

## **Imagery and Symbolism in Love Poetry: A Study of Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson**

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**ABSTRACT:** This research analyzes selected poems of Emily Dickinson through the framework of formalism with the aim of highlighting the ways in which this poet used the unique devices of presentation in his poetry to express his emotions in an era, which did not approve of women openly expressing their desires. The research emphasizes the imagery and symbolism deployed by the poet, in his poems and ultimately concludes the poems far from being innocent depictions of the beauty of nature, words and images actually symbolize feelings and desires, even protests that are far more profound. The research concludes that Dickinson's of deployment of imagery and symbolisms are powerful and explosive The research figures that themes of a poem do not determine the form of in one poet or that despite the sameness of theme; the form differs in some ways. This study argues that formalism is an effective tool in poetic analysis, since it not only isolates the formal features of a Poem and sets out its sound patterns, but it also shows the deeper significance of these when they are subjected to thematic analysis of the kind propounded by the formalist, Boris Tomashevsky.

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Date of Submission: 09-12-2019

Date of Acceptance: 24-12-2019

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Emily Dickinson is poet who has aroused interest both within and outside academic spheres. Scholars such as Kennedy and Gioia (2005), Macmonagle (2003), Stewart (2002), Stephen (2001), Hirsh (1999), Furniss and Bath (1996), McCulloch (1995) and Farr (1983) have regarded this poet among the best and pioneers of the English Literary artist. This woman, regardless of the "brutal power game" within the Victorian society, has managed to crawl out into the limelight of the literary world and fame. In Victorian times, love poetry was said to be the dominant type of poetry favoured by women and Dickinson fall under this category. Probably due to excess control over or the denigration of women, she was not allowed to express strong romantic feelings or emotions except through writing which is poetry. As the result of this, the woman resorted to the use of "Substitution" (Symbolism) while expressing their feelings or emotions or fondness through the use of imagery and symbolism. This study examines a imagery and symbolism in love poetry, analysis as well as the thematic concerns in the selected love poetry of Dickinson using the framework of formalism. It also investigates how the Poet uses imagery and symbolism to figure emotion, such as love, and the objects and icons they used in the process. Formalism is selected because the language of poetry is not ordinary but a condensed composition. Thus the formalist seeks to locate the artfulness or aesthetic features of an object in order to see the object as it really is.

Regardless of the limitations on women's education and authorship as well as other societal inhibitions in Victorian times, this woman has sought comfort and delved into the poetic world, letting poetry speak for them: to give the meaning to life in their verses, to console and comfort themselves or to preserve their feelings, emotions, desires, fondness and Infatuation. Both Poets do not adopt the same poetic tradition as Dickinson used free verse The following poems were selected as the primary texts from Dickinson's love poetry.

1. Poem (14) One Sister Have in Our House
2. Poem (1677) Volcano

### **II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **A BRIEF ON THE PRIMARY TEXTS OF EMILY DICKINSON**

The beloved Woman in the narrative of Sue according to Farr (1983:133) is associated with "birds and flowers" and that such paring suggests ecstasy and transport of spring and young Love and "anxiety of gender" is located in her Poem (84), "Her Breast is Fit for Pearl!" as well as oriented motifs, which connect her with Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Egypt. For Farr, she holds that this is what teams up the central theme of the "Sue" cycle or narratives. In the Poem, the "sensuous beauty of the beloved Woman" is so rare to the point of

awarding of a “Royalty” and her loveliness testifies to her being Royal more so like “Queen Victoria”. This royalty is inferred from the allusions of *breast and brow, pearls and thrones*, as these are presented in the Poem.

Poem (14) “*One Sister Have I in Our House*” is a Love Poem for Sue. Farr (1983:119) holds that the poem begins with “sweet compliment of a sister in law and ends as a personal declaration of feeling”. It emphasizes the difference between Sue’s nature and that of Dickinson’s family. He also argues that this Poem is a recollection of their useful days (Sue and Dickinson) when their “hearts were built”. However, this Poem was distasteful to Austin and Lavinia, so much so that the manuscript was mutilated and “scribbled” over. Thus, Bianchi published her mother’s copy in appreciation of their relationship. Most importantly, Sue is compared to a bird, which nests in all their hearts. However, not only to birds, but Sue is also likened to or associated with a bumble bee, probably for its musicality (92).

Farr (1983:194) maintained that the early “Master” poems are envisioned by “Dickinson’s speaker as a “child”, a girl, epitomized by that simple field flower, the Daisy” (an extract or epithet she uses of herself in a letter to Bowles). She maintains that “Daisy” is used in the Victorian tradition such that maids are changed into a Daisy or Sun flower out of Love for the sun in the 1860s art.

Farr (1983:226-228) argued that the most common theme in Dickinson’s Poetry is about “Love as an explosion, felt in the soul and echoed by the body” and that “volcano” is a symbol which she uses for “passion”, “suppression”, “love” and “rage” in her Poems-(178) and (1677). Bees are also associated with Dickinson’s love for both “Master” and Sue narratives. Examples of such Poems are Poem (211), Poem (230), Poem (869), and Poem (270) (pp 213-214).

### **A Brief on Love Poetry**

Hancock (2007:97) holds that poetry was born out of love and that love transcends time and circumstance; so love poetry from diverse cultures display consistent feature which renders it to be seen as an artistic product that provides us with a particularly intimate link to the very foundation of human creativity. Carr (1982:491-495) juxtaposed love poetry and the Bible (Old Testament) and brings forth some areas where they are similar in their features. Most love poetry is relatively short, though there is considerable variation in the length of the individual poems. Thus, such analogy seems to reflect especially on Dickinson’s fragmented poems. Out of the many features he identified are the vocabulary items. Words such as “thou” “thee” “thy” and the identification of the lovers as “sister” and “brother” or “queen” and “king” or “prince” and “princess”. Likewise the use of imagery from trees, flowers, grasses or jewelery such as gold, silver, alabaster, amber, bronze; or various types of animals and bird imagery – dove, bees, wild goose; or even wolf-cub such as lion or domestic animals such as oxen, stallion, mares, etc; or specific regional or features such as lake, rivers, mountains, volcanoes, etc. Another feature of the love poem syndrome is the expression of sexual interest or sexual longing which differs from the bible. Thus, love poems are composed in erotic terms but Christianity dismiss erotic expressions because they believed such aspect of human nature was not worthy of God’s attention.

In love poetry, feelings and emotions are best explained poetically; such that “inexpressible is expressed”. It provides a language of feeling. In the view of E. Bain et. al., (1981) being in love is not an easy task that can be expressed in just a phrase or so. They asked further that how can you put into words what it means to be in love? To them, they believed that poetry captures exactly the shade of emotion that feels just right... When you read a poem and realized that, that is exactly what you have in mind but unable to express it that way or this way. They also put that love poetry can be the mouth piece of our feelings even when our minds are speechless with grief or joy.

Love poetry is usually addressed to one person and it is always anchored by comparison and issues of similitude. It enjoys making analogies between one thing and another. Hirsh (1999) has given us a good example such as *Song of Songs* which presented an imaginative power of language, “shall I compare thee do a summer’s day?” Or “I have compared thee, o my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh’s chariots,” or Dickinson’s example “Shall I take thee to the propounded word?”

By typology, both Hirsh (1999) and Hancock (2007:199) have placed lyrics as the commonly used in love poetry. Love is easily expressed in lyrics than any other kinds of poetry, as it expressed grief or joy. Brodsky cited Hirsh (1999:115-116) maintained that love is a metaphysical affair whose goal is either accomplished or liberating one’s soul... And that is and always has been the core of lyric poetry. Denis de Rougemont cited in Hancock (2007:199) argues that what lyric poets put into their finest flight is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple, not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. This analogy is typified by comparing the beloved with other beautiful, inexpressible, simulated objects. In other words, the lover is been metaphorically substituted by the use of symbols and or images.

### **The Place of Women in Victorian Society and Culture**

In Victorian society, women were generally relegated to the background, as they were expected to conform to certain societal standards and they were not allowed to venture out of their designated domain. Generally, women did no more than mothering, knitting and sewing etc, leaving the society outside the home saturated and dominated by the powerful male. Politics and education was meant for men, which meant that women, regardless of their intelligence and capacity, had to submit to being no more than mere “appendages”. In other words, women were relegated to the background and marginalized politically, socially and educationally. With this strong demarcation between the male and female, women established a kind of sisterhood probably to seek solace from the “brutal power game”. Elaine Showalter notes that females in ancient cultures created a distinctive language in order to communicate without violating the silence imposed upon them in public life.(cited in Woodward 1987:147). Farr (1983) maintained that the Victorian era witnessed a cult of fond among the Victorian girls, which promoted Lilian Faderman to posit a tradition of romantic friendship and love amongst the 19<sup>th</sup> century women that was justifiable through epistle and precisely through poetic tradition. Presumably, this is why Dickinson’s unrequited love for her sister in law Susan (sue) or for her master remained a speculative and academic topic. And it is part of the reason why Dykstra testified of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that the victorian woman was thought by the victorians to have much less of a capacity for individuation than man therefore, artist frequently presented love between women by vision of similar forces. However, when such relationships flourished in the society, due to the emphasis on this fondness and affection, seminars and lectures were established in order to curb the situation, though such strictness remained an invalid solution or was rather taken for granted or given not enough consideration (1983:103).

One restriction of women in the Victorian society was that women were not allowed to celebrate or affirm their love to another. This is because most of the girls were in love with married men, leaving most of the lovers jilted and frustrated or that puritanism and Catholicism would not permit such act from the female. The girls, however, had nothing to resort to except poetry writing through which they poured out their heart. It is for this reason that Farr (1983) opines that “broken hearts were a continual theme in most Victorian writing”. And such despair and frustration can be seen in Dickinson’s narrative of Sue or Master. Perhaps, it is also the reason why some critics denounced Barrett Browning’s work on the grounds that it affirmed and celebrated her love for Robert Browning. Amazingly, this restriction further followed them even in the world of poetry. Themes such as religion, spirituality and love were the only permissible topic they could write about and other significant issues in life are to be written by men not vice-versa. It is this kind of limitation that led the denunciation and condemnation of Browning’s writing; as she writes more challenging issues in life than the restricted ones permitted by her society.

Consequently, religion and love became the dominant theme in poetry by women by which most of them distinguished themselves from male poets. However, these women poets being conscious of the barrier within and outside the literary domain chose, to use Leyda’s phrase “omitted centre”; i.e their poetry is mostly cryptic. Typically, most of Dickinson’s complexity about her poem resulted from this “omission of centre which increases the cryptic nature of her poem” (Farr 1983:ix and Hirsch 1999).The Victorian poets were heavily influenced by the ideology of the Christian marriage, the happy family and emotional fidelity in mourning all embodied by Britain’s longest reigning monarch which provided a rich source of artistic material as well as a receptive readership of the middle class (Hancock 2007:199). And that Victorian society may have placed great value on marriage and on family relations but the fact is, love poems of celebrated authors such as Barrett Browning, Browning (her husband), Arnold, Tennyson and others speak the exquisite affliction of passion than any other issues of attachment (2007: 217).Regardless of any restriction, these women have been successful on making them unique identify in a literary world. That is why Carruth argued that poetry found conceptually stranded on an aesthetic plane of being, divorced from practical or moral responsibility, accountable only to abstract style or to some other aspect of imagined form (1976:305).

### **III. STRUCTURE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON**

This research work is a formalist and thematic analysis of the selected poems of Dickinson. Each poem is analyzed after which the study seeks to see the presentation of the concept of love and fondness for the other. The selected poems are:  
One Sister Have I in Our House  
Volcano

#### **STRUCTURE OF THE SELECTED POEMS**

This poem has six stanzas comprising four quatrains and two stanzas, which consist of six and five lines, respectively. Almost all the stanzas are run-on lines. The first stanza consists of a mixture of eight syllables (iambic tetrameter), four syllables (diameter) and a six-syllable (trimeter). But the second quatrain comprises

an equal number of six syllables and all the rest of the stanzas are ranged from four to eight syllables. Again, Dickinson's use of imagery did not end on the bird but more so is linked to the musicality of both the singer and the image of a "Bumble Bee" For her, Sue's song is different from their own and so, Sue's song is comparable to the music or sound of the bumble bee. Dickinson's use of a complex rhyme falls within the third stanza-aba;

It was a different a tune      A  
Herself to her music        B  
As Bumble bee of June      A

And a near rhythm occurs in the fifth stanza, which makes them closer "Eye/lie". This has the feel of a popular song, particularly if it is followed by the alliteration in the last verse of the same stanza-Mouldered/Many/May. Symbolically, the "hills" are referring to height (↑ while the "miles" suggesting to space

or distance (←→) covered; Thus, it is represented more of the Christian cross (⊕)

The Volcano Poems usually appear in the Master narratives. Most of Dickinson's letters to "master" or Bowles or Lord Phillip reveal a love that has its roots in errors and admiration. An American critic, Robert Bridges Droch, argued that Dickinson's love poems are not solely on Sue; due to the consistent imagery that is linked to those numerous letters to Bowles, the poems must be for Master. Droch pointed out that the Master letters and poems are similar and possess an awe for "loved person" a man towards whom the awe is enhanced or fuelled by respect, fear and a little gratitude. Dickinson's images for master or Bowles are those of resurrection. She associated him with Christ and the Sun (cited in Farr 1983:181-183).

Due to the excess of her letters, Dickinson had told Bowles' wife that her "Cheek ... red with shame" because I write often (L2.388). So probably, she feels the need to conceal not just the name but herself upstairs behind closed doors or behind a metaphorical "Veil". However, it was in such letters written to master or Bowles that Dickinson confessed by not denying her feelings for Master. Therefore, by this confession about her passion; she seeks metaphors that are explosive, not merely electric. In other words, her love and feelings for master are more of an explosion that is left in her soul and felt as well as echoed by her body such explosion is probably what explains her poems on Volcano.

However, another reason for the choice of a volcano may be her knowledge on the themes of the then painting, of particularly the painting of the Chimborazo that was showcased around (1859) in a Bosnian newspaper. Nevertheless, Dickinson used volcano not only as a passion for suppressing love but rage. As she disclosed it in one of the volcano poems; consisting of only five quatrains, followed by the repetitions of "appalling" (extremely bad or shocking). The first volcano Poem- I have never seen volcanoes, consists of five stanzas of four equal lines each. The longest syllables are eight and the shortest is a diameter that appeared in first and fourth stanzas and all the rest are in form of trimeter and tetrameter

The diction too is quite associated with nature as "volcano" "mountain", "phlegmatic"(calm) and "still:" added up to the Image of the mountain; that lays still and calm across the earth or field. Therefore, the diction is substituted with Nature. And the repetition of "appalling" (extremely shocking) in the same stanza is not accidental but deliberations of the technique.

Other words (diction) or symbols used are associated with the Imagery of a disaster, a war or an aftermath of explosion just like the volcano itself. Words such as "gun", "smoke" or "appalling", "smouldering"(burning slowly without flame) and "anguish" (severe pain or unhappiness or mental suffering) suggest the disastrous nature of the place or city-"Pompeii". The rhyme is in triple rhyme because it consists of a three-syllabic word Volcanic/Titanic and a two-syllable word in face/place. Thus, it gives rise to three successive of a hypothetical (if... if... if...). A turn falls on line 13 "if some Loving antiquary", a deliberate diversion from talking about the suffering of men "appalling men" to a study with "Loving antiquary" this takes a complex journey. Dickinson was unorthodox and this she extends to her writing; she avoids "Resurrection Morn" in favour of "Resumption Morn", suggesting not a transfiguration in some imaginary heaven, but a restoration of a community (Pompeii)/ To the Hills return

### **Volcano – My volcano grows the grass**

The poem is just two stanzas and the lines are end-stopped ones of equal lines in each stanza because it begins with a thought and ends in the last line of the stanza. Line 3-4 "an acre for a bird to choose" "would be the general thought" is an end-stopped line. Again, the choice of word is also associated with the Nature after volcano is "grass", "bird", an "acre". A rhythm is rarely found, -in the beginning of the first line "grows the grass".

A turn falls on line 6 “how insecure the sod” such that the first line up to line 5 talks about nature or field where “grass” are grown, and a field for a “bird” to play or “choose” and a “sod” (a person, especially a Man, that you are annoyed with).

### **A Still Volcano**

This poem is not a Sonnet because it consists of twelve lines, so it is referred to as a free or blank verse. All the lines are either (trimeter), six-syllables or (tetrameter), four-syllables word except line 1 and 5 which are (diameter) two-syllables. The turn is a little bit delayed until line 10 “the lips that never lie”. The rhyme in this poem is a para-rhyme because all or most of the consonants are the same but with different vowels-“sight”, “style”, “subtle” and “suspect”. On the whole of the volcano poem, the /s/ sound is adopted probably to give an auditory Imagery through the hissing sound-“Still”, “Sight”, “Solemn” and “Symbol.” However, this is more like the music she sang silently in her upstairs. The rhythm “subtle to suspect” too is another one.

The use of dashes were not cut across all the verses rather she chose three verses out of the twelve “when it was dark enough to do” “too subtle to suspect” and “the north cannot detect”. In the archive of Dickinson Poems, she tried to substitute ‘S’ words into a process such that in searching for the right verb she jots down the words ‘slip’, ‘slide’ and ‘melt’ before preferring the much more carnal ‘ooze’ (in her jottings, this word is partly obscured). And in the first verse instead of A Still-Volcanic-Life, she tried the adjective “Volcanic” before volcano as a subject and “life” as a predicate “Volcanic life” and in the fourth line ‘erasing’ is finally promoted ahead of the more ‘endangering’. And the technique of a half rhyme is also a continuous style in the Poems-Night/Sight, Style/Naple, Suspect/Detect.

The Nature of Love in Dickinson’s Poems

Love is one of the most essential ingredients she wrote about, Macmonagle (2003) and others have argued that fondness or emotional instability led her to isolation and later to sing (poetry). Two-thirds of the Poems were written about her intense passion for her sister-in-law, Sue, and for Master, though most of her poems often converged two or more themes within a poem. Like One Sister Have I in Our House, it started - as a Poem of a sweet compliment of a sister-in-law and ended up with adoration "I chose this single star" and "Sue-forever more". Dickinson was not assured of Sue's love, she felt that Dollie was neglecting her or that she is cheating her "You love me -you are sure" and when Dickinson needed her (Sue) "and Dollie - gone" she is gone, gone deep into her marital relation and other social activities. Again, where Dollie is a sweet darling she simultaneously becomes dangerous for "You sting-again" over the "pain" she experienced; and so needed a soothing "balm". For Dickinson, love or passion is sometimes erotic and nostalgic while for Barrette Browning it is eternal.

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### **APPENDIX**

#### **One Sister Have I in Our House**

One sister have I in our house,  
And one, a hedge away.  
There’s only one recorded,  
But both belong to me.  
One came the road that I came  
And wore my last year’s gown  
The other, as a bird her nest,  
Built our hearts among.

She did not single as we did  
It was different rime  
Herself to a music  
As Bumble bee of June.  
Today is far from childhood  
But up and down the hills  
held her hand the tighter  
Which shortened all the miles  
And still her hum  
The years among  
Deceives the butterfly  
Still in her eye  
The violets lie  
Mouldered this many May  
I spilt the dew  
But took the morn-  
I choose this single star  
From out the wide night's number-  
Sue-forevermore!

### **The Volcano Poems**

Volcano Poem 175  
I have never seen "Volcanoes" –  
But, whom travellers tell  
How those old-phlegmatic mountains  
Usually so still –  
Bear within – appalling Ordnance,  
Fire, and smoke, and gun  
Taking villages for Breakfast,  
And appalling men –  
If the stillness is volcanic  
In the human face  
When upon a pain Titanic  
Features keep their place –  
If at length the smouldering anguish  
Will not overcome –  
And the palpitating vineyard  
In the dust, be thrown?  
If some loving Antiquary,  
On Resumption Morn,  
Will not cry with joy "pompeii"!  
To the hills return!  
Volcano Poem 1,677  
On my Volcano grows the Grass  
A meditative spot –  
An acre for a Bird to choose –  
Would be the General thought –  
How red the fire rocks below –  
How insecure the sod  
Did i disclose  
Would populate with awe my solitude (1677)  
Volcano Poem 1601  
A still – Volcano – Life  
That flickered in the night –  
When it was dark enough to do  
Without erasing sight  
A quiet – Earthquake Style –  
Too subtle to suspect –  
By natures this side Naples –  
The North cannot detect

The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol –  
The lips that never lie –  
Whose hissing Corals part – and shut –  
And Cities – ooze away –

Fatima Abubakar. " Imagery and Symbolism in Love Poetry: A Study of Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 12, 2019, pp. 54-60.