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A Metaphorical Study of Emily Dickinson's View of Love in Her Poems—A Case Study of *Seaweeds and Pearls*[1]

Xinyan Liu

Fujian Normal University, College of Foreign Languages, Fuzhou 350007, Fujian, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Xinyan Liu, Fujian Normal University, College of Foreign Languages, Fuzhou 350007, Fujian, China.

Abstract

This study attempts to discuss Emily Dickinson's metaphorical classification system of love by using cognitive linguistic tools, focusing on his poetry collection *Seaweeds and Pearls*. We have specially constructed a corpus of Dickinson's love poems and systematically analyzed the metaphorical patterns in it. The analysis results reveal the four core dimensions that Dickinson relies on to construct the concept of love: Natural Elements, Precious Objects, Auditory Experiences and Religious and Emotional Concepts. This shows that for the poet, metaphor is a constitutive element. Her love metaphor systematically makes abstract emotions concrete and polysemous by means of embodied sensory experience. It is a cognitive requirement that can reconstruct the subjective experience. At the same time, these metaphors also bear the cultural function. They carry the gender restrictions of female identity in the 19th century and show how poets seek a balance between the declaration of passion and the implicit attitude of traditional expectations. By proving that Dickinson's most intimate metaphors also follow the cognitive mapping rules that govern everyday conceptualization, this study advocates the continuity between poetic cognition and everyday cognition, and provides a corpus-based research framework for the subsequent study of cognitive poetics in lyrical expression.

Keywords

Emily Dickinson; love; metaphor; cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) lived a life of voluntary seclusion. Instead of joining the social activities of her New England environment, she opted for isolation and took care of her family and pursued a literary path largely on her own (Huang, 2017). She had produced a large number of works during her lifetime, but they had an economy of style. Nonetheless, they were full of profound ideas about life and death, nature and love.

Love is but a small corner in her writing. Her life has been influenced by the marriage of Charles Wandsworth, a married minister; the communication and eventual separation between the two figures are deeply reflected in her works (Li & Ge, 2018). This episode shows that young idealists have been tempered by life and now live in a complicated state where happiness and sorrow are mixed. As Alfred Habegger has pointed out, Dickinson was moving away from the ideals of Romanticism to explore the contradiction between spiritual closeness and sadness (Habegger, 2002).

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The present study is about the collection *Seaweeds and Pearls*. According to the theory of conceptual metaphor and supported by corpus methods, this paper will examine the metaphorical patterns in Dickinson's love poems and explore both the cognitive structure and attitude of these metaphors.

2. Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put forward that metaphor underlies the structure of our everyday thoughts, and therefore we often understand one field of experience through another. Thus, the idea is applied to poetic language and functions as a kind of thought. As Zhang (2016) mentioned, it can extend the reading world for people. Zhu (2007) also said that it needs concrete pictures. Dickinson's works are very sharp. Her poems are inspired by the physical environment of her New England home, which has been both the background for life and a source of inspiration for thought (Li & Zhang, 2020). She often uses the trait of faintness to describe everyday objects and makes people feel uneasy through their senses (Huang, 2021). The metaphors in *Seaweeds and Pearls* can be read as a record of the procedure applied to love.

3. Research Methodology

Based on cognitive poetics, a corpus method will be used in this paper. Although metaphor has long been regarded as a literary device in poetry (Luo, 1991), in cognitive science, it is considered a type of structure that can be studied systemically. The main source of data is the collection *Seaweeds and Pearls* (Sun, 1996). Of the 166 poems, 25 were love poems. Analysis of the above texts found 50 different metaphors. Therefore, we determined the source domains of these and derived 23 key lexical items that serve as source concepts. These items were further divided into 17 source domains and, according to Table 1, they belong to the four topics listed there, along with the number of times each source domain appears.

Table 1. Categorization of Love Metaphors

	Category	Source Domain	Frequency of Occurrence
1	Natural Elements	bird, wind, lightning, sunrise, brook, sea, stream, flower, strawberry, harbour	13
2	Precious Objects	amethyst, jewel	3
3	Auditory Experiences	music, hammer(sound), thunderbolt	4
4	Religious & Emotions Concepts	Eden, bliss	3
Total	4	17	23

The following sections will examine typical poems from all categories to trace Dickinson's metaphors for love.

4. Analysis of Love Metaphors in *Seaweeds and Pearls*

4.1 Natural Elements: Love as Element Force

Dickinson's metaphor of love in terms of nature is most obvious in *Why Do I Love You, Sir?* Wind, lightning and the rising sun are not just for decoration in this poem. Huang (2017) believes that the source domain is the organisation of experience where love occurs. Dickinson frequently mentioned her garden in her poems; therefore, the metaphor can be both an expression of her personal life and relatable to many others (Farr, 2005).

The first is a question: "Why do I love you, Sir?", and the three pairs of images that follow are the answers. The first pair, wind and grass, shows that love is a light force but will also pass. The character is a "grass", so when the wind blows, she is also scattered emotionally. Lightning is a sudden, overwhelming event and thus cannot be modelled as love. The involuntary closing of the eye in response to the light is a kind of cognitive map of the body's reflexive surrender in the face of brightness. Sunrise is finished; love is natural and makes life meaningful. "Because He's Sunrise—and I see—", "love" needs no words, only a simple act will be enough. There is a gender disparity in all these mappings. The speaker is in a passive state, like grass, eyes and an observer. "Sir" is attributed to the active forces of Wind and Lightning. The above is a typical structure for the romantic ideas of the 19th century.

The three natural metaphors together create the picture of love being a force outside us with the power to nourish and damage, and it spreads slowly and takes hold suddenly. Wind becomes lightning, and lightning appears at dawn; so too, does the emotional power increase, and in this way, it is discovered that a person is less about acting and more about responding. Love is not chosen here. Rather, it has happened to me. It is an essential trait that will give me the ability to speak.

4.2 Precious Objects: Love as Fragile Treasure

In *I Held a Jewel in My Fingers*, love is presented as a precious stone, and therefore it is both precious and liable to be lost. Jewels are not one of the ubiquitous natural phenomena mentioned above. They are creations. Therefore, it can be determined that this poet had a modest life but rich emotions. A Metaphorical place for the female speaker is structurally weak. Her "honest fingers" are unable to hold the gem, and thus she lacks agency according to gendered logic.

The first thing the speaker has is a piece of jewellery. Therefore, to be cherished is the same as to have a precious item. Subsequently, it is decided to "go to sleep"; thus, for a time, vigilance is lost, and although the jewel remains safe, consciousness is absent. She wakes up and discovers that "the Gem is missing"; she scolds her own "honest fingers", suggesting that the loss is a kind of self-blame characteristic of Dickinson's view on loss. The fault is taken on by oneself; it is not the cause. Therefore, the loss of the jewel is a type of cognitive map that shows that love is inherently unstable and can disappear with a moment's distraction.

The second precious object of the poem, the amethyst, appears in the seventh line as a remnant of loss. No longer a thing, the amethyst is now a remembrance. The purple stone is to represent the beauty that remains in memory after the departure of the one I loved. Amethyst has been replaced by jewels; now there is sorrow for what used to be. It can be seen that Dickinson was able to know love more deeply in retrospect. The precious objects in both metaphors are paradoxical; they are highly valued but also very short-lived. The character's purpose is to be influenced, rather than to seek out things actively. This form is consistent with the gender division in the whole work. The female speaker is the guardian of a love she cannot win in the end.

4.3 Auditory Experiences: Love as Sonic Impact

In *He Fumbles at Your Soul*, Dickinson has shown the beginning of love through a series of sounds. She believes that sound is a kind of source domain capable of building the structure of emotions and making them concrete. At the start, there is a hesitant and exploratory touch; gradually, it becomes a strong sound, and finally, a lightning bolt appears. It depicts love as something that is first approached cautiously and then experienced through the senses.

"He fumbles at your soul" is the first sentence; it shows that the person is about to speak. As shown in the table below, this refers to a skilled musician's sense of timing for playing the keyboard before performing. Music and love both need to be gradually experienced. Dickinson raises the sonic register further. "Stuns" is the verb, and "brittle" and "ethereal" are adjectives; they are used to set the scene before the hammering. They are slowly moving forward with weaker and weaker knocks; they are getting farther away and then very slow. This rhythm of accumulation forms a group movement that brings the speaker closer to immobility. The last metaphor of a "thunderbolt" is also at the end; it reveals the soul's emptiness and leaves an eerie quietness. The overall arrangement of the poem is in the middle stage of enhancement. Sound builds, the body stills, and the soul is reshaped by what has passed through it after being revealed.

The Auditory Source Domain is not the same as the other two that have been studied so far in terms of time. Sound has a sense of time and cannot be stopped. It should be in an order. The temporality of this will make the auditory area more suitable for presenting the development of love, not just one state. The last contrast of sound and silence in the poem shows this. It suggests that true love is not about the hustle and bustle of meetings, but rather about peace found after them.

4.4 Religious and Emotions: Love as Sacred Sanctuary

Dickinson applied the concept of love to the realm of the holy garden in *Come Slowly, Eden!*. She uses the image of "love is Eden" to show that love is a slow process of achieving a state of perfection. This is the production pressure Xiang (2022) refers to in religious inheritance and modern consciousness. Dickinson finds a place for herself in the construction of the homeland through poetry. Huang (2017) pointed out that for a long time, in Western culture,

gardens have been used as images of both God's and people's desires. They are pure places where people can express their deep emotions.

The opening word is "Eden", and thus the whole world seems religious. *The Lost Paradise* presents the way of love before the Fall and the secular after-Fall world (Milton, 1958). At the same time, it has an implicit intertext. Dickinson halts the story at the beginning and leaves the speaker waiting for a fall. "Come slowly" sets the time key, and the following images show a shy welcome; "Lips unused to Thee" sip "Jessamines" as if they were a sacrament. The speaker is a "fainting bee" and has absorbed everything to the extent of losing their own personality. In the second stanza, the girl is a flower that needs to be watered. "Nectar" and "balm" are words that suggest a sense of pleasure but also of numbness. The last sentence, "Enters—and is lost in balms", is when the lover arrives and the speaker loses themselves in the balms. To enter is to be destroyed.

In this Edenic Setup, Love is not a victory. It is an act of reverence for the sacred, and one must submit to it slowly. The Garden Metaphor is used to elevate both the beloved and the hesitant self that longs for them. Read it this way, and the young girl waiting for love in the garden becomes a self-portrait. She wants to take her time so as not to be too eager. Dickinson used the Eden metaphor to express her desire for love in a different way. In doing so, she shows that she is a poet who believes that the sacred and the amorous are not contradictory but rather intertwined.

5. Conclusion

Through the four main sources of Natural Elements, Precious Objects, Auditory Experiences, and Religious and Emotional Concepts, this study has investigated the metaphor system of love in Emily Dickinson's poem *Seaweeds and Pearls*. This is no longer merely a catalogue of figurative styles. It shows that there is a reasonable system of cognition, and abstract emotional experiences can be organised by embodied sensory mappings. Dickinson's world of poetry is full of disputes over love. It is both vast and tiny, profound and subtle, deep-seated and momentary.

By reading about the socio-cultural factors, we can uncover more patterns of these metaphors. In all four places, the female character is shown to be passive or in a vulnerable state. She is like grass bending in the wind, an eye closed before lightning, fingers unable to hold a jewel, a flower that has not been saturated. The male beloved is on the active side of these maps, however. He is the wind, the lightning, the musician, the implied visitor who enters the garden. The gender imbalance is in line with the feminist criticism put forward by Liu (2006), and it is more difficult to read Dickinson's metaphorical boldness as simple freedom. Her metaphors are new, but they still operate within the old system where women's actions are only reactions and not origins. This is what Jiang Nan (2013) considers to be the essence of her love poems.

The cognitive force of these Mappings is affected by the linguistic texture at which they are received by readers. Dickinson is known for brevity and is an excellent user of dashes to control the pace of reading in several sections; for example, the idea of a 'wind of love' is conveyed through rapid or irregular punctuation. As in "he fumbles for your soul", she uses personification to give life to the abstract mental state of loss. Nouns have acquired idiosyncrasy; that is, "Wind", "lightning" and "hammer" are no longer used as general references but as special names within a person's own idea system. These Styles are not about show. They are the foundation of cognition and turn conceptual maps in the mind into feelings.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) has offered some explanation for lyric poems. Dickinson's works have shown that metaphor is a basic way of thinking, and it draws upon our sense of touch and other senses to give life to intangible emotions. She made an original contribution by deepening the stylistic economy in presenting the map. The result is a poem that is both a form and a concept. Sclama (2011) thinks that this kind of cognitive-poetic way is not limiting to interpretation. It has expanded its channels and, in doing so, verified that Dickinson's metaphors are still to this day one of the most rich resources for exploring the structure of love.

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