



Defamiliarization in *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson

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Abstract:

This research analyzes defamiliarization in the poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson using the theory of Russian Formalism. The poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* by Emily Dickinson reflects the theme of death through the use of personification and defamiliarization. Death is personified as a calm and friendly figure, who takes the character on a journey to eternity. Through the technique of defamiliarization, Dickinson transforms the conventional perception of death as frightening into a peaceful and inevitable experience. The research method used is descriptive qualitative analysis, focusing on poetry texts as the main data source. The results show that Dickinson portrays death as a friendly figure, changing the general perception of death. Defamiliarization is seen through the depiction of the journey toward death, interactions with everyday life, and unique experiences of time. These findings show that this poem provides a new perspective on the journey of life and death, and invites readers to reflect on the deeper meaning of life.

Keywords: journey; general perception; conventional perception

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menganalisis defamiliarisasi pada puisi *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* karya Emily Dickinson dengan menggunakan teori Russian Formalism. Puisi *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* karya Emily Dickinson merefleksikan tema kematian melalui penggunaan personifikasi dan defamiliarisasi. Kematian dipersonifikasikan sebagai sosok yang tenang dan ramah, yang membawa karakter puisi tersebut dalam perjalanan menuju keabadian. Melalui teknik defamiliarisasi, Dickinson mengubah persepsi konvensional tentang kematian sebagai sesuatu yang menakutkan menjadi pengalaman yang damai dan tak terelakkan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah analisis deskriptif kualitatif dengan fokus pada teks puisi sebagai sumber data utama. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Dickinson menggambarkan kematian sebagai sosok yang ramah, mengubah persepsi umum tentang kematian. Defamiliarisasi terlihat melalui penggambaran perjalanan menuju kematian, interaksi dengan kehidupan sehari-hari, dan pengalaman unik terhadap waktu. Temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa puisi ini memberikan perspektif baru tentang perjalanan hidup dan mati, serta mengajak pembaca untuk merenungkan makna hidup yang lebih dalam.

Kata kunci: perjalanan; persepsi umum; persepsi konvensional



INTRODUCTION

Death is a natural part of life that marks the end of a person's physical existence. This general perception is often shaped by societal beliefs and shared experiences that highlight death as an unavoidable part of human life. According to Becker, many cultures see death as "the ultimate unknown," which leads to feelings of anxiety and discomfort in those contemplating it (Becker, 1979, p. 28). However, death could have different meanings for each individual and in various cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. Islam believes that death is the breaking of the soul's attachment to the inner body's known forms, accompanied by changes in state, as well as movement from one realm to another. Farewell between the soul and the body is the gateway to entering new life (Setiadi, 2020, p.50). Hindus believe that when a person dies, his material body also dies and becomes stiff and brittle. However, the subtle soul did not die but continued to live in a subtle realm similar to the world of our dreams (Nurwanti, 2023, p. 23). Furthermore, Christians believe that Death is the only bridge for humans moving from the physical to the spiritual realm invisible (Faot et al., 2017), and so on.

The beliefs about death of the three religions mentioned are similar. Being abandoned forever by the person one loves in the world makes one believe, brooding, sad, angry, or afraid. People feel the physical changes that occur in people about to die, such as difficulty breathing, become painful or uncomfortable (Jenny Mothoneos, 2020). The obviousness is that death is sorrow for those left behind and suffering for those who experience death because death is usually marked by painful things such as illness, accidents, etc. The conventional perception of death, likewise, tends to frame it as a disruptive force that brings pain and suffering, especially for those left behind. Kastenbaum states that "death is often personified as a grim specter," symbolizing both the loss of life and the cessation of individuality (Kastenbaum, 1977, p. 94). Death is also usually considered scary, and people are often afraid of being faced with death (Dysvik & Furnes 2010). However, death cannot be avoided; death will come to all living things, even animals and plants, at once.

Death is a theme that is often used in literary works, both from writers of the past era and writers in the contemporary era. Death remains an exciting theme to discuss. An example of a writer who often uses the theme of death in his literary works is Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson is an American poet who was born in Amherst,



Massachusetts. She is famous for her poetry in the past to this day. Nearly 1800 poems have been written by her, and one of her poems, which carries the theme of death, is the poem entitled *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* (Franklin, 1999). However, instead of writing death as a scary thing, she wrote as if death was a very friendly thing that warmly accompanied her on her journey.

Based on the explanation above, the researchers would like to analyze Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*. This study uses Russian Formalism theory to focus on this poem's text or intrinsic element. It will analyze the depiction of death in Emily Dickinson's writing. The researchers wonder, "How does Emily Dickinson portray death in the poetry *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*?" This study was conducted to answer the research question.

The significance of this study is that theoretically, it can expand literary studies regarding Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*. By conducting this study, the researcher can contribute to the field of literature, which can broaden the reader's insight. Practically, this study can contribute and become a reference in differentiating poetry through the theory of Russian Formalism by highlighting the defamiliarization contained in the poetry, considering that researchers have not found similar research regarding Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

The researchers found numerous previous studies related to Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* as an object. First, in her research, Thohiriyah (2017) aims to investigate how Emily Dickinson portrays the concept of death in her poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*. Researchers use a semiotic approach, especially in analyzing dramatic situations and connotative language in poetry. Using this theory, researchers explore the hidden meaning behind metaphorical expressions in the text. Through this study, the researcher found that Dickinson's poetry not only depicts death as part of the cycle of life but is also a symbol of protest against organized religion promoted by Puritans in Massachusetts. Furthermore, Dickinson highlights women's restrictions in the Puritan code, which causes them to have total obedience, making death a metaphor for women's loss of freedom.



The next study uses Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* conducted by Rahayu & Widyastuti (2016). This research aims to analyze the intrinsic elements in Emily Dickinson's poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*. By using library research methods, the researchers found that the poem reveals the use of visual, kinesthetic, and organic images to depict the journey with death and the use of rhyme, symbolism, and diction to convey deep messages about the cycle of life and death.

Furthermore, Bibi (2019) also conducted a study using Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* as the object. This study aims to understand the literary style used by Dickinson and interpret the contextual meaning of each figurative language used in the poem. The researcher used qualitative descriptive research methods to explore word choice, sentence structure, figurative language, and other stylistic devices that help establish themes of death and immortality in poetry. The findings from the analysis show that Dickinson breaks conventional norms in composing poetry by using half-words. In addition, she uses various figurative language such as personification, metaphor, metonymy, antithesis, and symbolism to strengthen the message in her poetry. However, the previous researchers only discussed the writing style and themes used. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study to highlight Emily Dickinson's writing technique, which is defamiliarization with Russian formalism theory.

Theory

Russian Formalism is a literary critical theory that emerged in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. This theory focuses on the structure of literature itself, studying how literature is created and how aesthetic effects are created in literary works, such as its figurative language, word choices, rhyme, etc (Shklovsky, 1925, pp. 3-5). One of the central concepts that emerged from Russian Formalism is defamiliarization. According to Shklovsky (1916), defamiliarization is an artistic technique used to present common or ordinary objects or concepts in an unusual or unexpected way. The main purpose of defamiliarization is to make the audience see something from a new perspective, experiencing the object or idea in an unfamiliar way, thereby creating more immersive experiences and generating creative thinking. Thus, in this study, the researchers would like to reveal the defamiliarization portrayed in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*.



RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, the researchers use a qualitative descriptive method according to Creswell & Poth (2016) to analyze the data thoroughly and present it in a narrative. This research emphasizes in-depth analysis of the data to explore themes, structure, figurative language, and rhythm. This method also emphasizes the role of the researcher and how his or her perspective can influence the interpretation of data.

Furthermore, the primary data source that the researchers use is Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* (Franklin, 1999) poem. The data is the written texts of the poetry. The data collection was conducted by using a close reading method, identifying the data related to the topic, and finally, the researchers analyzing the data. In addition, the secondary data was taken by using library research methods which use books, journal articles, and theses to support the issue explored by the researchers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Intrinsic Elements of *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

Theme

The central theme of *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* revolves around death and the acceptance of mortality. Dickinson presents death as an integral aspect of life rather than a fearsome end.

"Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me – "

These lines introduce death as a courteous figure, suggesting that it is not something to be feared but embraced. This perspective encourages readers to contemplate their relationship with mortality, viewing it as a natural progression rather than a definitive conclusion.

Tone

The tone of the poem is calm, reflective, and serene. Dickinson's portrayal of the speaker's encounter with Death contrasts with traditional depictions of death as abrupt and terrifying.

"We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too"



In the second stanza, the lines illustrate a tranquil journey, devoid of urgency. This peaceful tone fosters acceptance and invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of death, ultimately promoting a sense of comfort regarding the inevitability of mortality.

Imagery

Dickinson employs vivid imagery to depict the journey of life and the transition into death. Each image represents a specific life stage:

The School

The poem begins with the image of a school:

"We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –"

This imagery evokes nostalgia, illustrating the innocence and joy of childhood before adult responsibilities arise. The school symbolizes the formative years, highlighting the carefree nature of youth.

Fields of Gazing Grain

The subsequent image, "Fields of Gazing Grain," symbolizes maturity and the productive years of adulthood. Here, grain represents growth and sustenance, reflecting the flourishing of life. The term "gazing" suggests a sense of watchfulness, indicating the passage of time and the responsibilities that accompany maturity.

The Setting Sun

The journey culminates in the image of the "Setting Sun," which signifies the twilight of life and the approach of death. This image evokes a bittersweet feeling, as the day's end mirrors life's conclusion. By employing this imagery, Dickinson emphasizes the natural cycle of life and reinforces the theme of acceptance.

Structure and Form

The poem comprises six quatrains, following a free verse rhyme and regular meter. This structured form creates a steady rhythm that mirrors the calm journey experienced by the speaker with Death. The poem's regularity contrasts with its deeper themes, providing a sense of order amidst the complexities of life and death. The predictable structure encourages readers to reflect on the poem's content, reinforcing the notion that death is a natural part of life's continuum.

Symbolism

Dickinson's use of symbolism enriches the poem's meaning:



The Carriage

“The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.”

The carriage here represents the journey of life, with Death as the driver. This imagery transforms the act of dying into a serene journey rather than a chaotic end. The portrayal of Death as a courteous companion suggests that death is a part of life's continuum, rather than a fearful adversary.

The House

“We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –”

In the fifth stanza, Dickinson metaphorically refers to the grave as a "House." This description redefines the grave as a comforting and familiar place, blurring the boundaries between life and death. By using the term "House," Dickinson invites readers to perceive the grave not as a frightening endpoint but as a peaceful resting place, akin to returning home. This symbolic representation offers a sense of serenity, making death feel less intimidating.

Gossamer and Tulle

“For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –”

The character I's attire, described as “Gossamer” and “Tulle,” symbolizes the fragility of life. Gossamer, often associated with delicacy, highlights the ephemeral nature of existence. This choice of fabric reinforces the idea that life is transient, mirroring the ethereal quality of the journey toward death.

Diction and Language

Dickinson employs a unique and intentional choice of words throughout the poem. Her diction is both simple and profound, creating an intimate atmosphere around the subject of death. The use of soft, comforting language—words like “kindly,” “Civility,” and “Swelling”—serves to soften the harshness often associated with death. This careful selection of language fosters an atmosphere of comfort and acceptance, urging readers to approach the topic of mortality with understanding.



Defamiliarization of *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

Personification of Death

The poem opens with the personification of Death as a courteous figure:

"Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me."

This representation challenges conventional depictions of death as abrupt and fearsome, inviting readers to reconsider their perceptions. By portraying Death as a gentle companion, Dickinson defamiliarizes the concept of mortality, allowing readers to engage with it on a more personal level.

Imagery and Symbolism

Dickinson's use of familiar images, such as "the school", "fields of grain", and "the setting sun", serves to convey the stages of life in a way that transforms their typical associations. By framing these common experiences within the context of a journey with Death, she distances the reader from usual perceptions, enabling them to see life and death as interconnected. The image of the grave as a "House" further blurs the boundary between life and death, transforming it into a familiar and comforting concept, thus defamiliarizing the fear often associated with graves.

Structure and Rhythm

The poem's steady rhythm and regular rhyme scheme create a calming effect that mirrors the unhurried journey undertaken with Death. This contrasts with the chaotic nature typically associated with death, enhancing the defamiliarization. The orderly structure conveys the message that death is a natural progression in life, encouraging readers to reconsider their understanding of mortality's finality.

Distortion of Time

In the final stanza, Dickinson remarks:

"Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day."

This manipulation of time challenges conventional notions of its passage. By portraying eternity as something that feels brief, Dickinson encourages readers to rethink their relationship with time and mortality. This perspective reinforces the poem's exploration of death as a transition rather than an end, inviting a more nuanced understanding of existence.



CONCLUSION

In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, Emily Dickinson presents death as a gentle transition, inviting readers to approach mortality with understanding rather than fear. By using Russian Formalist techniques, especially defamiliarization, Dickinson reframes death from a source of dread to a familiar and comforting presence. Through her personification of death, symbolic imagery, and altered sense of time, she portrays it as a natural and continuous part of life. Therefore, this study emphasizes Dickinson's careful use of language and structure to position death within life's cycle, challenging traditional portrayals while encouraging a renewed appreciation of mortality. Furthermore, future research might expand on how defamiliarization reinterprets themes like mortality across various cultural and historical contexts, thereby offering a deeper view into how literature reflects societal perspectives on universal experiences such as death.

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