

# The Images and Metaphors in Death Fugue

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**Abstract.** Paul Celan's *Death Fugue* is one of the most important poems of the 20th century. The obscure and profound metaphors and images in the *Death Fugue* have always attracted people's attention. In addition, his poetry is seen as the product of a world in transition. After the Holocaust, the myth of modernity was destroyed so that the past experience was considered questionable on a poetical level. The *Death Fugue* was written in a way that had never been written before. This paper analyzes the text from the perspective of metaphor and intention and explores the potential meaning of words. This paper selects three main images and interprets them in combination with history and philosophy. The author analyzes how metaphors and imagery in the poem reproduce the Holocaust scene and responds to literary criticism of poetry after the Holocaust. Through these rare metaphors and images, Paul Celan created a new paradigm of poetry and made readers read it in a new way.

**Keywords:** *Death Fugue*, modernity, Paul Celan.

## 1. Introduction

Paul Celan is one of the most important and profound German poets to have influenced the world since the second half of the 20th century. The study of Paul Celan has been going on for almost a century [1]. It is generally accepted that his *Death Fugue* constitutes a kind of commentary on the twentieth century. He and his poetry became part of the profile of the twentieth century. Moreover, the Holocaust is one of the important themes of the 20th century. The humanitarian catastrophe of the Holocaust rendered the traditional poetic experience useless [2]. The language of the old era has failed in the post-Auschwitz era, and no paradigm can adequately describe an experience that is entirely new in human history. Thus, Paul Celan's language is seen as a completely new paradigm, a possibility for writing after the Holocaust. Behind his obscure poetic language lurk the features of the Holocaust and the feature of modernity. His poetry creating a way of writing after Auschwitz contradicts Adorno's assertions: After Auschwitz, it was cruel to write poetry [3].

So far, most of the research on Celan has focused on structure and grammar. These studies reveal how he reinvented German and made it a language exclusively for him, elucidating the significance of the new language produced by removing the poison of totalitarianism from the German language. However, the analysis of poetic imagery is relatively rare. Imagery and metaphor are also components of language. The connotation of the image contains individual and collective ideology. It is both a symbol of individual experience and a collective unconscious reaction of society.

This paper will focus on the interpretation of the image in the *Death Fugue* and how these images make up a post-Auschwitz language. The imagery that appears in *Death Fugue* is both related to his own experience and a reflection of the twentieth century and the Holocaust. This article will select representative images in poetry and focus on interpreting their hidden meanings, explaining the most important questions about Paul Celan from the symbolic level: How does his poetry present the experience of the Holocaust?

## 2. The Images and Metaphors in Death Fugue

### 2.1. Black Milk of Dawn—Reversal and Inversion

The opening sentence of *Death Fugue* forms the reader's first impression of the poem [4]. The counterpoint between dawn and night is exquisitely structured, but the unusual image of black milk

is more compelling. Black milk - a term that goes against the natural state of milk and evokes a psychological aversion to being out of control, responds to the death of the title in this uncomfortable way.

Like the recurring theme of a fugue, it is recurred many times throughout the poem. Black milk has the properties of a liquid. When it is repeated in the text, the disturbing atmosphere also spreads like a liquid throughout the poem. This repetition has both the moist quality of liquid and the rhythmic quality of fugue.

The word milk has a strong association with everyday life. Although milk has been around since the age of agriculture, it was not until technology led to sterilization and industrialization led to more efficient production methods that milk became a common drink. As one of the universal industrial products, milk is a common representation of modern life. Black is a color that people judge as inedible. Black color blocks and color words can trigger negative emotions [5]. Intuitively, it conjures up images of corruption and deterioration. This constitutes an invisible counterpoint, the counterpoint of black milk to white milk. A glass of black milk signifies a state of intrusion that occurs in everyday life; this intrusion and disruption of everyday life was inextricably linked to Nazi violence. An external force interferes with daily life and changes the color of milk. Therefore, this description is easy to stimulate people's subjective negative emotions.

In addition, the image of milk has deep religious connotations. Both Christianity, which is popular in continental Europe, and Judaism, which is practiced by Jews, regard milk as an important religious image. In the Old Testament, Moses led the Hebrews to the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey [6]. In this text, milk signifies the collective aspirations of early civilizations, symbolizing fertility and life. The Promised Land is one of the ultimate visions of Christians and Jews, one of the incarnations of perfection, and this vision is strongly associated with milk. In other words, for a twentieth-century Western reader, milk was more likely to excite latent religious feelings. It is associated with things that symbolize pure goodness: pure land, peace, and life. In binary cognition, black is usually opposed to white. The black milk can be a hint of the brokenness, desolation and fading of life. This description even suggests the collapse of the Promised Land and the shattering of myths. Not only was the homeland of the Jewish religious story gone, but a myth long espoused in the West had been overturned - the myth of the Enlightenment. Since the Enlightenment, Westerners have believed that reason and modernity would open up a perfect world for them.

However, the Holocaust, through its brutality, denied the future promised by the Enlightenment. Voltaire's reason did not bring perfection [7]. The spirit of technology and science conspired with tyranny to create concentration camps capable of efficient murder. Therefore, the symbol of black milk has a religious duality [8]. A long-standing mythological narrative of the ancient Promised Land and its symbols was destroyed, and the rationalist myth proved to be unrealistic. Neither Paul Celan, as a native German speaker and a Westerner, nor Paul Celan, as a Jew, could find any more identification with values. Whether it is the perpetrator or the victim, whether it believes in modernity or does not believe in modernity, in the face of the Holocaust, all mankind is confused and uneasy. The carnage of the Holocaust has engulfed everyone, and no historical experience can be used to mitigate it. This is the eternal question of black milk. It is not only death itself in the biological sense but also a metaphor for the destruction of values.

## 2.2. Shulamit's Ashen Hair and Auschwitz

In *Death Fugue*, Paul Celan describes two female figures of different races and hair colors. They appear together in the whole poem and bear different symbolic values to each other.

In contrast to Margrethe, a German girl from Faust, Shulamit comes from Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible. The position of Song of Songs in Jewish folklore has made Shulamit the representative figure of Jewish women [9]. She was the wife of King Solomon, and hermeneutics believe that the depiction of husband and wife in Song of Songs implies a depiction of man's relationship with God. She was the wife of King Solomon, and hermeneutics believe that the depiction of husband and wife in Song of Songs implies a depiction of man's relationship with God. Therefore, the character of

Shulamit is not only a female figure in literature but also one of the symbols of the Jewish spirit. When Paul Celan describes the color of Shulamit's hair, he does not use the usual word gray, but uses the rare and directional word "ashen". Ashen is more metaphorical than "gray", which is an objective description of color. The most immediate thing it conjectures is the ash of Auschwitz. The bodies burned day and night in the incinerator, the gray sky and the dirty dust on the interior buildings. The word ashes covered Auschwitz like a curse. Moreover, the fate of those imprisoned in Auschwitz was almost constant [10]. They are about to be turned into corpses and then ashes in an incinerator. "You need not fear the ashes," wrote Levi, another poet who visited Auschwitz, "We are the ashes". At Auschwitz, it was all about the ashes. Although the word ashen only appears to describe Shulamit's hair, it is a metaphor for all of Auschwitz, and a metaphor that bears witness to all the history of the Holocaust in this way.

The image of Shulamit is closely related to the bride in the Song of Songs, and some religious scholars even believe that she is Shulamit. In Songs of Songs, the bride appears as a fragrant and clean figure. On the eve of the wedding, she put on balm and praised herself for her beauty and propriety. This is a manifestation of the Jewish concept of cleanliness. According to the Old Testament, keeping the body clean was a religious duty. Unclean people were even forbidden to enter churches because Jews believed that impurity interfered with prayer to God. It has long been the custom of Judaism to regard cleanliness as a religious duty. Since man is God's creation, he is responsible for his own purification and for God's work [10]. However, in this poem, the figure of Shulamit is described as having "ashen hair". The image is obviously unclean: dark in color, and full of dust. This description is religiously contrary to the precepts of Judaism. This state isolates them from God, because impurity constitutes an offense against God. This violation of the religious spirit, this "impurity" implied the collapse of the Jewish faith. During the tragedy of Auschwitz, no transcendent God answered their prayers. They were forced to perish in uncleanness, like an image of ashes and death is a landmark in the history of Jewish suffering.

When readers look at the whole sentence and compare this image with the image of Margaret, they will find that the description of Margaret is not simply "blonde hair" but "golden hair". The use of gold to describe human hair, while conforming to the typical characteristics of the Aryan nation, highlights the luxury and elegance of this hair color. Shulamit's ashen hair forms a color counterpart to Margarita's golden hair, one light and one dark, one like gold and the other like dust. The binary opposition structure usually implies unequal power, and the contrast here reflects the difference in status between the German nation and the Jewish nation. This is another example of the complexity of Paul Celan's language. This is a direct manifestation of the opposition: the German-Jewish divide is played out in a subtle way through two very different metaphors about women's hair color. This is another example of the complexity of Paul Celan's language. He describes the carnage of the Holocaust with only a few sets of reciprocal intentions.

### **2.3. Death is a Master from Deutschland—Why Modernity**

Since the poem was published, "Death is a master from Deutschland" has become a famous phrase that has spread widely around the world. The word master has a threefold meaning. It refers not only to the upper echelon of the power relations but also to the skilled craftsmen, the masters of art. Death is described as a master who "strikes you with lead bullets". In this sentence, the word master associates death with aesthetic value in a shocking way, and the Holocaust becomes part of the art. This specificity between culture and barbarism makes it a difficult experience to describe. An obvious example is that in some Nazi concentration camps, officers would often play Bach. As they immersed themselves in this high artistic activity like masters, they seemed to completely forget the crimes they had committed in the concentration camps. Like the Nazi officer in Schindler's list who played piano at the scene of the massacre, they showed a high degree of artistic aesthetics. This is an extremely dangerous metaphor for the Holocaust.

This is reminiscent of Adorno's culture and barbaric dialectics. Civilization may lead to barbarism, and modernity may lead to pre-modernity. Adorno once said it was cruel to write poetry after

Auschwitz. After the Holocaust, due to his pessimism, he even began to advocate the de-aestheticization of art. This assertion is inextricably linked to *Death Fugue*.

This assertion has to do with the specificity of the Holocaust. For a long time before the Holocaust, people were immersed in the new myth of rationalism. The Holocaust is considered pre-modern because such a tragedy would no longer occur under the modern concept of reason. This is what makes the Holocaust special: In order to create this massacre, mankind has applied everything that modernity has to offer. Efficient organization, new gases, and scientific theories of race. It is this extreme complicity of modernity with pre-modernity that makes the Holocaust a special experience, a trauma.

Freud defined trauma as an experience [11]. For a short period of time, the mind is so highly stimulated that it cannot adapt in the normal way, which is the experience of trauma. Also, the Holocaust is a universal trauma. This specificity between culture and barbarism makes it a difficult experience to describe because it was unlike any massacre in history. The sheer number of victims and the modernity of the Holocaust shocked the world. There is no linguistic paradigm suitable for describing the experience. It requires a new way of witnessing and recording.

Because of this, Paul Celan created an entirely new style of language. *Death Fugue* is considered obscure, with unusual grammar and vocabulary. His poetry is as upside-down and broken as trauma itself. When the reader reads about the responsibility of death, he is bound to encounter a new experience, which invalidates all the experience he has accumulated in reading poetry in the past. In this language, he exposed the crimes of the Nazis. The word master is the embodiment of this disclosure.

In that word, the whole paradox of the Holocaust is captured. The word "master" has a strong modern color, it represents a kind of technical maturity and aesthetic perfection. It points directly to the proposition explored by Adorno: Will art and modernity become allies of the Holocaust? Under totalitarian regimes, language tends to become a dangerous thing. It can become a lie, it can become a myth, it can become part of a power structure. Literary and cultural values not only did not limit totalitarianism, but on the contrary, they most likely fostered this new fear. This is especially true of the tragedy of Auschwitz. When culture has been sufficiently barbarized, artistic creation in the name of culture can hardly escape barbarism. Instead of being the vanguard of resistance to tyranny, the arts, which are regarded as refined and humane, conspire with them. The Nazis' achievements in terms of aesthetics were astonishing, including the film *Triumph of the Will* as well as some famous right-wing songs. This was further confirmed by the artistic quality of films and literature that some Nazi officials recognized. It was the concentration camps and the Holocaust that made the Nazi aesthetic complete. By aestheticizing inhumane behavior, violence achieves another level of cruelty.

This is what the word master reveals. By making a direct connection between the word master and death, Paul Celan issued the most vehement accusation. He satirizes both the Nazis' false pursuit of high art and art complicit in the Holocaust. That's what makes Paulcelan so great. He liberated poetry and art from hypocrisy and weakness. At the moment, poetry is not a toy of mainstream ideology or a kind of rhetoric. It is in itself witness, it is in itself trauma, and it is in itself resistance. The new language he invented removed the totalitarianism of German and made it possible to speak the Holocaust. He has no qualms about breaking the conventions of grammar and creating new words and expressions. The paradigm of language was created by him and never appeared in the history of poetry. This pioneering nature makes it as limitless as any new thing. Writing in the post-Auschwitz era is writing with blood and scars. It recounts a history that human is afraid and unwilling to face. Having lived through the Holocaust, the human language may face new threats—like the next hot war or the next political fight. Because the wounds of the world have not ceased, humanity needs new witnesses. That is why the world needs Paul Celan and his successors.

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout the poem, the metaphors and images of *Death Fugue* are usually counterpoint. They form a pattern of duality on one level but are confused on the other. Life and death, Nazi and Jew, civilization and barbarism, many different connotations hidden in the image and metaphor.

These obscure and heavy images constitute a re-enactment of the Holocaust. It was a powerful response to totalitarianism and the Holocaust. There is a tragic and enduring artistic power hidden in these impressions. Paul Celan's poetic language is one that rejects lyricism and collusion. Each of these metaphors and images contains a cruel connotation, and these cruel connotations connect the whole scene of the Holocaust. This is Paul Celan's way of remembering and witnessing the Holocaust. In his own way, he responded to cultural critics' concerns about art after the Holocaust. His language and the paradigms of witness he invented do not yield to the ideology of authority.

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