

A Brief Analysis of Animal Metaphor in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract: Emily Dickinson was a representative of the Imagist poets in the early 20th century. She was good at observing the features of animals and using their characteristics in metaphors, so animal metaphors account for a large part of her poetic works. She used animal metaphors to reflect the context of the times and her personal life and to express her emotions and thoughts. This article intends to study the animal metaphors in Emily Dickinson's poetry and the profound implications embodied in them, based on cognitive linguistics. Different from former researches, this thesis is to study metaphors of animals and their functions in the poetry and it focuses on four typical animal images, including birds, bees, crickets and rats. Through the use of these animal metaphors, we are able to understand the profound meanings of the poems as well as Emily Dickinson's core of thoughts and attitudes towards the times, thus mapping the poet's own personality.

1. Introduction

Poetry is a lyrical literary genre. It originates from the spontaneous overflow of strong feelings recollected in tranquility. In nineteenth-century America, Romantic poets dominated European and American poetry. The American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), one of the pioneers of twentieth-century modernist poetry[1], was born in the remote town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where she was socially inept and spent her days in the company of poetry. She was initially introduced to poetry at the age of 20, and wrote nearly 1,800 poems in her lifetime[2]. Dickinson's poetic style is unique. She often works through unique imagination and strong symbolism, as a way to celebrate the themes related to nature, love and death, and she widely used metaphors in the creative process to convey profound thoughts and emotions.

This article will focus on four types of typical animal images, including birds, bees, crickets and rats. It aims to analyze the animal metaphors in Dickinson's poetry in order to explore the deep connotations and themes in her poems. Through the study of the functions of animal metaphors, this paper will be able to grasp Emily Dickinson's experiences and ideas about truth, life, love and the historical background. Emily Dickinson, as a household name, has a great deal of research on her poetry as well as her metaphor usages. In previous studies, a large number of theses take the themes of poetry as the central research element and there are also numerous cognitive linguistic papers that use Dickinson's poetry as a case study to perfect the linguistic frameworks. However, there is still a lack of research that explores the idea of poetry with animal metaphors as the main subject.

Therefore, this paper will study the embodiment and roles of animal metaphors in Dickinson's poetry, so as to understand the poet's profound insights and rich feelings.

2. Overview of Metaphor

Aristotle (1996: 34) in the *Poetics* suggests that "a metaphor is the application of a noun which properly applies to something else. The transfer may be from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy." [3] These four types of lexical shifts refer to the transfer from a general meaning to a particular meaning, from a particular meaning to a general meaning, between two particular meanings and proportional metaphors. Richards, based on his pragmatic study of metaphor, put forward the famous Interaction Theory in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, which criticizes the conceptual confusion that traditional rhetoric is prone to in its formulation.

In the development of modern linguistics, metaphor has always been at the cutting edge of research at all stages. American scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson co-authored *The Metaphors We Live By*, published in 1980, in which they (2003: 9) pointed out that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" [4]. Through this work, the "Conceptual Metaphor" [4] was proposed for the first time, and metaphors were classified into three categories according to their cognitive functions: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Since then, the study of metaphor not only belongs to language research, but also is an important research on human life and thinking, which has set off a boom in the United States and even all over the world. A large number of American poets have used metaphors in their works, among which Emily Dickinson's metaphors are more characteristic. Her animal metaphors are symbolic, mysterious and unique, and she often used a variety of animal images to express her emotions, which include the themes of life, death, freedom and self-cognition, etc. The metaphorical techniques she often used include visual metaphors, emotional metaphors and symbolic metaphors.

3. Characteristic analysis of animal metaphors in Emily Dickinson's poems

3.1 Metaphor analysis of "bird"

"Birds" are often associated with beauty, wisdom, and resilience in life, and there is much bird-related imagery in Dickinson's poetry, which generally embodies freedom, hope, and joy.

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops— at all—(Poem 254)*

In the poem "*Hope" is the thing with feathers*, "hope" is metaphorized as a bird ("thing with feathers"), through which the spirit of freedom and resilience is expressed. Dickinson wrote it between the 1850s and 1860s, a period in which she not only broke with her lover, but also missed the opportunity to publish her poetry. With such a double blow, she gradually lost hope in her life, so she chose to seek hope and help for her inner world.

*The Robin is the One
That interrupt the Morn
With hurried— few— express Reports
When March is scarcely on—
The Robin is the One
That overflow the Noon*

*With her cherubic quantity—
An April but begun—
The Robin is the One
That speechless from her Nest
Submit that Home— and Certainty
And Sanctity, are best(Poem 501)*

In *The Robin is the One*, the poet again characterizes the bird with hope and joy. In this poem, the poet sees “the robin” as the messenger [5] of the changing seasons, whose melodious song celebrates the seasonal changes and delivers hope and happiness to life. In addition, as the years go by, the robin’s wonderful singing gradually turns into wordless silence, which also suggests women’s experiences of growing up. From coming into the world to becoming a young lady, then to getting married, most women will play the role of silence and speechlessness in marriages. However, Dickinson took a different path. Instead of choosing to be silent in family as a wife, she was all on her own[6].

In Emily Dickinson’s poetry, she not only follows the metaphorical characteristics of the Western Imagist poets for the beauty, freedom and hope of birds, but also has her own distinctive insights.

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—
I keep it, staying at Home—
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—
And an Orchard, for a Dome—
Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I, just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton— sings.(Poem 236)*

In the poem *A Service of Song*, she compares the “Bobolink” to a choir, thus expressing her reverence for nature and her new understanding of it. In the line “I, just wear my Wings”, Dickinson uses wings as a metaphor to express her unwillingness to be constrained by tradition [7], and expresses her feelings of yearning for nature, admiration for nature and longing for nature.

*I have a Bird in spring
Which for myself doth sing—
The spring decoys.
And as the summer nears—
And as the Rose appears,
Robin is gone.*

...

*Then will I not repine,
Knowing that Bird of mine
Though flown
Shall in a distant tree
Bright melody for me
Return. (Poem4)*

Furthermore, *I have a Bird in spring* was written in 1854, where the poet compares the bird to her friend Susan Huntington Gilbert, who was about to get married. Through this poem, Dickinson expressed her blessing for the marriage, although Susan was going to leave soon, the distance would not extinguish their deep friendship.

3.2 Metaphor analysis of “bee”

“Bees” often give people the impression of hard work, dedication and pragmatism in life. They often represent wisdom, danger and also power in Western literature. In Dickinson’s works, she often conveys her delicate feelings through “bees”. Compared with male poets, her writing on power and strength is more delicate, and she is good at using the imperceptible traits of “bees” as a metaphor [8].

*The Flower must not blame the Bee—
That seeketh his felicity
Too often at her door—
But teach the Footman from Vevay—
Mistress is “not at home”— to say—
To people— any more! (Poem 206)*

Firstly, “bees” often represent love in Dickinson’s works and are used as a metaphor for men in love. In *The Flower must not blame the Bee*, the “Bee” is compared to a man and the “Flower” symbolizes a woman [9]. The scene of the bee collecting honey is a metaphor for a man courting a woman. Even though the bee is belittled by the flower, he understands that his persistence will eventually be reciprocated by the flower. In the poem, the initiative embodied by the bee and the passivity expressed by the flower show the unequal relationship between men and women in love during the Victorian era.

*A Bee his burnished Carriage
Drove boldly to a Rose—
Combine alighting—
Himself— his Carriage was—
The Rose received his visit
With frank tranquility
Withholding not a Crescent
To his Cupidity—
Their Moment consummated—
Remained for him— to flee—
Remained for her— of rapture
But the humility.(Poem 1339)*

Moreover, in the poem *A Bee His Burnished Carriage*, Dickinson also uses the “Bee” as a metaphor for men, emphasizing their active and aggressive personalities. The “Rose” is also compared to a woman, highlighting the passive position of women from the expression of behavior. It reflects the reality that women were not able to pursue beloved men in the Victorian era, and depicts the inequality that always existed in the relationship between the two genders.

Additionally, by analyzing Dickinson’s poems, it is easy to see that “bees” have a richer image from the perspective of a female writer. Compared with male poets, Dickinson’s work is more flexible in terms of power and strength, and she is good at using the characteristics of “bees” as a metaphor.

*Fame is a bee.
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.(Poem 1788)*

In the poem *Fame is a bee*, the “bee” and the “song” symbolize, in these four short lines, the high moment of honor in one’s life. The fluttering bee and the beautiful music seem to celebrate this moment, but the bee will eventually fly away and the song will always come to an end. People

should not just dwell on their moments of achievements, but should be grounded in reality and focus on their own lives.

*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,—
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.(Poem1755)*

In *To make a prairie*, the poet compares the “bee” and the “clover” as the driving force of the road to success. Bees are tiny creatures in nature, but Dickinson combines the small power of the “bee” with the great faith of believing in the dream, indicating that as long as one’s faith in the pursuit of the dream is strong enough, even if it is only a little bit of impetus, it is the inexhaustible impetus to propel him to success.

*The Pedigree of Honey
Does not concern the bee;
A clover, any time, to him
Is aristocracy.(Poem1627)*

What’s more, in the poem *The Pedigree of Honey*, Dickinson uses the “bee” to refer to ordinary people, while “Honey” is compared to wealth. The bees work hard all day long to collect honey from the flowers, just as the common people work diligently day and night to create the fruits of labor with their own hands. The “clover” refers to the upper class and the nobility, and the poet implies that the society at that time paid too much attention to lineage and status, but she believes that the good and bad of people should not be judged by their fortune or power, and that everyone should strive for a better life.

3.3 Metaphor analysis of “cricket”

“Crickets” usually give people a sense of sensitivity, harmony and beauty in life, and often embodies the image of freedom and independence and a representative of nature in the writings of Western poets. Dickinson often expresses her emotions through the description of crickets in her poems.

*Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—(Poem 668)*

To begin with, “crickets” are a symbol of tranquility. In the poem *Nature is what we see*, the “Cricket” is used to embody the quiet environment, and the cricket’s chirping contrasts with the large sound of thunder, the combination of which shows the power of nature and highlights the harmony of nature. Even though silence and noise are two extremities, they can reach unity and balance under the powerful force of nature, underlining the beauty of nature. Dickinson reveres nature, and she praises the great power of nature by describing the echo of crickets and nature.

*Her voice among the aisles
Incites the timid prayer
Of the minutest cricket,
The most unworthy flower.(Poem 790)*

In addition, in *Nature, the Gentlest Mother*, the poet compares nature to a “mother” and the “cricket” and the “flower” to “nature’s children”[10]. Mother is the creator of life, and nature is the nurturer of everything in the world. In this poem, Dickinson combines “nature” and the identity of “mother” from a female perspective, discusses in depth the relationship between nature and human

beings, and expresses her respect for natural world. The above two poems were written in the 1860s, on the eve of the Second Industrial Revolution in the United States. Although the Industrial Revolution brought rapid social, economic, and technological development to industrialized countries, environmental and ecological problems followed. After realizing these issues, Dickinson reflected on natural environments and human beings. All things created by nature should be venerated by mankind, and nature possesses a powerful capacity that individuals cannot reach.

Further in Summer than the Birds—

Pathetic from the Grass—

A minor Nation celebrates

It's unobtrusive Mass.(Poem 895)

In Emily Dickinson's poetic works, not only does she follow her metaphorical characterization of the harmony, beauty, and freedom of crickets, but she also has unique understanding. In *Further in Summer than the Birds*, the poet regards the sound of the crickets as a sign of the transition from summer to early fall. Unlike the emotions expressed in the previous two, the cricket's chirping is contrasted with the bird's song in this poem, presenting a sad image of the cricket in late summer. The chirping of the cricket evokes lonely feelings in Dickinson's mind, whereas she clearly understands that this loneliness is common to all humans.

'Twas later when the summer went

Than when the Cricket came—

And yet we knew that gentle Clock

Meant nought but Going Home—

'Twas sooner when the Cricket went

Than when the Winter came

Yet that pathetic Pendulum

Keeps esoteric Time.(Poem 1276)

Similar expressions exist in the poem *'Twas Later when the Summer Went*. Through two lines “’Twas later when the summer went Than when the Cricket came—” and “’Twas sooner when the Cricket Twas sooner when the Cricket went Than when the Winter came”, the poet reflects the change of seasons with the coming and going of the “Cricket”, suggesting that time flies by in a hurry and is also irreversible. Dickinson not only sighs at the fleeting nature of all things in the world, but also conveys the thought of cherishing the present moment with the “Cricket”, and expresses the pursuit of finding the true meaning of one's transient life.

3.4 Metaphor analysis of “rat”

“Rats” usually leave people a disgusting, fearful and mysterious impression, but in Dickinson's writing, “rats” represent the decline of life, rich in wisdom and tenacious vitality.

A Rat surrendered here

A brief career of Cheer

And Fraud and Fear.

...

The most obliging Trap

Its tendency to snap

Cannot resist—(Poem 1340)

In *A Rat surrendered here*, through the two lines “A brief career of Cheer and Fraud and Fear.” and “The most obliging Trap Its tendency to snap Cannot resist—”, the poet depicts the rat's fragility and powerlessness, expressing her sigh for the transience of life. No one can be spared from death. However, even though all life is going to be extinguished, joy and happiness still exist in everyone's lifetime. Dickinson reflects the philosophical thinking about life and death through

the image of the rat, suggesting that one's life should be lived with a purpose to be fulfilled.

Besides, in Emily Dickinson's poems, not only the negative image of the rat is used as a metaphor, but also its resilience and resourcefulness are skillfully borrowed.

The Rat is the concisest Tenant.

He pays no Rent.

Repudiates the Obligation —

On Schemes intent(Poem 1356)

In the lines "The Rat is the concisest Tenant. He pays no Rent." The poet metaphorizes the "Rat" as a tenant and a survivor, and extends a reflection on human tenacity and adaptability through the rat's extraordinary ability to survive. It emphasizes that in this complex society, as long as people have strong beliefs and wisdom, they will eventually succeed.

4. Conclusions

Emily Dickinson is known as the pioneer of British and American imagism in the early 20th century, and she has high achievements in the usage of metaphors. As a female poet, Dickinson has a nuanced point of view, and she observes a variety of animal features in her daily life, so animal metaphors take up an important part in her creation. In her works, birds are the symbols of hope and happiness, expressing her yearning and reverence for nature. Bees allude to masculinity and strength, reflecting the unequal status of two genders in the Victorian era. Crickets are often compared to the products of nature and the signals of seasonal change, which triggers the Dickinson's thoughts on the relationship between nature and mankind. In addition, the poet is also good at utilizing the fragile and timid but vital image of the rats to express her lament for the ephemeral life and praise for the resilience of human beings. These images not only combine Emily Dickinson and the historical background, but also vividly reflect her unique writing style and the connotation of her poetry.

Meanwhile, it is noticeable that the study leaves a lot to be desired in many aspects and there are still things that need to be discussed and improved. This article only discusses four typical animal metaphors, but the fact that Dickinson's poetry contains a wealth of animal images still allows for further study. For this reason, more examples of animal metaphors can be found and be analyzed in the same way to study Dickinson's poetic style and ideas. Therefore, this paper serves as a foundation for future research.

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