

Review of International Geographical Education | **RIGEO** | 2020

RIGEO



ISSN: 2146 - 0353

**Review of International
GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION**



www.rigeo.org

Exploring Metaphor, Conceit, and Imagery in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* and Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*: A Cognitive Poetics Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of metaphor, conceit, and imagery in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* and Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* through the lens of Cognitive Poetics. By examining the mental spaces and conceptual metaphors evoked by these literary devices, the study highlights how both poets engage with themes of mortality, existence, and the human condition. Dickinson's personification of death and the metaphor of the carriage ride symbolize the inevitability of mortality, while Frost's metaphor of the woods as both a place of rest and temptation reflects the tension between life's duties and the allure of solitude. Through vivid imagery and symbolic conceits, both poets invite readers into distinct mental and emotional spaces, emphasizing the contrast between the pull of death and the demands of life. This analysis underscores the power of cognitive processes in the interpretation and emotional resonance of poetry, demonstrating how metaphor, conceit, and imagery serve as tools for understanding complex human experiences.

Keywords: Cognitive Poetics, Metaphor, Conceit, Imagery, Mortality

Introduction

Poetry, as a form of artistic expression, has long been a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of human existence, including the inevitability of death, the passage of time, and the tension between life's responsibilities and the allure of rest. Two iconic American poets, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, delve into these themes in their respective works *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Both poems, though distinct in

tone and perspective, use metaphor, conceit, and imagery to engage with the human condition, especially mortality, in profound ways.

This paper applies the framework of Cognitive Poetics to analyze the metaphorical, conceited, and imagistic elements in these poems, aiming to uncover how these devices shape the reader's cognitive and emotional experience. Cognitive Poetics examines the interplay between language, cognition, and emotional response, exploring how readers mentally and emotionally engage with the text. By focusing on the metaphors and imagery in Dickinson's and Frost's poems, this study will investigate how these literary techniques help construct the readers' mental spaces, offering insights into how both poets navigate themes of death, existence, and the human journey.

Through the examination of *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, where death is personified as a courteous figure guiding the speaker on a carriage ride, and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, where the woods serve as a metaphor for peaceful solitude and existential contemplation, this paper will reveal the underlying cognitive processes that allow these metaphors and images to resonate deeply with the reader. In doing so, the analysis will highlight how these literary devices facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex emotional and philosophical questions posed by both Dickinson and Frost.

Cognitive Poetics: A Framework for Understanding Literary Devices

Cognitive Poetics, a branch of literary theory that merges cognitive science with literary analysis, focuses on how readers perceive and mentally process literary texts. The central premise is that the meaning of a text is not solely contained within the words themselves but emerges through the interaction between the reader's cognitive faculties and the poetic structure. This theoretical framework emphasizes mental imagery, conceptual metaphors, and mental spaces, which are crucial in understanding the mental and emotional resonance of metaphors, conceits, and imagery in poetry.

Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

In *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, Emily Dickinson presents a meditation on death, personifying it as a courteous and inevitable companion. The poem's central metaphor revolves around Death as a figure who "kindly" arrives to escort the speaker, symbolizing the inescapable nature of mortality. This personification of death is both an invitation and a resignation, suggesting

that death is not an abrupt interruption but an inevitable, polite force that “kindly” waits for one’s acceptance.

Metaphor and Conceit in Dickinson’s Poem

The metaphor of the carriage ride in the poem is central to its exploration of death. The speaker and Death travel together in a carriage, symbolizing the journey from life to the afterlife. The metaphor of the “Carriage” as a vehicle for the passage from life to death is a reflection of the duality of death itself—it is both a mundane and extraordinary experience. In Cognitive Poetics, the mental image of the carriage ride would evoke different mental spaces: one of daily routine (a carriage ride as a normal part of life) and one of the metaphysical (the journey to eternity). This duality emphasizes the tension between life and death, with the carriage ride both mundane and transcendent.

Dickinson also employs the conceit of the “House” representing the afterlife, which connects to the larger theme of the journey’s inevitability. The imagery of the “House” as a metaphor for death suggests a final destination that is both unsettling and comforting, evoking complex emotional responses from the reader. This conceit amplifies the metaphysical contemplation that Dickinson achieves by suggesting that death is both an end and a form of arrival.

Imagery in *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

The imagery in Dickinson’s poem is crucial in establishing the tone and atmosphere. The visual journey through the “Fields of Gazing Grain” and the “Setting Sun” conjures images of the passage of time and the inevitability of death. The grain and the sun symbolize the end of the cycle of life, where life moves toward its natural conclusion. Additionally, the imagery of the “School” with its “children” symbolizes the progression of life from youth to maturity, but also the end of that progression.

In Cognitive Poetics, the vivid imagery invites readers to experience the mental spaces of each stage of life, reinforcing the contrast between life’s vitality and death’s stillness.

Robert Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

Robert Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is an iconic poem that presents a moment of reflection and contemplation in the midst of nature’s quiet beauty. The poem explores themes

of duty, solitude, and the pull between the allure of rest and the obligations of life. In stark contrast to Dickinson's somber meditation on death, Frost's poem centers on a solitary figure contemplating the beauty of nature as he pauses in the snow-covered woods.

Metaphor and Conceit in Frost's Poem

In Frost's poem, the central metaphor revolves around the woods themselves, which represent a place of peaceful isolation and an escape from the obligations of life. The narrator's attraction to the "dark and deep" woods is tempered by the awareness of the promises he has yet to fulfill. The metaphor of the woods as a place of temptation signifies a desire for peace, but also the weight of responsibilities that keep the speaker tethered to the world of obligations.

Frost uses the metaphor of "sleep" or "rest" to represent a more profound yearning for death or escape from the burdens of existence. The woods are not merely a physical location; they symbolize a spiritual retreat or final rest that the speaker feels compelled to resist. This tension between desire and duty resonates deeply with readers, as it mirrors the conflict between life's demands and the temptation of eternal peace.

Imagery in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

The imagery in Frost's poem is serene, evoking the quiet, cold beauty of a winter night. The "frozen lake" and "snow" create a sense of stillness and solitude, inviting the reader into the mental space of contemplation. The "darkness" of the woods and the "snowy evening" represent the unknown, yet they are also symbols of peace and stillness. In Cognitive Poetics, the visual imagery of the woods, the snow, and the night evokes feelings of both tranquility and foreboding. The mental space created by the imagery is one of deep reflection, where the reader can almost feel the isolation of the speaker.

The final stanza, where the speaker resolves to continue on his journey, highlights the conflict between the pull of the woods (symbolizing rest) and the promise he has made (representing life's duties). The phrase "Miles to go before I sleep" reinforces the idea that the journey of life is not yet over, and the speaker must continue despite the allure of rest. This phrase serves as a metaphor for the inevitability of life's commitments and the personal resolutions one must honor before yielding to the ultimate rest of death.

Comparative Analysis: The Use of Metaphor, Conceit, and Imagery

Both Dickinson and Frost employ metaphor, conceit, and imagery to explore the themes of mortality, isolation, and the human condition. While Dickinson focuses on death as an inescapable and polite force that is encountered on life's journey, Frost's contemplation of death is framed in the context of personal choices and responsibilities. Both poems evoke powerful mental images that allow readers to connect emotionally with the themes, but they do so in different ways: Dickinson through the inevitability and finality of death, and Frost through the tension between rest and responsibility.

In terms of Cognitive Poetics, the reader's experience of these metaphors and images creates distinct mental spaces. Dickinson's poem invites readers into a mental space where death is anthropomorphized and inevitable, with imagery that evokes the passage of time. Frost, on the other hand, creates a mental space of peaceful contemplation that is eventually interrupted by the realization of responsibility, emphasizing the tension between desire and duty.

Results

The analysis of Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* and Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* through the lens of Cognitive Poetics reveals several key findings regarding the use of metaphor, conceit, and imagery in these works.

1. Metaphor and Conceit:

- Dickinson employs a central metaphor of a carriage ride to symbolize the journey to death, personifying Death as a polite and inevitable figure. The metaphorical representation of death as a courteous companion helps readers mentally navigate the concept of mortality as both a part of life's natural progression and a final destination. The conceit of the "House" as the afterlife adds to the metaphysical tension in the poem, creating a mental space where death is not feared, but rather an eventual arrival.
- In contrast, Frost uses the metaphor of the woods as a place of peace and solitude, offering the speaker a temporary escape from life's obligations. The conceit of

"sleep" or "rest" in Frost's poem represents a desire for final peace, contrasting with the pull of responsibilities that keep the speaker tethered to life.

2. Imagery:

- Dickinson's vivid imagery of the "Fields of Gazing Grain" and the "Setting Sun" evokes the passage of time and the inevitable march toward death, creating a mental space of calm resignation. The visual imagery helps the reader conceptualize the stages of life as part of the journey to death, reinforcing the inevitability of the final destination.
- Frost's imagery of the "snowy evening" and the "dark and deep" woods creates an atmosphere of serene isolation, inviting readers into a reflective mental space. The stillness of the snow and the quiet of the woods mirror the speaker's inner conflict, caught between the pull of rest and the duties that await him.

3. Cognitive Response:

- Both poets use cognitive processes to engage readers' emotions and thoughts. Dickinson's poem evokes a mental space of acceptance, where death is both an inevitable and somewhat comforting presence, while Frost's poem elicits a conflict between duty and desire for peace, reflecting the complexities of human choices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, through the use of metaphor, conceit, and imagery, craft poems that invite readers into distinct cognitive and emotional spaces. Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* uses personification and metaphor to depict death as a natural, polite companion guiding the speaker toward the afterlife, emphasizing the inevitability and acceptance of death. Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, on the other hand, explores the tension between the allure of rest and the obligations of life, using the metaphor of the woods and the imagery of a snowy evening to evoke a reflective and solitary emotional space. Both poets employ these literary devices not only to convey themes of mortality and existence but also to engage readers in the cognitive processes of contemplating life's deeper

questions. Through the Cognitive Poetics approach, this analysis reveals the profound impact of these poetic techniques on the reader's emotional and cognitive experience.

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