

ENGLISH: *SELECTED POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON*

How do the texts you have studied explore the assumptions underlying the concept of belonging?

In your response refer to your prescribed text and at least TWO other related texts of your choosing

A sense of belonging vacillates depending on the individual and his or her society. As a result, assumptions underlying the nature of belonging can be both accepted or challenged. Within her celebrated poems, poem 66 and poem 82, Emily Dickinson observed the connection between an individual's identity and their sense of belonging amongst society. The complex and unconventional nature of her poems illustrates an individual's ability to embrace or resist the challenge to belong. Albert Camus' novel, *The Outsider*, similarly demonstrates the intrinsic connection between belonging and identity. *The Outsider* challenges assumptions underlying the concept of belong by suggesting it is often society not the individual who desires a sense of belonging. Within *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski reflects his own Holocaust background to reveal how values and ideals of society can prevent belonging amongst a community. Ultimately, by affirming or challenging the assumptions underlying belonging, all three texts force us to consider its complex nature.

Dickinson's poem 66 explores the assumption that an individual's sense of belonging within society can depend on their identity as she attributes her persona's lack of belonging amongst her society to her connection with art and nature. As she asserts 'This is my letter to the world'; Dickinson utilizes the personal nature of a letter to symbolise her persona's identity. The persona's personification of nature as she discusses its 'simple news', told with 'tender majesty' highlights the connection between her identity and the natural world. The oxymoron juxtaposes the intimate, loving connotations of the word 'tender' with the regal and powerful image of 'majesty' to convey the persona's reverence for nature. The ambiguity of her assertion; 'Her message is committed' forces the readers to question whether Dickinson is discussing nature's message or her own poem, thereby interweaving the persona's identity with both the natural world and her art. However; these images of connection are undercut by Dickinson's lack of belonging within a society that 'never wrote to me'. The extended metaphor embodies an indignant tone to reveal her disconnection with a society who rejected her art; and by extension, her identity. The persona's final plea to 'hands I cannot see' to 'judge tenderly' of her work reinforces her lack of belonging amongst the current poetic world and illustrates her wish to belong amongst a future literary world. Dickinson's exploration of the connection between belonging and identity affirms the assumption that an individual's identity must be compatible with her society in order to achieve a sense of belonging.

Within *The Outsider*, Camus similarly asserts that it is an individual's identity which determines whether they belong within their society. While Dickinson's persona is identified through her connection to art, it is the Existentialist beliefs of Camus' protagonist, Mersault, that create a disjunct between himself and the collective identity of his society. Mersault's banal language in 'Mother died today. Or, yesterday; I can't be sure' and his unexpected refusal to see his mother's body "What? You don't want to?" evinces an existentialist apathy towards a sense of familial belonging. This confronting absence of emotion undermines the social importance of relationships; expressed through his friend's remark 'there is no one like a mother'. Mersault's indifference places him at odds with the values of society, and comes to represent an unwillingness to sacrifice his identity in order to belong. Ironically, Mersault's determined rejection of societal norms allows him to achieve a state of belonging. Whilst awaiting execution, Mersault's conversation with the prison chaplain expresses his eventual happiness about his own identity. His rhetorical questioning 'What difference could it make to me, the death of others, or your God?'; reveals a final acceptance of his status as individual isolated from the values of his society.

An individual has the ability to resist or accept a sense of belonging. Dickinson's poem 82 challenges the assumption that a state of belonging is always desired by individuals. The opening metaphor 'I had been hungry all the years' coupled with images of 'wealth' and 'ample' food present belonging as the fulfilment of desire. The religious connotations inherent with these images of 'wine' and 'bread' reflect Dickinson's own unorthodox background and her sense of exclusion with established religion. However; as the persona acknowledges 'I did not know the ample bread. 'Twas so unlike the crumb', her wish for inclusion dissipates. The Christian imagery of 'ample' bread overwhelms her when contrasted with the sufficiency of 'crumb'; and she rejects the abundance of society for the simplicity of not belonging. Her abrupt assertion that this 'plenty' made her feel 'ill and odd' reveals her sudden repulsion in the unknowable feast; attributing the persona's decision not to belong to her unwillingness to sacrifice her identity. This is reinforced by the stark simile 'as berry of a mountain bush transplanted to the road'. The juxtaposition of the beautiful, wild natural world to stark societal infrastructure reveals the persona's resigned recognition that such acceptance calls for too much sacrifice of self. The pithy, rhythmical final metaphor 'that hunger was a way of persons outside windows the entering takes away' subverts the persona's initial desire to belong; and creates a sense of finality to her final rejection of belonging. Thus, Dickinson's exploration of the individual's ability to reject a sense of belonging challenges widely held assumptions that individuals desire to belong.

Similarly, Camus' *The Outsider* challenges the assumption that individuals choose to alter their identity in order to belong. Where Dickinson reveals her persona's wish to not belong amongst society, Camus depicts a society which attempts to enforce its values onto the individual in order to achieve a sense of belonging. The prosecuting lawyer harsh denunciation that Mersault has 'no soul' as he is placed on trial for murder, draws upon Mersault's existentialist philosophy to ostracise him from the devoutly Christian society. As the lawyer proclaims Mersault's atheism 'unthinkable', Camus depicts society's wish for Mersault to accept their religious codes and achieve a sense of belonging. The paradox that 'All men believe in God, even those who reject him' exposes the lawyer's futile attempt to enforce a Christian identity onto Mersault. In this way, Camus inverts the traditional relationship between the individual and society; suggesting it is society not the individual who desires a sense of belonging.

Emily Dickinson, Albert Camus and Roman Polanski explore the notion of belonging by calling into question assumptions held within society. Through various narrative and dramatic techniques, the authors astutely expose the connection between identity and belonging and the ability of the individual to embrace or resist a sense of belonging; ultimately forcing us to recognise its complex nature.