

5. Joan Bennet, *Five Metaphysical Poets*, p. 124.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
7. William H. Galperin, "Emily Dickenson's Marriage Hearse," in *Denver Quarterly* (1985), Winter Vol. 18 (4), p. 65.
8. Jerome Loving, *Emily Dickenson: The Poet on the Second Story*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 40.
9. William H. Galperin, "Emily Dickenson's Marriage Hearse," p. 66.
10. David Porter, *Dickenson: The Modern Idiom* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 9.
11. Jerome Loving, *Emily Dickenson: The poet on the Second Story*, p. 47.
12. Conrad Aiken, "Emily Dickenson," in *Emily Dickenson: A Collection of Critical Essays* Ed. by Richard B. Sewall (N.J. Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963) p. 10.
13. Charles Anderson, *Emily Dickenson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) p. 295.
14. John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickenson* (London: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 344.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 346.
16. Charles Anderson, *Emily Dickenson's Poetry*, p. 295.
17. Brita Linberg-Seyersted, *The Voice Of the Poet: Aspects of style in the Poetry of Emily Dickenson* (Uppsala, Sweden, 1968), p. 37.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
19. Charles Anderson, p. 246.
20. Frances Bzowski, "A Continuation of the Tradition of the Irony of Death," in *U.S. Poet* (1984), Vol. 54, p. 33.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
22. Loving Jerome, "Dickenson's Hansom Man" in *Santraud, Jeanne-Marie* (Paris, 1985), p. 47.

is shut away. Hence, the disappointing love experience costs her her whole life presented in a short trip usually made by a groom with his bride.

Since then — tis Centuries —, and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were toward Eternity —

Life here seems immortal and immortality implies the meaning that there is no possibility of escape or even aid from outside her room. Further, the first two lines of the last stanza, starting with: "Since then 'tis Centuries — and yet feels shorter than the Day," underscores a paradoxical implication posed between "centuries" and "shorter than the Day." To explain this, we should bear in mind that the type of life Dickenson led after her retirement from life was heavily burdened with a deadly routine and monotony which ultimately seemed endless. On the other hand, due to its emptiness of any notable occasion or event, this life was shorter than a day. Finally, using paradoxes was one of the major concerns of the metaphysical poets.

To sum up, if we review the starting and the closing points of this poem, we would conclude that the poet has mistaken death for someone else; someone she obviously welcomes. The irony is not evident until her realization of eternity at the end.²¹ His arrival with his all civil qualities plus her well-preparation for this occasion foreshadow a near happy future. Whereas at the end of the supposedly bridal tour, a completely different end occurred. This is to say that Dickenson's future lay in the past for she is by now living a state of death-in-life.

Life would always be the life that was — when it consisted of those illusions. Life could not be lived. She lived in the past. She felt the full weight of experience that life is a loss.²² In a sense, life is a burden for her, which is particularly heavier than an actual death.

Within the compass of this style, she has brought a new range of experience which is largely similar to that of the metaphysical poets, specially John Donne. The similarity between Donne and Dickenson lies in their striking treatment of the theme of love in terms of death.

Notes

1. Niels Kjaer, "Emily Dickenson, Job's Sister," in *U.S.Poet* (1988), Vol. 65, p. 19.
2. Joan Bennet, *Five Metaphysical Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1974) p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) p. 287.

by a natural desire for love. It was her chance in life to live a happy married life, she submissively obeyed him to their final nest of love, where they could enjoy an immortal night of love like courtly lovers. Thirdly, these opening lines indicate clearly that the carriage drive was a standard mode of courtship a century ago.¹⁹ The image can be summarized in this way: a passionate lover arriving in his carriage on a wedding-night to take his bride on a conventional trip to their bridal bed of love. Besides, all civil qualities given to him such as: kindly stopped, slowly drove, and his civility are strong evidence of (his) being a groom to take his bride who dressed in a gossamer gown and a tulle tippet as wedding dress, but he strangely took the shape of death.

Dickenson's analogy of a lover to death is unique in English poetry with the exception of the metaphysical attempts. She has made an excellent blend between love and death to prove a notable image largely similar to the metaphysical ones. Like Donne, she has invested the quality of death attachment to man, so love is presented like death decisive in achieving its aim without hesitation.

Then, a slowly moving tour is made in the conventional ceremonial way in which they leisurely view the life in a town in a sequence of some scattered scenes of ordinary life before finally they retire to their presumably nest of love. This journey implies seeing: school children, fields of grain, and chill and quivering dews:

We passed the School, where Children strowe

We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —

The Dews drew quivering and chill —

Soon after this short journey, this seemingly passionate lover turns out to be insincere for, near the evening, he leads her to a "swelling ground" where she stays for ever:

We passed the Setting Sun —

Or rather — He passed Us —

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground —

The Roof was scarcely visible —

The Cornice — in the Ground —

Thus, the "setting sun" is an obvious indication of despair and agedness as she reached a dead end in her trip. At this time only, she discovers the deception exerted upon her, her assumed faithful lover's mask is dropped and truth is revealed. She is unknowingly transported by death; to her destiny beyond the setting sun. She is conveyed to her destination, not moving under and guided by her own free will.²⁰ So the poet speaks from beyond the setting sun in the swelling ground where she

friends, always pale, silent, absent-minded and meditative. Life seemed heavily burdened with continuous cares and anxiety. In fact, it was a peculiar state for a living human being. John Cody states the following notes about her:

Her face appears pale and expressionless;
her former vivacity is replaced by a distant
stare, a mysterious unmotivated smile, a
toneless voice. Her whole state reveals an
inner agony.¹⁴

Then he proceeds to describe her in the following way:

She feels dead, like a puppet without any
feelings. The world appears strange and
she feels shut away from others, as if
enclosed in a transparent vacuum.¹⁵

Anderson sees that the most persistent and most romantic cause was that she turned away from the world because of a frustrated love.¹⁶ An ambitious sensitive lady was disappointed in her hopes early in her life. Her disappointment culminated gradually to make her withdrawal from the world.

Bearing this in mind, the poem can be regarded as a literal translation of her whole life. Life started like a bright dream with a hope for a happy future and ended gloomily with failure. It was unexpected failure which drove her gradually to be a recluse and to live in isolation. Thus, the frustrated love experience threw shadows of despair over her remaining period of life. It comes like destiny for which man is fated to follow and eventually reflects the betrayal of life.

In the light of these biographical facts, we can analyse the poem to show the central comparison between death and love, which is overwhelmed with a metaphysical atmosphere:

Because I could not stop for Death ——— *
He kindly stopped for me ———
The Carriage held but just Ourselves ———
And Immortality.*

First, Dickenson's "I" represents obviously the female-male relationship for death is brought about in male gender. So, the relationship between the poet and death is an identification of female-male connection.¹⁷ Secondly, there is an implicit appeal from the speaker and explicit response on the lover's part. We therefore see the poet reveal her feminine identity of submitting herself to the man she loved passionately.¹⁸ Thinking him a faithful lover, she responded to him instinctively, pushed

* In almost every poem, Emily Dickenson's punctuations (such as: capita-lization and using of dashes etc.), are highly individual.

* Geoffrey Moore, *American Literature: A Representative Anthology of American Writing*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 609.

achieving new insight into it, Dickenson's comparison of a lover to death falls within this perspective.⁷

This poem in particular is variously read as a love poem about parting, a poem of religious dedication, or one describing a mystical or a real marriage, yet the poem both invites and eludes interpretation.⁸ But if we read it on biographical terms, I think, a new interpretation could emerge here for the poem lends itself to this understanding. This poem, as I see, is the poet's self-portrait, a microcosm of her life, ranging from her early awareness of life in her youth to the present morbid state when she wrote it. The arrival of the handsome man was a real person who played an efficient role in her early life and retiring to seclusion in her desolate room was an established fact about the poet. Hence, the poem is a combination of two opposing stages of the poet's Life: a lively period followed by a barren one. Yet this death is not a physical one so much as a state of death-in-life.⁹

In order to understand this poem properly, we should be at least briefly acquainted with the actual circumstances through which the poet was passing. The poem falls within the sphere of the aftermath experience around which her whole life revolves.¹⁰ It was written in the later stage of her life at the time when life had lost its meaning, its vividness and appeared almost to have happened in some infinitely remote past.¹¹ So, an obvious idea of the early and later periods of her life must necessarily be needed to shed light on the poet's intended analogy of a lover to death.

Contrary to what is commonly spread of her refusal of the world and denial of the normal life, and inclination to an intended secluded life, Emily Dickenson had really enjoyed a very normal social life early in her life, full of activity, occasioned by frequent travels outside her town, Amherest. Conrad Aiken states that:

the poet's girlhood was a normally social one ——— she was active, high-spirited, and endowed with a considerable gift for extravagant humour ... she was an ambitious lady, who had a normal desire for love and marriage in several letters written in her early twenties ... she had trips to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington.¹²

Besides, Charles Anderson relates some testimony of her mixing with young gentlemen and making some nice outing for joy and fulfilment of love¹³. In such healthy and happy activity there was little sign of her future recluse.

Later, a totally different image is given of her life: a recluse, almost completely cut off from the world, including most of her relatives and

between the firmly joined individual souls of passionate lovers and the two legs of a pair of compasses which are mechanically linked. Donne extends and develops this initial idea by arguing a series of parallels between the two compared sides.

Besides, T.S. Eliot has said that an idea is an experience to Donne, i.e., to change an abstract idea into a real experience.⁴ Thus, in the same poem "A Valediction," Donne has invested a mild death image to prove two lovers' mutual faith in love. He initiates his poem with the description of virtuous men's mild attitude toward death:

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say no,

So let us melt and make no noise,
No tear-floods nor sigh-tempest move;
T' were profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

There is a great difference between love and death for each offers a totally different experience. However, Donne could find a connection between the two experiences. His image affirms that parting is not separation but a re-affirmation of spiritual union.⁵ To prove this concept, the poet employs the mild attitude usually adopted by the faithful toward death. Such people welcome the arrival of death believing that death, though fearful and mysterious, yet for them is a way toward approaching God and enjoying His blessings in Heaven for they have done well in this life. In other words, death is not a separation from this life so much as a paved way toward union with God and starting a better new life. Similarly, Donne's temporary parting with his beloved is a good proof of the faith and strength of their love, for a sense of firm and deeply-based emotion is evoked between them. So, mixing love with the solemnly religious affairs is one of Donne's techniques.⁶

In Dickenson's poetry, we can find a similar example. In "The Chariot," a striking instance is found in which the poet holds a far-fetched analogy between death and a passionate lover. In this death image, we do not observe the mysterious fear, nor violence, nor suddenness we normally feel in approaching the experience of death. Death here is a gentleman, characterized by all civil as well as courtly qualities, comes decisively to his impatiently waiting inexperienced lady and takes her away in a carriage prepared for a bridal night. But, he unexpectedly leads and drops her to "a swelling ground" where she stays suffering endlessly. In brief, the total experience could only be conveyed in a metaphysical conceit is a means of exploring experience and

A Metaphysical Conceit in Emily Dickenson's Biographical Poem, "The Chariot" (1872)

by
Akram H. Shereef*

Abstract

A Metaphysical Conceit in Emily Dickenson's Biographical Poem, "The Chariot" (1872)

This paper finds much similarity between Emily Dickenson's approach to death in her poem "The chariot" and John Donne's poem: "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". The Similarity between Donne and Dickenson lies in their striking treatment of the theme of love in terms of death.

Emily Dickenson, the American poet, is widely acknowledged among critics as one of the finest and most innovative poets. Niels Kjaer has described her as one of the greatest poets in the world.¹ she had confined herself wholly to poetry, both reading and writing, and consequently produced a large number of poems. This bulk of poems tackled variety of subjects such as: love, beauty, nature, life, time, destiny, spirit and body, death, immortality, life after death, resurrection... etc. There exists in her poetry depth of meaning, intensity of feeling, exquisiteness of attitude, mystery of ideas, mystical approaches, peculiar situations and even madness. However, one of the implicit elements which appeals to my mind in my study of her poetry is the metaphysical side of her character which is partly embodied in some of her poems. Hence, my paper is an attempt to examine some metaphysical touches incarnated in one of her famous poems, namely "The Chariot."

To begin with, the word "metaphysical" refers to style plus subject matter; but style reflects an attitude to experience.² The metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, headed by John Donne, looked for a connection between their emotions and mental concepts. All their poetical imagery arises from a perceived likeness between different things. These poets usually establish relationship between the abstract and the concrete, the remote and the near, and the sublime and the common-place.³ This connection between two unrelated objects is usually defined as conceit; a far-fetched comparison. It is one of the characteristic features of this type of poetry.

A well-known example that can be given here is in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," where the poet holds a comparison

* Department of English/ College of Arts