



# The Idea of Self in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Emily Dickinson's "The Soul Selects" – A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

The present paper focuses on the interpretation of 'self' by two great American poets who belong to the new breed of poets and thinkers that were brought to the fore due to the tremendous intellectual and social changes leading to the emergence of the New World. Victorian prudery and orthodoxy were diluted, if not ended, and poets and novelists spoke boldly of new ethical values. In fact, egotism became pronounced, boldness worshipped and traditionalism ineffective. Man began worshipping the intellect, and religion and orthodoxy took a back seat.

Running through American literature, one finds that America is an extension of Europe in its expansionist phase. Hence, early colonial writers considered themselves and their writings not as American but as European. New England, particularly, had a puritan atmosphere which was discouraging to imaginative literature. But, well before the end of the colonial period, the power of Puritanism greatly declined, ushering in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The United States achieved its independence in 1783 and, thereafter, the beginning of literary independence, too, became evident. By the 1840s the Age of the Common Man arrived and, by the 1850s, the environment of the New World, along with a host of ideas inherited from the Romantic traditions of Europe, helped to shape the attitude of American writers. About the 1830s Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement, came to the fore exalting feeling over reason and individual expression over the restraints of law and custom. It has strongly influenced writers from the age of Emerson up to the present.

The American poetry is a poetry of courage and defiance, particularly of old traditional values. This paper seeks to take up for study two poems by two of America's most famous poets who opened up new vistas for American and English poetry. The poems are "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman and "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" by Emily Dickinson, which offer an irresistible opportunity to the reader to study and analyze the structure, tone, thought and philosophy which emphasize the vital, energized and powerful streak of egotism that brings these poems so close together despite their varying lengths. Both the poets have rejected certain existing values. Emily Dickinson presents a strange contrast to Whitman. While Whitman celebrated the life of everyone in his poems, Emily limited herself to the inner life of the soul. Yet it is the treatment of the self in the two poems by poets, who are truly American but different in their sensibilities, that has prompted the selection of these poems for a deeper study.

**Key words:** self, New World, egotism, literary independence, individual, traditional.

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Walt Whitman, born 1819, appeared on the American scene at a time when the nation had, after travelling a long way from colonialism, undergone many political and social changes. One of the greatest emotional forces of modern times and popularly known as the bard of democracy, Whitman was singularly loved for representing a vast nation and for being and celebrating himself – a true American.

Greatly influenced by his father's radical democratic ideas and his mother's Quakerism, the natural scenes and sights of Long Island where he was born and the literary influences of Homer and Shakespeare, Whitman's fame rests with the *Leaves of Grass* which makes him the poet of Democracy and the representative poet of America. Through a personal, philosophical and mystical journey, he sought to stamp out a new type of character – his own, and to establish a universal brotherhood of men.

Coming to Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself" which is the quintessence of *Leaves of Grass*, one finds in it all the themes, the profound and the simple, contained in his poetry. 'I celebrate myself', sings Whitman, and this self-celebration throughout is the celebration of himself as a man and an American. He identifies himself not only with man but with all living creatures. The idea of self is the most significant aspect of Whitman's expression of his mind and art. He considered the self to be both individual and universal. For him man has an individual self whereas the world, or cosmos, has a universal or cosmic self. The self comprises ideas, experiences, psychological states and spiritual insights. The poet scans over the wide surface of the New World, describing the landscapes, the trees and the valleys with loving care and precision. As a conscious artist, a profound and original thinker, he formed a vital relationship between poetry and life. He is like a Howard Hawks or a John Ford who used their cameras to capture wide areas of beautiful landscapes for their films. One remembers the scenes in *Gone With the Wind* which Margaret Mitchell had written but perhaps could not visualize in a movie whereas David O. Selznick could bring it out on the screen. Here Whitman uses nature as a background to present his ideas of life. Lines quoted from the poem, "Song of Myself" have been taken from the *Leaves of Grass* 1856 Edition.

"Song of Myself" is a song of praise, yet, from the recesses of the poet's inner being, exhales an egotistic or personal feeling, a powerful urge for expressing himself in so many ways.

"I know perfectly well my own egotism,  
Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,"  
(Section 42, lines 1083 – 1084)

The word 'myself' is at the vortex of Whitman's thought process. The very title and first line suggest the poet's desire to celebrate himself.

"I celebrate myself , and sing myself,"  
(Section 1, line 1)

The opening section states the theme viz. a complete identity between himself and the rest of humanity. In singing of himself, Whitman identifies himself with the American masses.

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"And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good  
belongs to you"  
(Section 1, line 2-3)

These lines express a sort of pantheistic faith that the inner essence of all is one and indivisible.

He invites his soul to "lean and loaf" and observe "a spear of summer grass" which symbolizes the procreant power of nature. In other words, Whitman belongs entirely to nature and feels at one with her.

“My tongue, every atom of my blood,  
Form’d from this soil, this air,”

(Section 1, line 5)

The ‘I’ in the poem offers itself to numerous interpretations. It is the poet himself, all Americans, the natural man and also, perhaps, a spectator standing apart and watching the varied aspects of life. Whitman magnifies the self and glorifies the senses in his progress towards a union with the Absolute.

The poem develops through seven major stages. Section 1 to 5 mark the poet’s entry into the mystical state. He moves away from worldly associations and goes to the woods “undisguised and naked”. He wants to be in contact with nature like Wordsworth and to feel

“The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves,  
and of the shore and  
Dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in  
the barn,”

(Section 2, line 24)

Sections 6 to 16 tell us about the awakening of the self to higher levels of consciousness. There is a continued expansion of the poet’s self until it appears to embrace all mankind.

“I am the mate and companion of people,  
all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,”

(Section 7, line 137)

and

“In me the caresser of life wherever moving,  
Backward as well as forward swing,  
To niches aside and junior bending, not  
a person or object missing,  
Absorbing all to myself and for this song.”

(Section 13, lines 232-234)

Sections 17 to 32 deal with the purification of the self. Whitman turns from the vast extension of his identity to the pervasive equality of all beings.

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“I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,”

(Section 21, line 422)

Sections 28 to 30 describe the sexual ecstasy and fulfilment which lead to a “new identity.” Here we find the traditional mystical pattern inverted as the senses are purified not by mortification but by transfiguration and glorification.

“My flesh and playing out lightning  
to strike what is hardly  
different from myself,”

(Section 28, line 662)

Section 33 begins with a higher stage of perception showing the poet winning his way through purification to illumination, thereby gaining mystic knowledge and insight.

“Space and time now I see it is true, what I guess’d at,  
what I guess’d when I loaf’d on the grass,”

(Section 33, lines 710-711)

Freed from life's physical restraints, he momentarily transcends space and time. But in Section 33 itself the mood gradually shifts from exultation to darkness and despair when the poet identifies himself with the sick and the wounded, the unwanted and the destitute.

“Agonies are one of my changes of garments,  
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels,  
I myself become  
the wounded person,”

(Section 33, lines 844-845)

This identification continues until Section 37 when suddenly the reader encounters an abrupt shift in attitude in Section 38 where the poet says:

“Enough! enough! enough!  
Somehow I have been stunn'd, stand back!”

(Section 38, line 959)

Thereafter, Sections 39 to 43 emphasize faith, love and identification of Christ. The poet's sudden achievement of wisdom, and a knowledge of that union with the Absolute, bestows him with divine energy and certainty.

In Sections 44 to 49 the emphasis is on perception, and the poet's "supreme power" becomes the power of mystic insight into the fundamental questions of existence.

“births have brought richness and variety,  
and other births will bring us richness and variety.”

(Section 44, lines 1140-1141)

and

“And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.”  
(Section 49, line 1289)

Finally, we have the concluding Sections 50 to 52 portraying the poet's emergence from his mystical trance. Physical and spiritual exhaustion put him into a deep sleep from which he

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again gropes his way back to the consciousness of the material world but expresses his inability to put into adequate words the substance of what he has learned. The last Section comprises his farewell and treatment:

“I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under  
your boot-soles.”

(Section 52, lines 1339-1340)

The poem, "Song of Myself" clearly appears to be a meditative soliloquy where the self has been conceived as the protagonist swaying alternately between defining itself and yet again having no definition. Whitman's metaphor of self versus en masse is a paradox revealing at once the poet's ambivalence in stating man to be unique and separate in himself, while, on the other hand, stating him to be the same as everyone else.

Now let us consider Emily Dickinson, born 1830, a major American poet and the greatest of all women poets in English who lived an obscure life of isolation but wrote more than seventeen hundred poems. Though she witnessed the American Civil War (1861-65) in her lifetime, this great event left her untouched so that she was completely isolated from all contemporary life. She lived in an age when old religious values were fast disintegrating to be replaced by new ones. Puritanism had begun to decline to be replaced by Transcendentalism, a more optimistic religious attitude. Thus, the young Emily found herself surrounded by Evangelical devoutness which she found hard to accept. Her unconventional and impulsive bent of mind made her rebel against orthodox ideas and free herself from the tangles of tradition.

"The Soul Selects", taken up for this study, is a short exquisite poem of just twelve lines written in blank verse where Emily selects an abstract theme which she handles in her own egotistic mien. It is one of Emily Dickinson's 'soul' poems in which she explores inner needs and self-reliance. It is about identity,

self-analysis and psychic sensitivity. The poem represents a movement inward towards a unity with the Divine or maybe towards absolute isolation. It takes the reader into an abstract inner world full of symbols and shifting perspectives. The poet brings the abstract and the concrete together in meticulously constructed stanzas that curiously rebel against tradition. The poem focusses on the idea of the soul creating a special 'select' type of person or persons and a withdrawal from mainstream society. The language and imagery relate to space vacated or filled, openings, closures, superiority, authority. For Dickinson, the soul must shrink away from the limelight to seek inner solace. The poem reveals the classic trademark of a Dickinson poem – unusual syntax including dashes and single words, slant rhyme and no title. Written in 1862, it belongs to that period in Emily's life when she had stopped attending church. It relates to her own withdrawal into a life of solitude about this time, preferring her own select group and shutting the door on the general world, as the opening lines suggest -

“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 -

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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 - ”

We discover the truth of a statement made by Josephine Hendin in her book *Vulnerable People* where she says that the refusal to “believe the world my other than that he (novelist) says it is a tool for a kind of self-liberation. It brings freedom from the idea that human nature is fixed by death, by the determinisms of psychology, heredity or environment.”

In the present poem Miss Dickinson describes a weird congregation of souls which crowd as in a purgatory without feeling or sympathy. No solution or redemption is promised according to Christ or the final judgement, but the assemblage of souls in a high-walled fortress, the doors of which are opened and closed to let in new souls. Souls are kept as in a prison, doomed and despaired, disillusioned and dejected. The mightiest of the mighty bend their knees one by one before a sovereign female who is arrogant, authoritative and autocratic and who presides over the destiny of the souls.

“- an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat - ”

Miss Dickinson's egotism lends itself in the creation of a supreme divine being who is a female similar to a dowager in the oriental past way back in history. Kings bow before as she lives in aloofness and arrogance in a high-walled fortress alone. Souls are symbols of helplessness and impotence that stand as a part of the chorus. The kings strain to grace the mighty female. This imagery is her personal creation.

The keynote of this poem is the exclusiveness of friendship and the highly selective quality of affection. It is the inner self searching for its companion and shutting out anything that does not measure up to its standards. A surface reading of this poem may simply suggest an affair of the tenth line, and the central stanza supports this idea suggesting that future suitors are being rejected because of the chosen “One”.

“Then - close the Valves of her attention -  
Like Stone - ”



The image of valves closing like stone emphasizes her exclusiveness. These valves represent the very inner recesses of the human being which, like a door, open and close mechanically to allow or stop the flow of emotions. The poem ends harshly with the soul's stern attitude compared to the unfeeling "Stone".

Written at a time Emily was struggling between Puritanism (the old faith) and Transcendentalism (the new faith) and was influenced by Benjamin F. Newton's free thinking as well as Emerson's reliance on inner light and intuitive reason, the poem points out that Miss Dickinson, though a born Christian, felt that the soul was sexless, without feeling, sentiment or emotion. It was a living form, apathetic and non-physical. Things happened because they had to happen and the soul looked on.

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In this poem, Emily's view of life after death is a figment of her imagination fraught with egotism. Two points clearly emerge – one that her own egotism of life after death is anti-Christian where souls are helpless, hapless and hopeless, and, secondly, that the ultimate power is in the hands of a powerful female. Now the female, vested with tremendous strength, is anti-Christian in essence as it strikes at the roots of the Trinity i.e. Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. The Father is not substituted by a Mother but by an arrogant, powerful, angry female. This is where Emily's egotism stems out as a revolt. The poem is abrupt and vibrating with energy. It is pathetic in feeling. The law of retribution or reward or punishment, given to people in this life in accordance with their deeds, is ruled out. The Christian concept of reward or punishment, either in this life or life after death, is also ruled out.

The present poem, though borrowing linguistic trappings from Puritan theology such as "The Soul selects", "her divine Majority", "an ample nation" and "Choose One", is a conscious attack on Puritan snobbery. The poem, in denying the Christian concept of reward or punishment either in this life or the life after death, makes Emily akin to Hardy who, though a born Christian, read the Bible only for knowledge. He did not believe in any kind of salvation or a benevolent order. He felt the presence of a mighty power that created and destroyed at will which he called 'The Immanent Will' – a mighty power, blind and unpredictable and illogical in behavior. Influenced by the German philosophers, Schiller and Schopenhauer, and the Greek tragic dramatists who helped him to hammer out a desperate philosophy of life, Hardy was an egotist like Dickinson and amply expressed his disdain towards orthodoxy. Like Emily in "The Soul selects", Hardy, too, presents the three "In Tenebris" poems as "poems of nescience exploring, as they do, self-protective withdrawal of the individual from external reality", the poems having "distinctive tones of derision, defiance and despair" according to Brian Greene in his essay, "Darkness Visible: Defiance, Derision and Despair in Hardy's 'In Tenebris' Poems".

The proud soul in Emily's poem selects its "own Society" – a society which it defines according to its own preferences and priorities. The soul dwells in its own Emersonian universe, emotionless and unmoved by entreaties even from "Emperor" himself. Ironically, this soul images itself as a supreme power in the likeness of its God initiating its own process of election and rejection.

The word "Unmoved" occurs twice in the poem thereby emphasizing the egotistic self choosing to behave in a haughty, selfish manner. "Chariots" and "Emperor" in the second stanza lend a regal note. The hardened soul of Emily stares "Unmoved" upon the souls of royal personages who come in their "Chariots" and "pause" to make obeisance to to her arrogant self. The "low Gate" suggests a heightened position of the poetess's soul which seems to be seated high up on a throne in her fortress looking down upon those who are passing "her low Gate". And as the chariots pass, each Emperor, craving for attention, steps down to kneel "Upon her Mat" in utter humility and servility to pay his respects to this arrogant self. Yet she is "Unmoved", a word which lends finality to the lack of feeling or pity which the soul bears towards other souls craving for its attention.

This poem, which is short, abrupt, pensive and un-Christian in content, can be compared with another poem by Emily – "After great pain, a formal feeling comes -" just to

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point out the fact that it contains the same lost, rather tragic, imagery so that we are led to believe that loneliness and despondency are the cause of egotism that looms over her poetic creation. She is distraught

and, therefore, unkind in her philosophy of life after death. In a way, she is an existentialist because what is available when alive is real and true, but after death all hopes evaporate leaving souls too impotent. There is a feeling of superiority and the soul parts company with the body as with everything else. Self-worship is a kind of spiritual death, and spiritual and physical deathliness, therefore, pervade the poem. Here we have the soul's unconditional assertion of itself. Things outside the soul become more and more disparate till the soul's relationship to the self becomes impaired and finally collapses. In the final moments the "Valves" of the speaker's feelings close and she becomes "Stone". The soul here has a grotesquely heightened sense of itself and selects its own society, rejecting the material world and craving perhaps for immortality. So, we find Miss Dickinson, on the one hand, lacking Christian conviction and, on the other hand, seeking unity with the Divine being.

Now, when the two poems, "The Soul selects" and "Song of Myself" are juxtaposed, we find in the one the soul, or self, rejecting everything right from the very beginning and moving towards the "One" while the other poem adopts a process of lending the self to various identities and only much later, in the 39<sup>th</sup> Section, extricating the self from these identities to move towards a union with the only "one". In this respect, the selection and rejection process in Whitman's poem is much slower than in Emily's poem.

As regards the attitude, both poems have self at the centre of things. But, Whitman's self does not assume an arrogant attitude like Emily's self, cutting itself off from everything else in its search for a final identity. Whitman's self takes on various identities and again extricates itself from each so as to preserve its spontaneity. His self is created by the happy union of body and soul, deriving power from nature as the horse with which he compares himself - "affectionate, haughty, electrical". Emily's poem shows an anti-Christian attitude while Whitman's does not.

As regards treatment of the subject, one finds the 'self' dominant in both poems and the self also wanting to free itself from man-made conventions and limitations. Both poems are thus expressions of revolt as both signify the individualistic dignity in human creation. Both poems are egotistic in essence but the poets have taken recourse to different modes of projecting the egotistic self. While Emily's poem is entirely subjective, describing the self from the standpoint of a woman who is, from the very beginning, haughty as well as selective, Whitman's poem encompasses both the objective and subjective interpretations of the self. His self at first lends itself to various natural identities and then, by stages, denounces all things materialistic in its quest for the immortal.

Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself" is more of a modern circular epic in which, without any narrative, he juggled and grouped together lines taken from his notebook. It comes closest to T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" in its indirect unity consisting of repeated images, balancing of themes and plurality of meanings. In this poem of self-making, the poet's voice has travelled leisurely and the syntax has stretched far beyond ordinary speech. We find his uninhibited relationship with the world contrasting with Emily's self residing in a walled enclosure, shutting out the rest of the world. Section 15 in "Song of Myself" is a long catalogue encompassing all mankind. This is markedly different from Emily's style where the barest minimum of words has been used to convey the maximum and most intense emotions.

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"Song of Myself" sprawls over the universe for its setting and its numerous catalogues may be defined as extended symbols revealing a mind which includes everything. These external symbols get intertwined with private meanings to make the poem an extravagant monologue. There is a superfluity of words, making the poem unusually long. Whitman's is a hungry self "taking in" everything he sees and himself a "Kosmos" whereas Emily's is a self desperately seeking isolation. Whitman feels at one with nature and the self in his poem has many voices and moods. As Paul Zweig puts it, "there's the melting-in effect of the humanist painters he had admired in the shifting grasp of the moods and impulses".

"The Soul selects", on the other hand, is a short poem dealing with a single, abstract theme. Her style is fragmentary and spasmodic rather than complete. There is no exuberance of emotions like Whitman. The reader finds a deliberate repression of emotions in an attempt to convey their intensity, and is baffled by her language at a casual first reading of the poem. Words chosen by her do not fully express her intentions. The lines are chopped, expressions abrupt and the total sense accrued pervades beyond the sensibilities of the reader. The total word sense is never allowed to settle down in the crucible of understanding. In short, the structure of words and their syntax do not convey the fullness of the whole experience. Her vocabulary was

not remarkable and her verse seemed stripped to the bone containing only the essential idea. In the selected poem the imagery and diction employed unite to build up a note of ecstasy in the choice of the “One” to whom the poetess pledges for whole-hearted devotion. Emily’s disjointed thoughts and sad demeanour lend an incompleteness, yet that vacuum of thought brings in silence for retrospection and links it with eternity. Life, existence and life after death, in the shape of souls, energize Miss Dickinson on selecting an off-beat abstract theme which she endeavours to describe with the limitation of ordinary diction. Consequently, the meaning conveyed is incoherent and the silence that erupts creates chunks of meaninglessness and resonance of the powerful words spelt with capital letters. In her style, at once cryptic and terse, Emily is akin to the metaphysical poets like Donne and Herbert. In many of her attitudes and technical innovations she anticipates the style of the Imagists who were to write later.

A peculiarity of Emily is her repeated capitalizing of nouns, adjectives and adverbs which lend them a certain dignity. Another peculiarity which one observes in this poem is Emily’s use of dashes which one finds difficult to interpret. One finds an unorthodox syntax and, on the whole, a disregard for the standard punctuation marks replaced by a great reliance on dashes for achieving special effects. Hints of meaning filter through these to infuse into the poem an electric vibrancy.

Now, in an attempt to trace the kind of self portrayed in these two poems under consideration, one might say that, despite their differences in theme, form and treatment, both poems seem to evoke the picture of an egotistic self. Both Whitman and Miss Dickinson are preoccupied with the idea of the soul rejecting the material world in its quest for the Divine. While breaking the conventional norms, both have created new systems. The soul in Emily’s poem has been given a feminine identity but not so in Whitman’s poem. Also the soul in Emily’s poem is characterized by a quality of stiffness and lifelessness as indicated by phrases such as “shuts the door”, “unmoved”, “close the Valves of her attention / Like Stone”. Contrasted with this is Whitman’s soul merging itself with the procreant powers of nature and with the whole of mankind suggesting life itself.

“Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world”.

10.

Nevertheless, after a careful reading of both these poems, one can only say that the all-powerful “I” seems to be at the centre of the entire thought process of both Whitman and Miss Dickinson. Both the poets have made different, though acute, psychological observations about the self. The atmosphere is surcharged with egotism, and the entire thought process of both crystallizes in the final imagery of the self transcending the limits of death in moving towards an eternity.

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