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**Figurative Language in Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson (I Heard a Fly Buzz, I felt a Funeral in my Brain, Because I could not stop for Death and Hope is the Thing with Feathers)**

A Graduation Research Project

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2021 -2022**Abstract**

This research project examines the figurative language used in selected poems (*I Heard a Fly Buzz, I felt a Funeral in my Brain, Because I could not stop for Death and Hope is the Thing with Feathers*) of the American poet Emily Dickinson. The project is divided into three sections. The first section offers explanations on figurative language and key terms that are necessary to the analysis of the poems. The second section deals with the motives for Dickinson’s poetry and recurrent subjects in her poems that could help the researcher in the analysis. Section three deals with the findings of the research. For instance, in ‘*Hope is the thing with feathers*’, the extended metaphor that compares hope to a bird constructs the base of the figurative language in the poem. In each subsection of section three, the analysis of the researcher and the view of critics are focused on. The paper ends with a conclusion and a list of references.

**Literature and Language**

* 1. ***Figurative Language***

Literature is a form of art that uses language to give pleasure or communicate ideas, thoughts or certain feelings. It has been with the mankind since the early ages. Folk songs, stories and sayings are forms of early unwritten literature. The language used in literature is not always like that of daily conversation between normal individuals in a society. When a person asks “What is your name?”, the question normally contains no connotative meanings. Connotation refers to a meaning implied by the use of a word, in addition to its literal denotative meaning. The language of literature is rather different and writers often do not state what they mean directly. Literature usually employs a type of language that is widely known as figurative language through using figures of speech.

The meaning of the term figurative language has been discussed in many books and works of research. Paul (1970, p.225) states that “speaking figuratively is a sort of flowery way of not saying just what you mean, quite natural in poetry and politics but presumably absent from serious legal, scientific, and philosophical discourse”. He believes that no one has been successful in giving figurative language the right detailed description. Victor Shklyovsky cited in (Bressler, 2011, p.50), introduces the term “defamilarization” to describe figurative language as the use of ordinary words in new, creative ways. Therefore making readers take a second look at words or word combinations used within a text in order to arrive at an interpretation.

Figurative language, in another definition, refers to language that involves figures of speech or is utilised in a nonliteral manner to create a certain meaning or effect (Mustafa, 1987).

On the whole, it can be said figurative language is that language which writers compose to strengthen the idea they wish to spread. Moreover, a variety of figures of speech help writers in achieving this.

* 1. ***Figures of Speech***

Although all genres of literature use figures of speech broadly, poetry in particular, manipulates figures of speech and poetic devices lavishly. One writer defines figures of speech as a statement that departs from the recognized literal meaning, the regular order of words, or the emphasis created by sound patterns. (Baldick, 2001). Thus, using figures of speech is a common technique in literature. This can also be found in normal everyday talking and writing. According to Quinn (2010, p.6), a figure of speech is “an intended deviation from ordinary usage”. This means that figures of speech are not uncomplicated. Figures of speech used in literary works are not usually easily comprehensible, and they carry ideas and concepts that need contemplation.

The term “figures of speech” traditionally refers to various tools used in literature, generally, and in poetry, in particular. Some of them are introduced below.

* **Metaphor** is a figure of speech “in which one thing, idea, or action is referred to by a word or expression normally denoting another thing, idea, or action, so as to suggest some common quality shared by the two” (Baldick, 2001, p.153). A metaphor, states Mustafa (1987, p.138), draws a comparison between two names, features, concepts, or any other things that are not originally similar. Example: *“I dwell in Possibility”*( *I dwell in Possibility,* Dickinson). In this line, possibility is compared to a house in which the speaker lives.
* **Simile** is “an explicit comparison between two different things”. It differs from metaphor in its use of the words “as” or “like” and in some cases “akin to” (ibid, p.237). Example: “Her cheek like beryl stone” (*The Moon*, Dickinson). Here a girl’s cheek is compared to a shiny stone to show the beauty of her cheek.
* **Synecdoche** is a figure of speech in which one part of something is mentioned and stands for the whole. (Baldick, 2001). Example: “The Lightning—never asked an Eye” (*Why Do I Love You*, Sir, Dickinson). Here eye, as a part of the human body, is mentioned to refer to a human being.
* **Synesthesia** “signifies the experience of two or more kinds of sensation when only one sense is being stimulated”. It involves the unconventional combination of adjectives and nouns. For example, when a colour is described in terms of sound, or when the taste of a sound is reported.-

- (Abrams & Harpham, 2005, p.315) Example: “With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -) (*I Heard a Fly Buzz*, Dickinson). The buzz of a fly is described as being blue which is an adjective for describing visible things.

* **Personification** is giving human qualities to non-human things. That is to say “animals, abstract ideas, or inanimate things are referred to as if they were human” (Baldick, 2001, p.190). Example: “*But Remoteness travelled*

*On her Face and Tongue*” (*Now I knew I lost her,* Dickinson)

* **Imagery** is the use of expressions to create an experience that evokes senses in the mind of the reader. Apart from the sense of sight, it might also trigger other senses, i.e., sound (auditory imagery), smell (olfactory imagery), taste (gustatory imagery), and touch (tangible imagery). (Mustafa,1987). **Image**, however, is how words are used to create images. (Lewis, cited in Abrams & Harpham, 2005) The imagery in a work of literature consists of the different images that are used in it. (Baldick,2001)  Example: “A narrow Fellow in the Grass Occasionally rides” (*A narrow Fellow in the Grass,* Dickinson). Here, the visual scene of green plains or maybe hills and a boy is created.
* **Onomatopoeia** refers to the use of a word or an expression to imitate a sound, whether human, or natural. (Abrams & Harpham, 2005) Example:“I Heard a Fly Buzz” (*I Heard a Fly Buzz,* Dickinson)
* **Oxymoron** is usually the use of two opposing terms connected in a single phrase or expression. (Baldick, 2001) Example: “Finite Infinity” (*There is a Solitude of Space*, Dickinson). **Paradox**, on the other hand, is “a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense.” When two naturally opposing words are used within a single utterance in literature or poetry, it is called an **Oxymoron**. (Abrams & Harpham, 2005, pp.201-202). It can be said that both figures of speech involve contraries if they are understood literally. Oxymoron can be regarded as form of Paradox which is expressed in fewer words.

Figurative language is a powerful tool for explaining a concept that is difficult to grasp due to its abstract character or complexity. While figurative language does not provide a literal answer, it may be used to relate one notion to another to help picture the first. Figurative language is also employed to connect two ideas in order to persuade an audience to see a link even if one does not exist. Prose and poetry writers use figurative language to evoke emotion, aid in the formation of mental images, and attract readers into the work.

**Emily Dickinson**

* 1. ***Main Topics in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson***

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), an American poet, has dealt with a diverse range of topics in her writings. Two main themes of her poetry are death and nature. Other subjects include love, immortality, and self-identity (Emily Dickinson Museum, 2019).

The reoccurring topic of death is quite noticeable in poems by Dickinson. In her literature, she tries to describe death, being in a grave and afterlife. By this representation of death, “she seems to have attempted a sublimation of grief and an annihilation of her sense of loss”. (Lindberg, 1962, p.273)

Nature is another dominant theme in the writings of Emily Dickinson. Sharma (2017) suggests that Dickinson was a keen observant of nature and that she contemplated every element of nature. This, the writer comments, in addition to the influence of William Wordsworth’s nature poetry, led Emily Dickinson to write an approximate of five hundred poems about nature.

* 1. ***Transcendentalism***

During the period in which Emily Dickinson composed her poetry, there were many different active movements and literary schools that influenced writers. One of those was the Transcendentalism movement in the United States.

Transcendentalism first emerged as a religious movement before expanding to cover other aspects and to respond to serious social and political matters. Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman were among the famous Transcendentalist authors of the time. Emerson, in particular, had influence on Emily’s writings that were oriented towards Transcendentalism. She agreed with him and stopped following poetry traditions. Moreover, this aligning with transcendentalism is obvious in how she has written her poems in unusual grammar and almost empty of meter and rhythm. Through her refusal of conventional religious dogmas and her hope that humans can find truth within the natural world using their consciousness, Dickinson has shown the principals of Transcendentalism in her works (Martin, 2007).

**Figurative Language in Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson**

**3.1 *Figurative Language in ‘I Heard a Fly Buzz’***

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air -

Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset - when the King

Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable - and then it was

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 –

In this poem, the speaker opens with introducing an auditory imagery in “I heard a fly buzz”, and the word “buzz” is onomatopoeic. A visual imagery is then produced in the fourth line conveying the scene of temporary stability in the weather prior to a storm. In the first three lines, there is simile in using “like” to show the similarity between that calmness of weather before storms and the room the poem is set in.

In the second stanza, there is synecdoche in the first line “the eyes” represent people present in the room described. Oxymoron is also used in the expression “last Onset”, this linking of two contradictory words could be interpreted as the speaker’s view of death as the beginning of a never-ending life or the last beginning that the speaker needs to go through. Moreover, this view is further confirmed in the presence of a metaphor in the word “King”, which possibly refers to God, Jesus Christ, or death as a personified figure.

The last stanza begins with synaesthesia in describing “Buzz” as “Blue”. It also portrays another visual imagery, the speaker mentions “the light” which is something visual and it could mean the light people claim to see when they are expecting death, or it could simply mean the light the human eyes see. In addition, another striking metaphor is found in the line before the last in “the Windows failed”; it leads readers to believe that the eyes of a dying person are compared to windows being shut. The comparison creates a palpable image in readers’ minds.

As one of the critics states, in the first stanza, Dickinson employs imagery to focus on how silent death really is. In addition, the way she compares the silence to the stillness in air before a storm implies that something huge is about to happen. Furthermore, the figurative language used “evokes the stillness of death”. On the synecdoche in the second stanza, the author adds that Dickinson utilised images of “disembodiment”, and she never mentions persons but “Eyes”, and “Breaths” to refer to the people in the room(Leiter, 2007, pp.103-104).This intensifies the sensation of alienation found throughout the poem. Also, Leiter thinks that the word “King” in the second stanza most probably means God. (ibid)

Connelly (1966) comments on the unusual combining of the adjective “Blue” with “Buzz”, he believes that this use of synaesthesia can be understood, if it is assumed that the fly symbolizes death. The colour blue, he writes, is often interconnected with death or the presence of devilish creatures. It is the arrival of the fly which makes Dickinson’s narrator realise this “blueness”, and it is after this that the speaker is dead and no longer sees light. Additionally, this idea of blue being associated with death is also found in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar.* (ibid)

All in all, figurative language boosts the way in which death notion is presented in this poem. Figures of speech such as metaphor and imagery, and the figurative language in general, have allowed the poet to create a stunning, terrifying, and distressing vision of the moment of death in readers’ minds.

**3.2 *Figurative Language in ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain’***

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading -treading - till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum -

Kept beating - beating - till I thought

My Mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race

Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,

And I dropped down, and down -

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing - then -

This poem could be interpreted in multiple ways, one hypothesis is that the speaker is experiencing an actual funeral, possibly the speaker’s own. An alternative reading is that this “Funeral” is an extended metaphor used to express psychological fragmentation and mental discomfort of the narrator in the poem.

If the second interpretation is applied, it can be said that the word “Mourners” in the first stanza, is a personification of and a metaphor for the concerns the speaker is continuously having that are leading to this state of mind.

The fictional ceremony continues, and it is compared with a simile to a drum that keeps beating creating an auditory imagery. An auditory imagery is formed in the next stanza describing the sound of lifting a box and creaking.

In the last line of the third stanza, “Then Space - began to toll”, space is compared to a ringing bell, and this idea is extended to the next stanza. Heavens, is likened to a bell using a simile. The speaker then employs a metaphor to compare his/her own existence to an ear, giving the notion that the sound is significantly irritating. In line number fifteen, another metaphoric expression is found in the speaker, and the personification of silence, being compared to an unknown creature.

The extended metaphor continues in the final stanza, “a Plank in Reason” breaks, this could either mean that reason is compared to a house and a part of its floor breaks, or that the plank is of the imaginary coffin. Either way, this makes the narrator fully aware of what is actually going on.

One reading of this poem is that the funeral is actually of the speaker, and that the events are reported after the death of the speaker. (Wolff &Anderson, 1986)

Leiter (2007), on the other hand, asserts that the funeral is an extended metaphor used in the first three stanzas of the poem. Dickinson has created an imaginary funeral in order to present her illogical mental instability in a logical manner through intense figurative language. In addition, Leiter maintains that mentioning the bell is to say that from the speaker’s perspective, “Space” seems to be ringing.

Dickinson has made use of figurative language in this bizarre poem to express the indescribable and irritating feelings she experiences. The language of the poem is highly figurative and it employs many figures of speech, it all adds to the power of emotions conveyed in the poem.

**3.3 *Figurative Language in ‘Because I could not stop for Death’***

Because I could not stop for Death –

He kindly stopped for me –

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –

And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess – in the Ring –

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –

We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –

The Dews drew quivering and Chill –

For only Gossamer, my Gown –

My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground –

The Roof was scarcely visible –

The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity –

In this poem of Dickinson, death has been personified, and a trip aboard a carriage is used as an extended metaphor for the speaker’s journey of life or towards death. The narrator describes death as a man who “kindly” stops and the speaker gets in the carriage. Immortality, again personified, is another character sitting in the carriage.

In the second stanza, “We slowly drove – He knew no haste”, the extended metaphor continues, the trip is apparently slow, and the man who is supposedly death is not in a hurry. Meanwhile, the speaker has given up her “labor” and “leisure” as a reference to life. Death is described as having “Civility”, and as a polite man.

In the third stanza, various visual images are found that perhaps symbolise a stage of human life. They pass children who are playing in a school which hints childhood. Next, they drive past fields of “Gazing” crops, grain is attributed the ability of gazing and it is also a symbol for youth and prime of life. In the twelfth line, the speaker says they are now past the “Setting Sun” which represents the period of life before death.

In the fourth stanza, “Dews” is the personification of dew. Dew is an uncountable noun, so the addition of the plural suffix and the capitalisation of the first letter suggest that Dickinson wants to show dew as people who are shivering of cold.

The fifth stanza contains another metaphor. The features of a bizarre house are highlighted. This house stands for a grave, the trips destination and the final resting place of the speaker.

Commenting on the central metaphor of the poem, a researcher explains the significance of the first two lines. Raina (1985, pp.11-12) thinks that “since the narrative subject of the poem finds herself rather too involved in the humdrum of living”, death is personified as a noble man and offers the speaker a ride to her final destination.

Moreover, Leiter (2007, pp.57-59), remarks that the speaker’s ride with death, is the main metaphor of this poem, and it stands for “transition from life to death”. She also adds that each scene the speaker says they passed represents a phase in normal human life. Also, the peculiar house described by the speaker is most probably her grave. Leiter says the “the Horses’ Heads” is a synecdoche for the horses and it shows the horses’ galloping towards eternity, or in an alternate scenario, the speaker is unable to see what comes next. (ibid)

Throughout the poem, figurative language is maintained by the use of the extended metaphor and other figures of speech. The main metaphor, which is the carriage ride, paves the way for the rest of the figurative language. The figurative language pictures how the narrator contemplates life and embraces death.

**3.4 *Figurative Language in ‘Hope is the Thing with Feathers’***

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

The first line of the poem begins with a metaphor. Hope, an abstract, is personified and likened to a bird. The soul is compared to a branch of tree or a nest, or any place where the bird rests in. This metaphor composes the central figurative language of the poem. An auditory imagery is found in the third line producing the cry of birds in readers’ minds. The singing of the bird never stops. Similarly, the speaker wants to convey that hope does not cease. In the second stanza, there is a paradox; “Gale” represents tough times “the soul” goes through. The speaker mentions two visual imageries in the third stanza. Both “the chilliest land” and “the strangest Sea” imply the existence of hope during severe hardships that the speaker has seen. This bird has never demanded anything from the speaker, this means that hope is not like any other creature and is always present when needed.

According to Leiter (2007), hope is personified in this poem as a bird who visits the soul but is not a residence. The speaker then mentions the never-ending singing of the bird, and how no words are accompanying the singing. The singing of birds is naturally just a melody and nothing comprehensive is in it. In addition, in stanza number two, the bird is now a traveller and “the soul that has been transformed by Dickinson into a landscape of storms”, and the bird goes on singing in the miseries of humankind. (ibid, pp.87-88)

Martin (2007) comments on the last stanza, he believes that by using the idea of the bread crumb, “Dickinson shows that even the smallest portion of oneself, a single ‘crumb’, can provide an entire meal for Hope”. (Martin, 2007, pp.56-57) By this, the speaker wants to say that the slightest glance of one’s spirit can sustain the hope inside the soul.

Overall, the figurative language evidently empowered the poem to delineate such an abstract concept as hope. The metaphor depicting hope as “the thing with feathers” lays the foundation for the whole poem and aids in creating the main idea.

**Conclusion**

In the first selected poem ‘*I Heard a Fly Buzz*’, imagery, simile, synecdoche, oxymoron, onomatopoeia, metaphor, and synaesthesia are among the figures of speech used. These tools intensify the sad and lonely atmosphere and tone of the poem. The writer has made use of figurative language to construct her message about what death might feel like.

In ‘*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*’, figures of speech such as metaphor, personification, simile, and imagery are employed in the poem. Figurative language is maintained through the extended metaphor of a funeral going on in the brain of the speaker. This portrayal of the imagined funeral facilitates the explanation of the unreasonable concerns in the speakers mind.

Personification, metaphor, and synecdoche are the figures of speech that comprise most of the figurative language in ‘*Because I could not stop for Death*’, the third selected poem. Figurative language becomes useful in the poet’s effort to show death and immortality as men and life as a short journey.

The fourth poem ‘Hope is the Thing with Feathers’, manipulates an extended metaphor to act as the core for the figurative language. The figurative language of the poem makes it possible to describe hope in a tangible way.

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