him inclusion in her Society. The Soul then appears to be discriminating (in a constructive way) who is worthy of trust and admission.

For the most part, throughout the poem, Dickinson privileges the closed door, the closed “Valves of her attention.” There are times when the door needs to be shut. Perhaps the door is to keep her in or to keep others out. As long as she is in control, her need is met, whether the need is for solitude, for protection, etc. However, there are times for the Soul when the door should be open, because who or what is on the other side brings a gift to her. Here she must take a risk.

The final binary opposition is that of exclusion/inclusion. Dickinson privileges exclusion. But the poem speaks also of her inclusion. Many present themselves to her; this desire they have in common. No information is given to us about her reasons for exclusion. But if we read the poem to infer that the Emperor is the One, we obtain insight from his behavior into the reason for his inclusion. He kneels and waits, respecting her need to choose for herself.

The deconstruction of each of the binary oppositions reveals a surface text that privileges the feminine over the masculine. In so doing, Dickinson clearly departs from nineteenth century conventions around the role of women. Women were not able to vote. Most were relegated to the roles of wife and mother and were economically and psychologically dependent on their husbands. But Dickinson’s female Soul is powerful and unmoved, authoritative and effectual. In

fact the binary oppositions in the poem reverse each hierarchy that would be anticipated by her contemporaries (see previous discussion). That in itself would be courageous enough. However, the deconstruction of the binary oppositions unearths another layer of text that suggests she has embedded a second text that deepens and refines the lessons of the first. As Kennard says, “New texts will appear hidden in the old in answer to new needs, in response to new conventions” (337).

While Dickinson privileges the female Soul, the open/closed deconstruction suggests that the poem concerns more than the Soul claiming her power, wresting it away from male dominance. She moves beyond her unmoved, cold, rejection of men to a recognition of the variations in the trustworthiness of men and the importance of discernment. She recognizes that there are some men who deserve to be let into the door. The Soul seems to be saying, “Women, be careful lest you adopt the power of the male aggressor and use it in the same way. Know when to use it and when to lay it aside.” The One male (Emperor) is wise in his use of power and ultimately then, so is the female Soul. When she find the One who is able to kneel, despite his Chariots and crown, she is wise enough to recognize that the door should be opened to him. The focus then is not only on the Soul’s reclaiming of power but on the development of her wisdom.

Feminist Interpretation

The poem begins with a traditional stereotype, the fixed image of a woman as a spiritual being and soul (Donovan 228). However, Dickinson quickly challenges gender stereotypes and redefines them in this poem. The female Soul is the major character in the poem at a time when most characters in the literary canon were male, and most female characters were minor characters used in the service of the male characters (Bressler 174, 182). In “The Soul Selects” Dickinson identifies the Soul as a woman (see previous discussion of feminine pronouns) and the Emperor as a man. The poem presents an alternative feminine image to the economically and

psychologically dependent woman of her time. Women typically did not have the opportunity to choose their own societies but were included in the societies of their husband's business contacts or their children's activities of school and play. In addition, the areas in which they were allowed to exercise choice were very narrow, usually within the household. Today Dickinson would be dubbed a "resisting" poet. Dickinson reverses the gender roles so that the feminine Soul has power and the powerful male Emperor is kneeling.

Dickinson's female Soul exhibits agency. She "*selects . . . shuts the Door . . . orders that they 'Present no more' . . . Chooses One. . . [and] Closes the Valves of her attention . . . [italics mine].*" She exercises the power to exclude. The low Gate would seem to invite others in; however, few make it through the Door. The poem suggests that there are some parts of a woman (the Soul), some knowing that men desire to access but few will be chosen to do so. The Door is the way in and the way out and she is in control of it. Whether the power has been given to her or she has usurped it, she exercises it. The Soul owns the Majority; it is *hers* [italics mine]. The choice of the word Majority verifies her power. And it is a "divine Majority," suggesting that her power has been granted to her by God.

The female Soul is "Unmoved." This description of her stands in stark contrast to the presentation of women in the nineteenth century and even today as weak and illogical. In the early twentieth century, psychoanalyst Carl Jung warned, "women's consciousness is characterized more by the connective quality of Eros than by the discrimination and cognition associated with Logos. . . . In women . . . Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable accident" (559-600). He suggested that the male "animus gives to woman's consciousness a capacity for reflection, deliberation, and self-knowledge" (560). But Dickinson's Soul operates out of her Logos (typically seen as male) rather than her Eros (typically seen as female).

The male characters in the poem are the unnamed inhabitants of the chariots and the Emperor. Chariots are a means of transportation for warriors. Yet they pause at her “low Gate.” The Soul is to be sought out, even by mighty men with military arms and physical strength. Even the Emperor kneels before her on her mat at her door. Dickinson’s portrayal of these male characters reveal a respect, sensitivity, and restraint more typically associated with the feminine.

The Soul chooses and she has many opportunities for choice from an “ample nation.” She retains her power and with a steely resolve, chooses “One.” Who she chooses and why she chooses is a mystery. She offers no explanation, so those who would want to gain access have no opportunity to better their chances or gain some control. Once she makes her choice, she simply “closes the Valves of her attention— Like Stone—.” This suggests that she has complete control of the psychic mechanisms by which others gain entrance to her. A valve “closes temporarily a passage or orifice or permits movement of fluid *in one direction only*” (“Valve” 2009). And again, like Stone, there is no moving her. Stone suggests an impenetrable hard surface or a “heart of stone.”

The poem then completely rewrites the nineteenth century gender role of women. The woman (Soul) here is not a minor character created in the service of a male protagonist (Beauvoir, cited in Bressler 173; Donovan cited in Kessler 225). She is more than a stereotype as we have some insight into her psyche, particularly her need for conscious choice. She exhibits traits of authentic characters which Donovan says are determined by whether she possesses a “reflective critical consciousness, whether s/he is a moral agent, capable of self-determined action, whether s/he is a Self, not an Other” (Donovan qtd. in Keeseey 225). She is articulating her own role (Bressler 182). The female Soul described here is, by Donovan’s definition, morally responsible as she acts, presenting a “valid model for imitation” (Gardner, qtd. in Donovan, 230). Also, she acts out of an awareness of her own needs and is able to realistically assess others. Murdoch calls for the “redirection of the will and attention” in feminists in order to recognize the

impact of myths on our perceptions (qtd. in Donovan 232). She notes that “it is love that enables us to get under the mythic net, for love demands an awareness of realities beyond the self” (cited in Donovan 232).

Conclusion

Feminist critics state that their readings reveal “what has always been there but not previously seen” (Kennard cited in Keesey 330). Deconstructionist criticism augments the feminist analysis of the poem in that it highlights the moral choice made by the Soul to act out of love. The female Soul might have chosen to utilize her power in a reactionary, angry way, in order to gain retribution for past injustices from men. However, the deconstruction of the poem suggests that she acts out of wisdom and perhaps even out of love.

J. 303

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 know her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—closes the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

c. 1862; published 1890

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