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Poetic Technique of Concretizing the Abstract: A Study of Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poems

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Abstract:

Emily Dickinson is undoubtedly one of the greatest poets America has ever given to the world. She wrote a wide range of poems with varying themes such as nature, love, death and immortality. Her style is peculiar in as much as she uses unconventional devices in her poetry such as short lines, lack of titles, slant rhymes, unconventional capitalization and punctuation and dashes. Despite the fact that not more than a dozen out of her eighteen hundred poems are published during her life time, her poetry has simply mesmerized and enthralled her readers. But this is only one side of the coin. Her poetry is known for its complexity and the use of images which baffle and intrigue the readers. The present paper is an attempt to study the use of concrete images for describing the abstract ideas such as love, death, hope, faith and immortality. Her poems abound in such imagery and they are unique and unparalleled in their meaning and structure.

Keywords: Abstract, Concrete, Concretizing, Imagery, Poetic Technique

Introduction

Emily Dickinson was born on 10 December 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. A close scrutiny of her life reveals that she spent her life in seclusion and never had many friends or associates. Yet, the few with whom she established good relationships had a lasting influence on her life as well as her work. The one who made such an influence in her life was the Reverend Charles Wadsworth whom she called "my closest earthly friend."

The three major influences on her poetry were the 17th century Metaphysical poets in England, the Bible and her upbringing in a Puritan family. She admired the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrette Browning and John Keats. It is amazing that not more than a dozen of her poems were published during her life time though she wrote close to or more than 1800 poems. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955. She died in Amherst in 1886.

What keeps Dickinson foremost on the firmament of poetry is her writing technique which is unique and is different from others. She wrote her poems at the tail end of the Romantic period and yet she was influenced by some of the ideals of Romanticism which find expression in her poems on Nature. But her main forte is Realism. Emily Dickinson was particularly interested in

dealing with subjects such as death, love, mental pain, religion, solitude and nature. Among all of these subjects, her primary fascination was with death, which she focused on extensively and with great insight.

The word 'Abstract' refers to ideas or concepts which have no physical form. Naming words such as love, sympathy, fame, success, immortality, eternity, life, and death are some of the examples. These ideas and concepts are not available to the senses. The opposite is the word 'Concrete'. They are ideas or concepts which have a definite form. Examples are physical objects such as door, mat, stone, and umbrella. They can be perceived by the senses. The curious truth about abstract ideas or concepts is that we are all familiar with these and yet we cannot recognize or imagine them unless they are set against something which really exists, that is, unless we concretize them. Emily Dickinson uses this as a poetic technique to explain the intangible. The reader finds it difficult to understand these abstract ideas represented by the concrete images, as there appears some seeming obscurity and ambiguity in the poems. But a deeper analysis of the poem unfolds and unravels the levels of meaning in the poem and opens the doors of happiness and joy to the reader. Dickinson's poems are known for this quality. professors Peggy McIntosh and Ellen Louise Hart comment: "For Emily Dickinson, the immeasurable, unrecorded life was far more real than the verifiable one; the intersections of visible and invisible worlds far more electric than facts recognized by biographers" (1) Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the only one literary critic during her life time calls her a "wholly new and original poetic genius." Another critical perspective of her poetry is that "she is now regarded as one of the two founders of American poetics, alongside Walt Whitman, but her legacy provides an alternate direction for American verse—her abstract, spare musicality and contemplative introversion providing a counterpoint to Whitman's sprawling lines, concrete subject matter, and grandiosity." (2) The author of "The Cambridge History of English and American Literature" writes that Dickinson's "poems are remarkable for their condensation, their vividness of image, their delicate or pungent satire and irony, their childlike responsiveness to experience, their subtle feeling for nature, their startling abruptness in dealing with themes commonly regarded as trite, their excellence in imaginative insight and still greater excellence in fancy." (3) Some of Dickinson's most famous poems are chosen here to discuss concretization of the abstract in her poems.

Concretizing the Abstract:

In the poem, Fame is like a fickle food, she says that fame is temporary and those who go after fame find that it vanishes after some time. She says that fame is like food set on a table which leaves crumbs after some time. This has a parallel in the axiomatic statement of Kulapati Ekkirala Krishnamacharya that goodness is like a mother who gives comfort and the much needed solace whereas greatness is like a beautiful woman who tempts.

FAME is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate,
Whose table once a Guest, but not
The second time is set.

Whose crumbs the crows inspect,
 And with ironic caw
 Flap past it to the Farmer's corn;
 Men eat of it and die.

The abstract idea 'fame' is set against a number of concrete images – fickle food, shifting table, and crumbs – which makes the idea splendid.

In the poem, Hope is the Thing with Feathers, Dickinson takes abstract ideas such as hope, depression and helplessness and describes them with concrete images. She describes Hope as a bird which perches in the soul. Thus, she gives a recognizable shape to an abstract idea. In this poem, she shows the two sides and the shades of the bird. On one hand, the bird with its soft feathers perches in the soul and is hardly noticeable of its presence. But it is strong enough. It withstands tempestuous weather and hard times and never stops singing. When Hope is set against 'the gale', 'the storm, the chilliest land' and 'the strangest sea', the indestructible nature of hope in the face of difficulties and crises gets intensified.

HOPE is the thing with feathers
 That perches in the soul,
 And sings the tune without the words,
 And never stops at all

In the poem, Success is Counted Sweetest, she says that those who are never successful in their lives place the highest value on success. They count success as the sweetest. In order to bring home this beautiful abstract idea, she uses a concrete image – 'nectar'. Nectar is sweet and those who do not have it acutely desire it. Here, success which is an abstract idea is equated with a concrete image, nectar and those who desire success must have the 'sorest need'. In another set of images, she takes the victorious army ('the purple host') and contrasts it with the defeated and dying men. She says that the defeated and the dying men understand the importance of success better than the victorious. It is interesting to note that many of Emily Dickinson's most famous lyrics are homiletic. On the surface, they appear simple but they are so complex that a world of meaning is embedded in it. Its first two lines express its homiletic point, that "Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" and develop the argument with the help of images – success is counted sweetest by those who have the sorest need and the defeated and the dying men understand the importance of success better than the victorious.

SUCCESS is counted sweetest
 By those who ne'er succeed.
 To comprehend a nectar
 Requires sorest need.

The Brain_____is Deeper than the Sky is a striking poem where the immense power of mind is set against the wide sky. The speaker says that the brain is deeper than the sky as it is able to absorb everything in the universe “with ease___and you___beside”. She says that the absorbing power of mind is greater than the sky as it can absorb anything as sponges and buckets absorb water. The poet here takes an abstract idea of the immense power of brain and equates it with the sky, the sponges and the buckets which are so apt to understand the abstract. This is another classic example of Dickinson’s use of homilies. The final stanza is complex and ambiguous. The beauty lies in its complexity and ambiguity. It is thought provoking. The brain differs from God or from the weight of God as syllable differs from sound. The difference between a syllable and sound is that a syllable is a part of a word which has form. But sound is formless. Is Dickinson speaking of the Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient and yet formless God? Aren’t we thrilled simply?

THE BRAIN is wider than the sky,
For, put them side by side,
The one the other will include
With ease, and you beside.

The brain is deeper than the sea,
For, hold them, blue to blue,
The one the other will absorb,
As sponges, buckets do.

The brain is just the weight of God,
For, lift them, pound for pound,
And they will differ, if they do,
As syllable from sound.

Dickinson’s poem ‘The Soul selects her own Society’ is a beautiful poem with a perfect blending of the use of metaphor with imagery. The soul selects its own companions and never allows anyone against its conscience. This abstract idea is beautifully conjured up in concrete images such as ‘shutting the door’. The closing of the door is so uncompromising that even the chariots, an emperor and an ample nation cannot persuade her. This idea is further heightened in the last line where she emphasizes on the ‘One’ who is chosen. This ‘One’ may be a friend who was very dear to her like Rev. Wadsworth or Jesus. No doubt there is complexity and ambiguity

in the poem. But the moment this complexity and ambiguity is unearthed, the reader's soul dances with joy.

THE SOUL selects her own society,
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

As we all know, Dickinson's whole world is her own house and she lived her life in total isolation. But her poetic sensibilities never hindered her in giving expression to her keen observation and deep insight.

In the poem, A Bird Come down the Walk she describes the minutest details. She sees a bird come down the walk and is not aware of the fact that it is being watched. The bird "ate an angle worm, drank a dew/from a convenient Grass____ and then hopped sideways to let a beetle pass by. The bird is frightened and it "unrolled his feathers" and flies away with grace as if "oars divide the ocean" or "butterflies leap "off banks of Noon". The striking feature of this poem is the imagery employed in the final stanza. Here Dickinson uses two splendid images of flight and aquatic motion (rowing and swimming). The image of butterflies leaping "off Banks of Noon," splashlesly swimming through the sky, is one of the most memorable in all Dickinson's writing.

A Bird came down the Walk –

He did not know I saw -

He bit an Angle Worm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

And then, he drank a Dew

From a convenient Grass -

And then hopped sidewise to the Wall

To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes,

That hurried all abroad -

They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,

He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers,
And rowed him softer Home -

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon,
Leap, splash less as they swim.

Emily Dickinson is a poet who is known for her inward look and self-observation. “After a great pain a formal feeling comes” is a beautiful poem which neatly balances the emotional feelings of a person who survives a great loss and trauma in life. The abstract idea of one’s pain or grief after a great set back in life is concretized by images such as ‘Nerves’ and “Tomb’. The heart questions whether it has really borne such a pain with a mechanical and plodding feet and stone like contentment. The poet says this is ‘the hour of lead’ and if the person survives this hour, the survivor remembers it the same way a ‘freezing person’ remembers ‘snow “First – chill—then—stupor—then the letting go”. The images are so beautiful that they intensify the effect. The choicest words used by the poet to describe the feeling after the funeral are really amazing. The emotion following pain is ‘formal’; one’s nerves feel like “Tombs,” one’s heart is stiff and disbelieving. The feet’s “Wooden way” evokes a wooden casket, and the final “like a stone” recalls a headstone.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –

Remembered, if outlived,

As freezing persons, recollect the Snow –

First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

The death poems of Dickinson need a special mention.

In the poem, Death is like the insect, she shows the inevitable nature of death. She likens it to an insect which kills the tree of life. She says that if the insect of Death cannot be stopped even after cutting the branch where the insect has settled, it is better to leave the tree to die. The concrete images insect and tree used by Dickinson in contrast increase the intensity of the poem.

“I heard a Fly Buzz” is a beautiful poem which reminds us of a common phenomenon in the world and makes us wonder at the ignorance of human race. Death is a great boon to human beings. It relieves and liberates one of all the suffering in life. But, we in our ignorance, express grief for those who are on the death bed. The speaker in the poem says that when she was on her death bed, she heard a fly buzz. The buzzing of the fly was the most irrelevant idea and distraction at the crucial hour when one’s attention should be on God and full of peace and tranquility. She says that the room was as still as the air between “the Heaves” of a storm. The intensity further heightens as the fly’s wing cuts the speaker off from the light until she cannot “see to see”. The remarkable feature of this poem is that what happens in the materialistic world is given expression to in the concluding lines “What portion of me be / Assignable”, that is, the relatives and the beloved ones pouring on her and the dying woman signing away in her will.

I HEARD a fly buzz when I died;

The stillness round my form

Was like the stillness in the air

Between the heaves of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,

And breaths were gathering sure

For that last onset, when the king

Be witnessed in his power.

I willed my keepsakes, signed away

What portion of me I

Could make assignable,—and then

There interposed a fly,

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,

Between the light and me;

And then the windows failed, and then

I could not see to see.

The poem “ I Died for Beauty____ But was scarce” is another example where abstract ideas are concretized with images. The speaker in the poem says that she died for Beauty and she was unable to “adjust to her tomb.” There was another man who too died for Truth and was in the same predicament. When both of them started exchanging their ideas why they died, the man in another tomb said that Truth and Beauty are the same and that they met at night as kinsmen and they were ‘brethren’ They talked with each other till such time the moss reached their lips and covered up the names on their tomb stones. This shows the transience of human life. The man’s exposition reminds us of John Keats’ ‘Truth for Beauty and Beauty for Truth’. However, Dickinson’s treatment of this bizarre idea of death is astounding and is unique in literature. What is singularly Dickinson’s and is unparalleled in this poem is the harmonious blending of different abstract ideas like the physical death of a person (“Until the Moss had reached our lips—”) gradually leading to martyrdom (“I died for Beauty. . . One who died for Truth”) interspersed with Platonic love and kinship (“And so, as Kinsmen, met at Night—”), and an undying desire to live a life after death (it would be nice to have a like-minded friend). The profound truth in this poem is that all cravings, desires, anxieties, ambitions come to a naught when death attends on us and life is so transient.

I DIED for beauty, but was scarce

Adjusted in the tomb,

When one who died for truth was lain

In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
“For beauty,” I replied.
“And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names

In the poem, *The Blunder* is in estimate, she says that we all make a mistake in thinking that Eternity is a Station that we try to reach after death. She says that Eternity is always with her like a friend. There are Biblical allusions in the poem against the backdrop of a letter (L288) written by her to Sue in 1864. ‘There is no first, or last, in Forever – It is Centre, there, all the time.’ The Biblical reference is in John 5:24 where Jesus said to his disciples, ‘In very

truth, anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in him who sent me has hold of eternal life.’

In the poem, *The Butterfly* obtains, she continues her idea of a butterfly being a symbol of immortality and expresses her grief that human beings are not sympathetic to him and wishes to soar high and free as a butterfly.

Conclusion:

The scope of this paper is limited and it is not possible to analyze the poems of Dickinson fully, as the poems are more in number. What surprises the reader is her inward look, her deep insight into the abstract ideas and her success in giving a concrete shape to such ideas in images which are drawn from the daily routine. She writes on a variety of themes and that is precisely the reason why her poems do not fit into any one genre. Some critics see the influence of Emerson’s Transcendentalism on her, whereas the others find a relentless intrusion into the human mind. Whatever be the differing opinions of the critics, one thing is certain that Dickinson is always in her imaginative realm – whether it is flowers, gardens, love, death or immortality. And what thrills the reader is her use of imagery to describe the abstract ideals with concrete objects. This is her poetic technique of concretizing the abstract ideas in a way that simply transcends our imagination.

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