

The Concept of Death in Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

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ABSTRACT

Through her poem, Emily Dickinson utilized figurative speech to elucidate the concept of death. In addition, the employment of the figurative speech is to illustrate what happened in the United States in the era of Puritanism. By using the concept of semiotics theory, the analysis shows that the poem demonstrates the passive protest over the organized religion that is being promoted by Puritan in Massachusetts, a place where the author was born and dies. Dickinson highlights the Puritan fierce rules which lead to female's total submission.

Keywords: death, Emily Dickinson, semiotics

ABSTRAK

Melalui puisinya, Emily Dickinson menggunakan majas untuk menjelaskan konsep kematian. Penggunaan majas untuk mengilustrasikan apa yang terjadi di Amerika Serikat pada era Puritanisme. Dengan menggunakan konsep teori semiotika, analisis menunjukkan bahwa puisi tersebut menggambarkan protes pasif kepada agama yang terorganisir yang dibesarkan oleh Puritan di Massachusetts, sebuah tempat di mana pengarang dilahirkan dan kemudian meninggal. Dickinson menekankan pada aturan-aturan keras Puritan yang mengarah kepada ketundukan total perempuan.

Kata kunci: kematian, Emily Dickinson, semiotika

INTRODUCTION

Poem, like a language, is a speech act – an act in which interlocutors do to convey a message in communication process. Unlike general conversation which employs direct and denotative language, poem uses metaphorical language as its language expression to convey the message to the readers. Hence, the interpretation of meaning implied in the poem can only be done by interpreting its metaphorical expressions contextually. Contextual interpretation is done since poem – like another text – is written by the author with no cultural vacuum, meaning that poem and culture are intertwined. In other words, poem documents the cultural and, not limited to, social situations happened in society.

In her poem entitled "*Because I could not stop for Death*", Emily Dickinson tried to portray her feeling relates to a death. Through her poem, she described the atmosphere of death in which her portrayal about death is, of course, being influenced by the cultural existence exists in the immediate vicinity of her residence. Since the poem possesses metaphorical meaning, this paper poses hypothesis that the death illustrated in Dickinson's poem is not simply a life cycle that the living individual will face. To investigate the alternative meaning over the Dickinson's poem dealing with the concept of death, further analysis should be imposed. This paper, then, aims for revealing the hidden meaning behind the concept of death that the author tried to communicate to the readers. Hence, by employing the semiotic approach, particularly using dramatic situation and connotative poetry, this paper tries to analyze the concept of death and the meaning behind the concept of death.

LITERATURE REVIEW

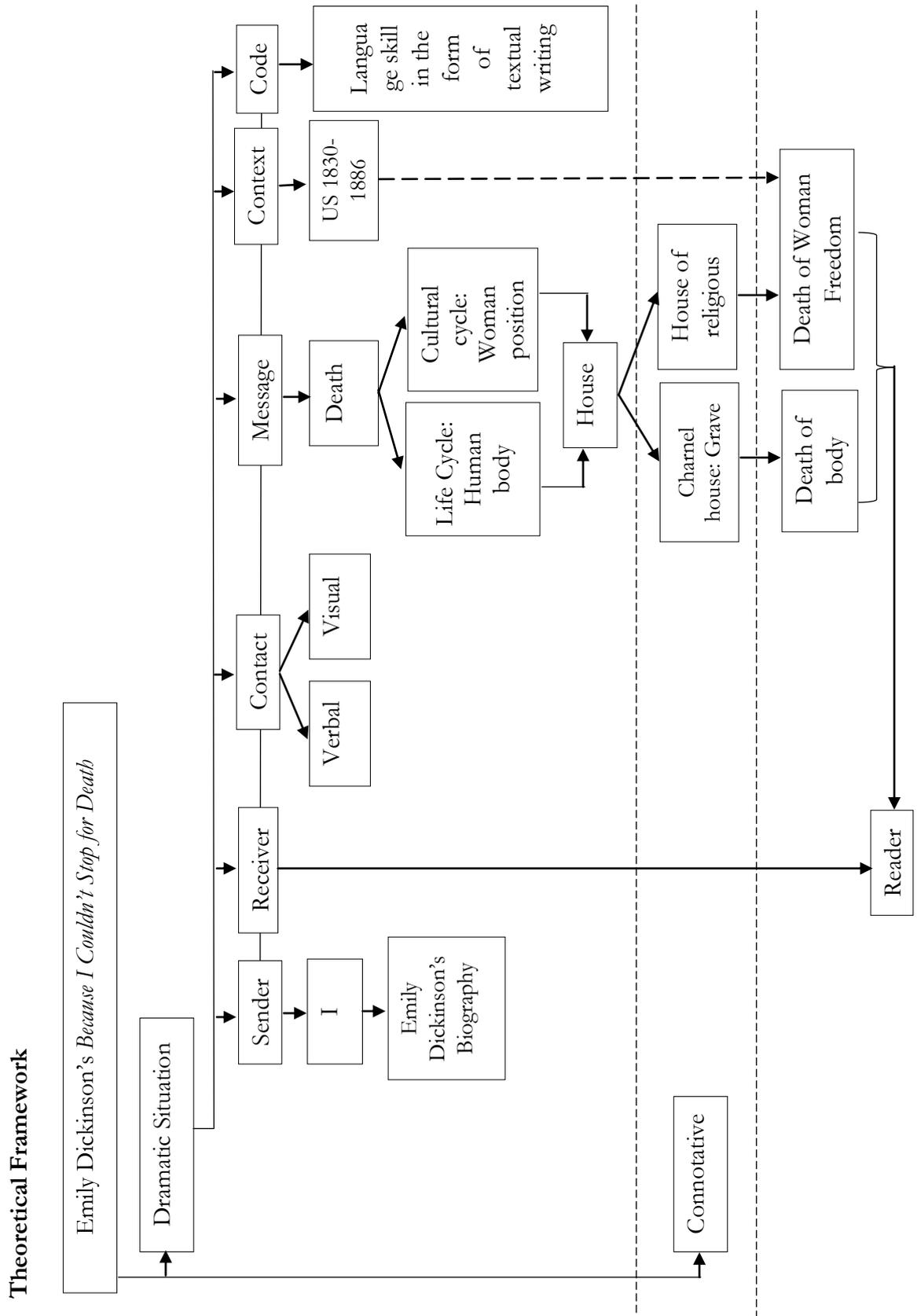
In this study, the employment of semiotic approach is emphasized on the linguistic signification in which metonymy and metaphor are the essential elements to be focused on. In addition, semiotics approach concerns in disclosing the meaning through the analysis of dramatic situations reflected in the texts.

Semiotics can be defined as "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (Al-Sharafi, 2004:80). Al-Sharafi highlights the main concern of semiotics is that of the study of signs. Furthermore, he affirms that the essences of signs are "mediators between messages and signals or between thought and expression". The signification done by using semiotics approach is considered as doing linguistic signification since semiotics sees the meaning through the language used in literary words. Linguistic signification, according to Al-Sharafi (ibid.), relies the analysis based on "the conceptualization of metonymy as a mode of contiguous and causal signification. Metonymy is viewed essentially as a way of abstracting a relation between concepts, words, and objects". Underlying the aforesaid idea that semiotics is lying the meaning over the relation of concepts, words, and objects, then it is being clearly paramount to analyzing the words and concept in relation to the concepts implied behind the words and the objects stated in the literary words.

Linguistic signification by using semiotic approach, as stated in the abovementioned description, can be done through the analysis of figurative speech in which metonymy, in one hand, is essential element to be analyzed. On the other hand, metaphor is essential element in linguistic signification. Unlike metonymy which considers the relationship between concepts, words, and objects, metaphor highlights the abstract relationship between "the part and the whole, the cause and its effect, or the position and the thing which occupies the position" (SSayed-Gohrab, 2012:4). What is meant by "the position" is actually cultural, historical, or political position. Thus, by considering the aforesaid definition, it can be said that metaphor actually concerns on the comparison between the two things in which those two things have relationship in relation to cultural, historical, or political context.

Other signification done by employing semiotic approach can be focused on the element of dramatic situation in the poem. Dramatic situation, according to Wardoyo (2014) is a communication process in literary texts particularly in poetry. Poem communicates a message through dramatic situation elements. The elements of dramatic situation are as follows: sender, receiver, contact, message, context, and code. Sender is the interlocutor who utters the words implicitly in a poem while receiver is the recipient of the poem. The next element is contact in which it can be defined as the way of communication with somebody using certain media of communication like gestures (visual contact) and body language (verbal contact). Message is something that is meant to be delivered by the reader either implicitly or explicitly. Context is a situation where events are happening, and all situation that describe the events. The last element is code. Code is a word/sign system that is used to represent the message implicitly. Code encompasses all elements of sender, receiver, contact, message, and context.

Finally, by analyzing the literary work using semiotics approach, it is hoped that the meaning implied in literary works can be mediated. Thus, the reader can see clearly the message hidden in the texts. In other side, metaphorical analysis reveals something unusual by utilizing common medium.



RESEARCH METHOD

This study administered a research methodology which refers to the concept of semiotics. Taking into account over semiotics perspective, the major concepts and steps which were formulated in analyzing the text are the dramatic situation and connotative analyses. In analyzing the dramatic situation, the main elements shall be highlighted are sender, receiver, contact, message, context, code. Meanwhile, in investigating the connotative meaning was derived from the interpretation over the message of the poem. Finally, as a receiver, the reader will get the significance of the poem by decoding the message and the context of the poem.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Because I Could Not Stop for Death was analyzed by using semiotic approach in which the idea of dramatic situation and connotative elements of the poem are being the main focus of the study. The analysis of the poem is presented below.

Signifying the Dramatic Situation and Connotative Language in *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

There are various ways and theories are able to be employed to interpret the meaning in the poem. One of them is semiotic approach. In order to reveal the meaning over Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death", the identification upon dramatic situation and connotative language should be done in an onset. After being identified, signification over those elements can be accomplished. Below is the identification table of dramatic situation and poem connotative for Dickinson's poem.

Table 1
Dramatis *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

Dramatic Elements	Situation	Referent
Sender		I
Receiver		Reader
Context		America 1830-1886
Message		Death
Contact		Body Language: riding the carriage (stanza 1&2), seeing environment surrounding (stanza 3&5), wearing gown (stanza 4), the journey (stanza 5)
Code		Language skill in the form of textual writing

Table 2
Connotative aspect: Metaphor in *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*

Metaphor	Meaning
I could not stop for Death	- Death just like living being who can run toward somebody else - Death can be meant as the lost of somebody's freedom
in the ring	Life cycle
School	Life simulacrum as the symbol of children stage
fields of gazing grain	Simulacrum of life: Field for growing maturity (mature stage)
the setting sun	Death stage
The dews grew quivering and chill	→Dews is like living being that can grow up →Chill is an atmosphere of cold. This atmosphere can be meant as the atmosphere of "a house" where the dead persona live in.
Since . . . centuries →Feels	Time shifting (from past to present): Past: a free life that gives somebody a freedom to have activity e.g. work and leisure activity Present: the life along "a house" / grave
the horses' heads were toward eternity	Persona goes to "a new world" →a new world covered by the code of death

Table 3
Connotative aspect: Metonymy in *Because I could not stop for Death*

Metonymy	Meaning
The carriage	the death carriage → Moving Carriage means carriage which brings the dead person into a grave or into a religious house before the dead person being buried
gossamer my gown	Thin wedding dress for the speaker's marriage to Death; hopeless → wedding gown
House	Institution of domination (father with Puritanism ideals), church → Religious house

Subject "I" in the above mentioned poem refers to the author of the poem, Emily Dickinson, who is categorized as the sender. The codes utilization in the form

of visual and verbal contacts in the poem such as “We slowly drove” in stanza 2 can be interpreted as the subject “I” is driving “The carriage” in which then can be seen in the first stanza. In order to know the hidden meaning of the text, signification over the poem should be done. Signification is done by analyzing the words and sentences structurally. The structural signification is presented below.

Because I could not stop for Death –	(line 1)
He kindly stopped for me –	(line 2)
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –	(line 3)
And Immortality.	(line 4)

The above mentioned lines are the lines of the first stanza in Dickinson’s poem. By seeing the first line above, it is immediately clear that the subject who is articulating the poem is “I”. The subject “I” refers to the author of the poem while in the second verse, the subject “He” refers to “Death” which was stated in the previous verse. Panther and Radden (1999:20) explicated that death is a metonymic aspect which highlights the most paramount point in death phenomena namely “burial”. In burial ceremony, there are some properties used such as coffin, gravestone, etc. to affirm the ceremony and there is also “the carriage” to travel the corpse. The term “carriage” itself in one hand is associated with a death carriage exists in the third line of poem. On the other hand, the carriage is a metonymic expression for the death carriage. The carriage is common transportation in burial culture which is also considered as the most crucial thing in the burial ceremony. The carriage function as a vehicle to move the dead body into the cemetery makes it to be the most crucial property in the burial ceremony.

The second stanza is a continuation of the story which articulates the process of subject “I” face the death. The word “we” in “We slowly drove, he knew no haste” in the fifth line refers to “I” and “he” who are in the journey to “a house” (see line 17) in which “a house” can be interpreted as the final destination of someone who are driving “the death carriage”. The human’s reaction over her/his existence in the death carriage is explained in the 6th and 7th lines of the poem. In the 6th line of the poem, the sentence “I had put away” explains the condition when the subject “I” is being put in the death carriage. The subject “I” put everything away in her life. Her carrier, leisure time, etc. should be “put away”. The last sentence in the second verse “for His civility” shows the sacrifice of the subject “I” to leave everything she has in her life for she is moving forward to “He” in which “He” refers to “God”¹.

The death carriage moves forward carrying the subject “I” to the final house passing the school and wheat field as it is illustrated in stanza 3. The aforesaid illustration over the journey to the final house is a retrospection of life encountered by the subject “I”.

¹ “He” or “God” in metaphorical signification can be interpreted as “man” who possesses the dominant culture. When “man” poses his power like God, then he is considered as the most authorized person over other’s life.

- We passed the School, where Children strove (line 9)
- At Recess – in the Ring – (line 10)
- We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – (line 11)
- We passed the Setting Sun – (line 12)

The experience of the subject “I” is narrated through the perspective of subject “I”. The word “school” which is followed by adverbial clause “where Children strove” becomes a sign for a simulacrum of life. “Children” is a sign of the early life stage as childhood is a symbol of the beginning of the life. School is a place where the children play and study. In addition, it is also a place where the children are being educated so that they can grow and develop well. Once the children get knowledge and being well-educated, they are about to go out of school and penetrate another new phase of life. The word “fields” in line 11 symbolizes a new simulacrum for the children who are about to be mature individuals. The children development stage into mature stage is symbolized by the phrase “Gazing Grain”. The author used a plant to elucidate the life development, for “grain” symbolizes food source which is being main nutrition supply that is important for human’s physical and non-physical development. The author associated the children with the gazing grain is aimed for showing the author’s hope over the human role in the universe. She hoped that human can pose like a wheat plant which is able to support human’s life. In the final line of the abovementioned stanza, the author inscribed metaphorical expression “setting sun” which means literally a “sun set”. Sun is energy resource which is paramount in human’s life. When the sun sets, then there will not be any energy to support the life itself. Energy resource as sun’s crucial attribute was being employed by the author to illustrate human’s soul. Human’s soul does not “set” but the sun shine “sets”. The term “set” in human life context can be interpreted as “death”.

In stanza 4, the subject “I” uses metaphor to highlight that she is starting a new stage of life after death. The word “tippet” and “tulle” are the properties usually attached to complete the “gown” which refers to “Gossamer”, a wedding gown for the bride. The metonymic phrase “wedding gown” is commonly worn in happy wedding occasion. However, in this poem, the author employed metonymic phrase “Gossamer, my wedding gown” to articulate that the subject “I” is not getting married with a groom but she gets married with the death. The wedding gown then can be interpreted as a symbol of a new life once the couple gets married. The word “House” in line 17 is a new world being penetrated by the subject “I” and her couple. The “House” in which the subject “I” penetrated is explained as a mound where both its roof and wall are invisible as they are buried by the mound. Thus, the “House” in line 17 can be interpreted as a metaphorical word which means “grave”. Grave being an onset sign of new life once the subject “I” get married with the “death” as her groom.

“Death”: Passive Protest from the Subject “I”

In the previous sub-chapter, the signification over the dramatic situation and connotative of poem have been done in order to reveal the author logic over the concept of death. By considering the abovementioned analysis, it is immediately apparent that the author highlights that the death is a normal cycle of life which possesses two signifiers that is first, death as the final stage of life cycle and second, death as the onset sign of a new life. The death is said as the final stage of a life cycle as all beings will die while the death as the sign of a new life articulates that the death symbolizes new beginning of life namely a life in the “House”.

However, the signification over the Dickinson’s poem should not stop only about the above mentioned hypothesis which solely considers linguistic merits over the poem. It is true that the analysis should also consider the contextual sphere as it goes without saying that the poem was created based on some motifs. Motif is being considered as predominant aspect since poem was created with no cultural vacuum. Underlying the aforesaid postulate that poem was born with no cultural vacuum, it is now apparently important that the signification over the poem should be intertwined to the historical, social, and cultural contexts where the author produced the text.

Because I Could Not Stop for Death was written in Massachusetts, the United States of America in 1830-1886 by Emily Dickinson. The settings of place and of time over the poem are Emily Dickinson’s a time and a place where Dickinson was born. At the range of time 1830-1866, the United States of America encountered a historical phase namely romantic era. In addition, it also experienced a transcendental era and American Renaissance in 1828 till 1865. At those aforesaid years, there were historical, social, and cultural tensions in which American females were being bound by moral norm. It is because America especially Massachusetts in which the colonizers called as New England², a place where Emily Dickinson born and spent her life, was dominated by colonial ideology and culture namely Victorian New England ideology³. Puritanism was the main ideology brought by New England colonizers. Puritan then dominated the church in which Puritanism was the main ideology. The church in Dickinson’s poem is symbolized by the “house” in which it refers to “religious house” or usually called as “house of Lord”. The illustration about the church in the poem is described by the word “tippet” in which it is a fabric usually worn by the nun. Thus, the word “house” and “tippet” form new meaning namely the church and its religious activity. The idea about church relates to Dickinson’s living condition which dominated by the church. Dickinson’s family is typically puritan family who object radical ideology. The interconnection between culture and the manner of American people reflected in the poem then motivates the text to disclose the treatise of death. The treatise of death has metaphorical meaning. It describes the death of woman’s freedom.

²Massachusetts, one of American States which was being colonized by British in *Colonial Period* in 1607-1776 (Check more at teachers.greenville.k12.sc.us/sites/.../Major%20Literary%20Movements.p...)

³ Sharon Leiter, *Critical Companion to Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*, Fact On File, Inc., New York, 2007, p. xii.

The death of woman's freedom is the being highlighted by Emily Dickinson in her poem. Through her poem, she created the subject "I" that signifies to woman subject. It also refers to her own biography. Emily Dickinson sees the death as the death of woman who was living in the "ring" of Puritanism. Puritanism and the church limited the woman movement even to express herself. Consequently, females solely subjected to the forceful and binding rules and norms. The submissive behavior over of females upon the binding norms is illustrated by the experience of the subject "I". The subject "I" did not have any choice but submit to the "tippet" meaning that she must comply the church rules like a submissive nun. The sentence "I had run away" can be interpreted as the demarcation line between the old and new life stages specifically a life before and after the subject "I" wear the "wedding gown" with "tippet" and move forward to "religious House" or "a House of Lord". The past life of the subject "I" is a life experienced by the subject "I" in public sphere (outside the house) in which the life offers an excitement in the form of freedom to do all things including "labor and leisure" while the new life is a life inside the "house" namely a life with a code of death as if a life in the grave. "The sentence "I had put run away" is the form of connotation which signifies the submission of the subject "I" namely submission to move forward to the "house". This submission is strengthened by the expression of the subject "I" who does not show any objection to ride "the carriage", the vehicle utilized to pick up the subject "I" headed to the "house". Going home for the subject "I" is just like encountering terrible illness which makes her shiver and numb as it is symbolized by the word "chill" In line 14. The subject "I" or the author herself represents American women who were submissive to Puritanism and always obey "He", the powerful and authorized person in "religious house". "He" himself – as already explained previously – is metaphorical expression which symbolizes "male" who are dominating the culture. When a male utters and postulates a proposition, he acts like God who is powerful and authoritative. In the context of male-female relationship in Puritanism, male holds strong authority over females' life.

In the context of "religious house", "He" poses as ruling power who have strong authority over the tippet-worn women. When the women are wearing the tippet, they are just like nuns who totally submit to "he" (read: religious leader). Underlying the total submission done by females, it can be said that women do not have a total freedom in her own life. Consequently, women will always feel "chill" over the submission. The "chill" is a connotative utterance which actually can be interpreted as uncomfortable condition that reflects the failure of the organized religion in giving warmth for people. What is being uttered by Dickinson through verbal and visual contacts in her poem especially the description of "chill" atmosphere elucidates the passive protest over the organized religion which failed in bestowing the promising happiness and warmth for people.

CONCLUSION

Signification process over the poem must not neglect the historical, social, and cultural contexts as a text, whatever it is, is born with no cultural vacuum. Therefore, in order to understand the implied meaning, critics should disclose the context which being the main background over the literary text. Through her poem, Emily Dickinson establishes communication with her readers (read: receivers). Language written in poem can be a medium for someone to convey the message which can be either positive or negative messages as a response over problems of life that are bound to the codes of historical, social, and cultural contexts. Through her poem, Emily Dickinson utilized metaphors of death to elucidate the passive protest over the organized religion that is being promoted by Puritan in Massachusetts, a place where she was born and die. Dickinson highlights the Puritan fierce rules which lead to total submission of females. The submission can be interpreted as the death of females' freedom. Dickinson analogizes the narration of the death of women's freedom as nuns' life in which nuns do not have any freedom before the religious house's rules (read: church as religious house). Passive protest is done because women movement is something that is difficult to be accomplished due to the male dominance. Besides, the treatise of death is a metaphor of passive protest of the author towards the organized religion in giving the comforts and warmth.

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