

Poem 66

'This is my letter to the world'

A reading

In Poem 66, Dickinson represented the concept of belonging through exploring an image of an isolated writer who is interested in using her writing to connect with the world.

This poem is probably autobiographical, but Dickinson constructed a persona who is not identified as either male or female to explore her ideas about the relationship between the writer and the wider community. The speaker's voice is isolated but connected. Using a letter to express her thoughts and feelings would have been socially acceptable for a woman living in the wealthy social circles of New England during the nineteenth century. Dickinson thought of her poems as letters to the world, and often transmitted them through letters. In the poem, Dickinson used the letter as a metaphor to define her relationship with the rest of humanity. She was writing from the vantage point of a solitary female poet, who was more in tune with philosophical issues than the usual personal and social concerns of women of her era. In structuring the poem, she juxtaposed the private world of the person with the public world, and tried to establish an intimate relationship with her audience using the first person.

Her poem raises the issue of the artist's relationship with humanity and Nature. The artist reaches out to others through the art of writing but, sadly, the world does not write back. The poem shows that the world is a space occupied by anonymous people. The artist is set apart from humanity and plays a special but detached role in life through examining and interpreting life's meaning. The act of addressing the world at an artistic level is seen as emotionally risky and leaves the artist feeling vulnerable.

Dickinson saw people as united through their connection with Nature and yet divided by their position in society and their individuality. Nature is depicted as a mysterious force that is within all human beings and speaks to

individuals in different ways. In this poem, the solitary artist feels alienated from the community but still longs to belong to the rest of humanity, which paralleled Dickinson's own desires. Dickinson used the metaphor of tactile 'hands', which has connotations of warmth and welcoming, to convey her desire to be greeted, connected and accepted by other people.

The speaker showed her fear of rejection through a plea at the end of the poem. She wrote 'For love of her (nature), sweet countrymen,/ Judge tenderly of me' implying that her fate depends on the response of people she cannot see, but she ironically hopes that they love Nature. Perhaps this is a criticism of capitalism and the industrialisation that was beginning to change the landscape of the natural world at the time. Her description of other people as 'sweet countrymen' shows her optimism. The poem was written at the height of local community consciousness and the issue of being American during the Civil War in 1863. Dickinson asks her future readers to judge her tenderly. The word 'tenderly' is repeated and shows a dominating need for nurturing. The speaker is self-motivated and acts on natural impulse, but still longs for social acceptance and support.

Poem 66 may represent an attempt by Dickinson to come to terms with her self-imposed exile from the world. Her mentor, Thomas Higginson, said the poem is an unreliable construct of feminine modesty because at the time Dickinson was supremely confident of poetic immortality. It does give us an impression of the emotional cost Dickinson paid for seclusion.