

# A Study of Poetic Metaphor in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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**Abstract:** *Emily Dickinson is one of the pioneers of American modernist poetry. She is known for her poetic language which is full of mystery, ambiguity and obscurity. There are many metaphors distributed in her poems, especially animal metaphors, nature metaphors and religious metaphors etc. By analyzing the metaphorical mapping system of her poems, it shows the cognitive frames that Dickinson constructs a world based on her own experiences and insights towards life. She manages to let readers to arise philosophical thoughts about nature, life and death etc. Based on the theory of poetic metaphor, this paper analyzes the poems from the book *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, and explores the function of poetic metaphors and the understanding of poems.*

**Keywords:** *poetic metaphor; poems; Emily Dickinson*

## 1. Introduction

Poetry has features of complicated images and illusory impressions. Metaphor is an essential element of poetry, which can provide poetic images and help readers understand abstract things. It supports a way to grasp the deep meaning of a poem. Lakoff and Johnson put forward the term “poetic metaphor”,<sup>[1]</sup> which is a kind of conceptual metaphors. “Language is not a separate structural system within the brain, but of the general cognitive processes that enable the human mind to conceptualize experience, processes”.<sup>[2]</sup> Poetic metaphor has its own characteristics and it is a new cognitive method to interpret poems. Emily Dickinson's poetry has an important position in western literature. During her lifetime, she writes two thousand poems to express her insights towards life. She uses metaphors to give her concern about nature, animals and human beings. This paper aims to find out how metaphors functions in poems and explore their deep meanings and aesthetics of poetry.

## 2. Purpose of the study

Poetic metaphor is prevalent in poetry, which is difficult to understand. The motivation of the study is to answer the following questions:

- (1)How are the poetic metaphor distributed in the selected poems?
- (2)What are the functions of poetic metaphor in the selected poems?
- (3)What are the features of poetic metaphor in the selected poems?

Data of the paper is Emily Dickinson's poems from her book *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, including 99 poems. This paper will select and analyze poetic metaphorical expressions from the selected poems. When the data is collected and analyzed, qualitative and quantitative methods will be applied. Inductive method will be used during the process of data analysis.

## 3. Literature review

Metaphor is a hot topic for many scholars because it is an indispensable part of poems. In Emily Dickinson's poems, there are many metaphors used to describe beautiful scenery of nature and express her attitudes about some topics. This part is literature review, including introductions of metaphor and poetic metaphor as well as the studies of Emily Dickinson's poems.

### 3.1. Metaphor

Metaphor is put forward by Aristotle in his book *The Rhetoric and Poetics*. This book reveals: “Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else, the transference being either from genus to species to genus, or from species to species, or on the ground of analogy”.<sup>[3]</sup> It shows that metaphor is a comparison between one thing and another, supporting a rhetorical effect. Richard publishes his book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, he believes that the function of metaphor is not just the basic lexical expression, which starts the analysis of metaphor from semantic view. Later, Lakoff and Johnson give the definition of conceptual metaphor in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, which starts a new way to study metaphor from cognitive view. Johnson believes that cognitive ability is helpful to understand poetry, especially interpretation of metaphors in poems. Lakoff states, “metaphor can be understood as a mapping from a source domain to a target domain”.<sup>[4]</sup> For example, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, love is the target domain, and journey is the source domain. People understand the idea “love” in terms of the source domain “journey”. Besides, the relationship between the two domains involves systematic mapping. Lakoff believes that metaphor is rooted in thoughts rather than language, and the conceptual mapping can have many linguistic expressions.

### 3.2. Poetic metaphor

In the book *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guild to Poetic Metaphor*, Lakoff and Turner illustrate the term poetic metaphor. They believe poetic metaphor is one kind of basic metaphor, and there are no essential differences between linguistic metaphor and poetic metaphor. Later, other scholars convince that poetic metaphor has its own features.

The first feature of poetic metaphor is originality. John Briggs and Richard Monaco point out that poetic metaphor is the combination of unlike things, ideas and feelings. Poetic language are always complicated, expressing imagination of poets. Poetic metaphor is common in poems. Poets discover and connect the unlike things with their embodied experience.

The second feature is crossing-domain. Conceptual metaphor involves the target domain and source domain. Poetic metaphor always finds out and connects the similarities between the unlike things. And it tries to interpret one thing or the target domain in terms of another or the source domain.

Besides, aesthetics is a feature of poetic metaphor. Metaphorical expressions of poems can create unconventional linguistic meaning. Lastly, poetic metaphor has the nature of expansivity. Poetic metaphor develops imagination and reflects human cognition. Richness is also a feature of poetic metaphor. Compared with conceptual metaphor, poetic metaphor is an exquisite conceptual metaphor, which elaborates a specific feature, depicts a complex image and express particular feelings.

### 3.3. Review of the study of Emily Dickinson's poems

Many scholars have studied Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. These analysis mainly focus on themes, including the art style, the analysis of translation and comprehension. Some scholars try to analyze her poems from cognitive view. Chang Ruijing and Chen Fei mainly study Dickinson's poems from conceptual metaphor. Zhang Yunhong analyzes Dickinson's poems based on conceptual blending theory. There are rare studies of Dickinson's poems based on the perspective of poetic metaphor. Therefore, this paper makes efforts to study the poems by using poetic metaphor.

## 4. Analysis of poetic metaphor in Emily Dickinson's poems

In this part, the paper selects thirty poems related with nature, love and death. Poetic metaphors and metaphorical expressions in poems are listed in tables. Analyzing the features and functions of poetic metaphor is important to find out the deep meaning of Emily Dickinson's poems.

### 4.1. Poetic metaphor analysis of the themes of nature

In her poems, Dickinson utilizes many creatures in nature, including birds, flowers, sea, moon and sky etc. She compares many species of nature to human beings which projects human features to the species in nature (See Table 1).

*Table 1: metaphors about nature*

Poetic Metaphor	Metaphorical Expressions
SNOW FLAKES IS A DANCER	Snow flakes, I counted till they danced so
SEASON IS A MAN	And still the pensive Spring returns
BEE IS A DRINKER	How many cups the Bee partakes
THE SKY IS A MAN	The sky can't keep their secret!
BIRD IS A MAN	I should bribe the little bird He bit an angleworm in halves...
DUSK IS A HOUSEWIFE	Oh!Housewife in the Evening West
THE HILL IS A MAN	The hills untied their bonnets
THE GRASS IS A MAN	The grass so little has to do... With the butterflies to brood And bees to entertain...
FLOWER IS A GIRL	I dared not meet the daffodils For fear their yellow grown...
SEA IS A MAN	And made as he would eat me up...
THE MOON IS A WOMAN	Her cheek a beryl hew Her eye unto the summer dew...
NATURE IS MOTHER	How fair her conversation... With infiniter care
FROG IS A CHILD	His mittens at his feet No hand hath he... <sup>[5]</sup>

From Table 1, the conceptual metaphor NATURE IS A MAN can be picked out. The poet uses the ontology “human” to map onto the abstract concept “nature”, which is also called personification. Lakoff and Turner mention that personification is a device of comprehension. She projects many aspects of human onto many things of nature, such as season, plant, moon and animals etc. Besides, she constructs many poetic metaphors in her poems, such as SEASON IS A MAN, THE GRASS IS A MAN, FLOWER IS A GIRL and FROG IS A CHILD etc. And the mapping can be seen in the mapping below (See Table 2).

*Table 2: Mapping of the metaphor NATURE IS A HUMAN BEING*

Source domain (human being)	Mapping	Target domain (nature)
Dancer	→	snow flakes
Man	→	season
Drinker	→	Bee
Housewife	→	Dusk
Man	→	hill
Woman	→	moon
...		...

Compared with conceptual metaphor, poetic metaphor has more concrete source and target domain which makes poetic metaphor diversified and various. Meanwhile, richness is the scope of mapping, which can project more attributes from the source domain to the target domain.

In the poetic metaphor, BEE IS A DRINKER, bees is compared to a drinker. Another poetic metaphor, SEA IS A MAN, which shows the power of nature. Poetic metaphor provides more detailed contents of nature. Meanwhile, in the poetic metaphor, NATURE IS MOTHER, Dickinson projects the roles of source domain “nature” onto the target domain “women” because nature has a mother’s affection for her creatures. Nature has both characteristics of male and female. Richness expands the scopes of poetic metaphorical mapping and enrich the varieties of perceiving the same target domain based on different source domain. Both originality and richness show creative features of poetic metaphor.

Besides, Emily Dickinson is a famous gardener being interested in nature. In her poems, she reveals her close-observation and wide-knowledge of nature. Above metaphors show that the source domain “human” projects characteristics onto the target domain including plants, microbes and animals mapping. She utilizes many poetic metaphors in her poems showing her deep love of nature. Poetic metaphor is helpful to understand the deep meaning and the purpose of the poet.

#### **4.2. Poetic metaphor analysis of the theme of love**

Love is a journey which is full of difficulties but she still keeps hope of love. And she believes that love is immortality. Emily Dickinson had never been married in her lifetime. It doesn’t mean that

Dickinson is indifferent to people. In her poems, there are many poetic metaphors about love. On her trip to Philadelphia, she meets Charles Wadsworth when she is twenty-five years old. Charles Wadsworth is a pastor and gives great inspirations on her poems. She falls in love with him but Wadsworth is a married man. After Wadsworth leaving with his family, Dickinson keeps single until her death. Even though Wadsworth is a married man, Dickinson still loves him deeply and shows her passion in her poems (See Table 3)

Table 3: Metaphors about love

Poetic Metaphor	Metaphorical Expressions
LOVE IS A JOURNEY	My river runs to thee Say Sea Take Me!
LOVE IS WARMTH LOVE IS LIGHT	You may forget the warmth he gave I will forget the light!
DIFFICULTY IS WILD WIND	Futile the Winds To a Heart in port
HE IS THE SUN LOVER IS THE SUN	Because He's Sunrise and I see Therefore – Then I love Thee
LOVE IS IMMORTALITY	That love is life And life hath Immortality <sup>[5]</sup>

According to Table 3, Emily Dickinson expresses her attitudes towards love. In the conceptual metaphor, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, Dickinson projects journey to the concept “love” because she believes journey including travelers, obstacles and routine. Similarly, the target domain love relationship includes lovers and difficulties in their relationship. In the poetic metaphor, DIFFICULTY IS WILD WIND, the poet projects a cross-mapping. Love is a journey which is the basis and difficulties of love like the wild wind during journeys. Thus, Dickinson projects the role of source domain onto the target domain. In the poetic metaphor, HE IS THE SUN, which the author compares her lover as the sun. She projects sun onto the lover because sun can give sunshine to people like lovers can give warmth to each other. These poetic metaphors show the creativeness compared with conceptual metaphor and it can express the deep meanings of the poems. These poetic metaphors also fulfill the aesthetic perception of poems. And the mappings is listed (See Table 4).

Table 4: Mapping of the metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY

Source domain (journey)	Mapping	Target domain (love)
Travelers on the road	→	lovers
Obstacles on the road	→	difficulties
Sunshine on the road	→	warmth
No destination on the road	→	immortality
...		...

### 4.3. Poetic metaphor analysis of the theme of death

In the selected poems, there are many metaphorical expressions about death (See Table 5).

In the poetic metaphor, ANGEL IS A SPY, the angel finds out the dead people and waits for the him. Dickinson is an imaginative poet and she projects spy to the concept “angel” because she believes that angel has the characteristics of spy, such as patience and insight.

The poetic metaphor, TOMB IS A HOUSE, which shows Dickinson’s attitude towards death. According to people’s experiential basis, death is a dreadful thing and tomb is fearful. However, Dickinson changes images of tomb. She projects the source domain “house” onto the target domain “tomb” because she believes that the dead going to tomb likes people going home. This kind of mapping also originates in experiential basis. People’s conventional image of house is associated with the final destination. The comparison of images between tomb and house activates a connection between death and home.

*Table 5: Metaphor about death*

Poetic Metaphor	Metaphorical Expressions
ANGEL IS A SPY	Her little figure at the gate The Angels must have spied
DEATH IS A ROAD TO PARADISE	When her breath was done Took up her simple wardrobe And started for the sun...
GHOST IS A MAN	The only ghost I ever saw was dressed in Mechlin He wore no sandal on his foot and stepped like flakes of snow His laughter, like the Breeze...
FUNERAL IS A PARADE	There will be that Dark Parade Of Tassels and Coaches soon
DEATH IS SUFFERING	The eyes around had wrung them dry And breath were gathering firm...
DEATH IS A MAN DEATH IS IMMORTALITY DEATH IS A JOURNEY	He kindly stopped for me The carriage held but just ourselves And immortality...
TOMB IS A HOUSE	We paused before a House that seemed A Swelling of the Ground The Roof was scarcely visible... <sup>[5]</sup>

In the poetic metaphor, DEATH IS A ROAD TO PARADISE, which shows her attitude towards death. She believes that death is not a dreadful thing. In western countries, people believe that they will go to paradise when they are died. Besides, the road to death and the journey to paradise are often correlated and these correlations are ubiquitous in people’s everyday experience. Dickinson projects the journey to paradise onto the concept “death” because she convinces that this kind of journey includes travelers, house, parade. Similarly, the road to death has the dead people, tomb and funeral. Therefore, metaphor works by mapping from source domain to the target domain. People can understand the deep meaning of the poems and the purpose of the poet, which is a better way to decode the poetic metaphors. And the mapping is listed below (See Table 6).

*Table 6: Mapping of the metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY*

Source domain (journey)	Mapping	Target domain (death)
Travelers	→	ghost, angel, dead person
Parade	→	funeral
Obstacle	→	suffering
House	→	tomb
Destination	→	immortality
...		...

From Table 6, their sources are grounded in Dickinson’s embodied experience. Abstract conceptual metaphor can not meet the vitality of the poem. These poetic metaphors enrich the source and target domain. Richness can expand the scope of mapping. It is an effective method to interpret poems by using poetic metaphors.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper mainly analyzes three themes of Emily Dickinson’s poems, including nature, love and death. With the theory of poetic metaphor, it is helpful to understand the deep meaning of poems and purposes of poet. Besides, from the analysis of poetic metaphor, this paper finds that poetic metaphor belongs to conceptual metaphor, but it has more complex characteristics. For example, DEATH IS A JOURNEY TO PARADISE, which can derive from the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY. Due to the complexity of poems, it is necessary to employ poetic metaphors in order to find out purposes of poets. Compared with conceptual metaphor, poetic metaphor has more concrete source domain and target domain. For example, THE MOON IS A WOMAN and SEA IS A MAN, shows that nature has both characteristics of men and women extending the dimension of source domain. Meanwhile, the target domain is concrete than abstract images of nature. The expanding of target and source domain reflects the richness of poetic metaphor.

Besides, there are many limitations of this paper. The amount of data is limited. This paper only selects one book of Emily Dickinson, it can’t stand for the general rules of the poetic metaphor and the themes of poems. Meanwhile, Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of poetic metaphor is complicated to

understanding. The process of analysis is simple and many aspects of theory aren't unfolding. Detailed introduction of theories and poems can be further studied in order to apply theories to interpret poems.

### References

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