

# An Analysis of Conceptual Metaphor in Walt Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!* From a Cognitive Perspective

Yang Linyan

Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 011517, China

**Abstract:** From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this paper takes the image of "captain" in Walt Whitman's *O Captain! My Maptain!* as the research object, and analyzes the source domain, target domain and their mapping relationship in the poem, aiming to deeply understand the definition and application of conceptual metaphor, and help better understand the poem.

**Keywords:** cognition; conceptual metaphor; *O Captain! My Captain!*

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor research has long been the focus of scholars. The study of metaphor in the west can be traced back to Aristotle. The traditional view of metaphor holds that metaphor is only a rhetorical device, a pure linguistic phenomenon, and its function is only to modify language. In 1980, with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, it provides a new perspective for the study of metaphor, and the study of metaphor has achieved a cognitive turn. In this book, Lakoff and Johnson construct the framework of conceptual metaphor theory for the first time. They believe that "metaphor is ubiquitous in our lives, not only in our language, but also in our thoughts and actions." In other words, metaphor is not only a rhetorical phenomenon at the linguistic level, but also a way of thinking and cognitive means.

The research on conceptual metaphor in China has made rapid progress in recent years, and its research topics focus on: comparative study of English and Chinese conceptual metaphor; conceptual metaphor and foreign language teaching; application of conceptual metaphor in literary works. Among them, literary works are more detailed and subtle, and different people have different understandings. Therefore, it provides more application space for conceptual metaphor research. Taking Walt Whitman *O Captain! My Captain!* as an example, this paper makes a deep analysis of the conceptual metaphors in his poem in order to deeply understand the definition and application of conceptual metaphor, and help better understand the poem and how the poet expresses his thoughts and feelings.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Theoretical basis

The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of things with the help of another. It is a tool to conceptualize and interpret experience. The common form is "A is B" or "A as B", where "A" is the target domain, which is abstract and unknown; "B" is the source domain, which is concrete and known. The specific characteristics of the two domains have the ontological correspondences of the system. The working principle of metaphor is mapping from the source domain to the target domain, that is, metaphor linking is the different correspondence between the roles of two domains. In short, mapping is to map the concrete content of "B" to the abstract "A", which aims to make "A" easier to understand. Metaphor uses one concept to express another. In terms of its structural features, two conceptual domains are different from each other, but the realization of metaphor is based on the similarity or composite similarity between the two conceptual domains. Take the metaphor of LOVE IS A JOURNEY as an example. When one speaks of the LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, he is using a mnemonic for a set of ontological correspondences that characterize a mapping, namely:

THE LOVE-AS-JOURNEY MAPPING:

- The lovers correspond to travelers.
- The love relationship corresponds to the vehicle.
- The lovers' common goals correspond to their common destinations on the journey.
- Difficulties in the relationship correspond to impediments to travel.

Fauconnier believes that this cross spatial mapping of conceptual metaphor plays an important role in people's reasoning and thinking process.

**2.2 Walt Whitman and his *O Captain! My Captain!***

Walt Whitman is an American poet, essayist, journalist and humanist. He was born on May 31, 1819 in Long Island. His family is a working-class. He was once a volunteer nurse during the American Civil War.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is a poem written by Walt Whitman. This poem is perhaps Whitman's most famous work and has been mentioned numerous times in media (including movies). This poem is about how the ship went to war and the shipmates love their Captain. Actually, this poem is written for the president Lincoln. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, Abraham Lincoln, the symbol of democracy and progress, was assassinated by the obstinate slave owners of the south states. Lincoln's death shocked the whole country. The democratic poet Walt Whitman wrote the poetry collection *Elegy Collect* to eulogize the beloved president, to confide his own sorrow at the death of the president. The abolishment of slavery is not only the progress of the American, but of the humankind. Then Lincoln's death is not only the sorrow of the American, but of the humankind. Therefore, Whitman revealed the grief of his own, of the American, of all the humankind.

**3. An analysis of conceptual metaphor in Walt Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!***

The central conceptual metaphor that runs through the whole poem can be reflected in the title of the poem - "LINCOLN IS CAPTAIN", where captain is the source domain and Lincoln is the target domain. What is known to us is that the captain is appointed or employed by the ship owner and is responsible for all the affairs on the ship. So the captain is the top person in charge of the whole ship. Similarly, the president is not only the head of state, but also the head of government. So he is the highest responsible person of a country. Therefore, there are similarities between the two concepts. The poet used the ship to overcome the rough waves to arrive at the port to compare the victory of the Civil War led by Lincoln, and symbolized the great achievements of President Lincoln by the captain of the vessel. In the jubilation of the people, he eulogized a great man with a sad song. This paper makes a concrete analysis of the image of "Lincoln is capsule" which can embody the central conceptual metaphor in each section.

In the first verse of the poem, the poet describes the magnificent sight of the triumphant returning of the captain and his crew and his astonishment at captain's death. The metaphorical mapping in this stanza is as follows:

*Table 1. Metaphorical mapping*

Source domain:Captain		Target domain:Lincoln
ship	----->	America
our fearful trip/ every rack	----->	the Civil War
The nearly port	----->	The victory of the Union Army
prize	----->	The honor of safeguarding the integrity of the country and the coming stable life
steady keel	----->	Stable state and government institutions
grim and daring	----->	The prestige and strength of the Union
.....	----->	.....

Here, the author compares President Lincoln to the "Captain" at the helm, and the United States, which experienced the Civil War, to a "ship" sailing in the wind and rain. Now, the ship survived the

storm and was sailing into the harbor. Then, it anchored and ended the dangerous journey. At the end of the Civil War, the northern Union Army won the great victory, the slaves were liberated, and the country was stable. Just as the boat sailed into the harbor safely, the author uses conceptual metaphor to turn the suffering of the whole country into concrete and daily visible ship activities, vivid and easy to understand and full of life atmosphere.

In the second stanza of the poem, by using the second person the poet participates in the conversation with the captain to express his longing for the captain and his sorrowful mourning over the death of the captain. He is so sad that he is not clear on the reality and dream. The yearning mingled with the mourning forms a confounded state of mind. The conceptual metaphor " LINCOLN IS CAPTAIN " throughout the poem has been analyzed in the first section. In a simple analysis, captain corresponds to Lincoln. The shore corresponds to America under the northern Union Army rule. In addition, there is another conceptual metaphor implied in this verse. In the poem "*Here Captain! dear father!*", it is not difficult to see the mapping relationship of A COUNTRY IS LIKE A FAMILY, which metaphors a country as a family. Then President Lincoln, the commander of a country, has conceptual similarity with the role of father, the head of the family. Specific expressions are as follows:

Source domain:family		Target domain:country/America
father	————→	Lincoln
people and I	————→	children

The poet crossed the boundaries of kinship and called "*Here Captain! dear father!*" to further express his close feelings with President Lincoln. This is more emotional than calling "Captain", so that readers can more deeply understand the great grief of a son after the loss of a father who is respected and loved by thousands of people. It is touching and tearful!

In the third verse of the poem, the poet finally concludes with *Walk the deck my Captain lies, Fallen cold and dead* in order to express that he can accept the cruel reality of Lincoln's death. In this last verse, both conceptual metaphors of " LINCOLN IS CAPTAIN " and "A COUNTRY IS LIKE A FAMILY" are embodied. In the first mapping, Lincoln corresponds to captain. The victor ship corresponds to the United States that won in the Civil War. And the voyage corresponds to the Civil War. In the second mapping, Lincoln corresponds to *my father*. *I(or the people)* correspond to the kid(s).

The above is the conceptual metaphor relationship in the whole poem. Then the following is a brief overview of the thoughts and feelings of the poem. In the first section of the poem, Whitman first uses "the dangerous voyage has ended", "our ship returns safely" and "thousands of people are cheering and shouting" to show the readers a magnificent scene of President Lincoln's victory and tens of thousands of people's greeting. The poem fully praises and affirms Lincoln's great achievements. In the second section, the poet depicts such pictures as banners fluttering, horns ringing, bouquets, ribbons and wreaths, and "eager face" etc. All these express people's admiration and love for Lincoln. The two sections use the technique of suppressing first and then promoting. First, the scene of President Lincoln's return with honor is depicted in a quiet way. Then, with a turn of the pen, the fact that "the red blood drops out" and the captain "has fallen" forms a sharp contrast with the previous description. By showing the cruel pictures that are not in harmony with the scene of cheering by thousands of people, the sad feelings of the poet and the people are more highlighted, and its artistic expression is stronger. In the third section, the poet affirmed President Lincoln's outstanding achievements from a historical point of view, and expressed his deep grief when he felt that "the ship is at anchor, but the captain has fallen down." he moved his sad steps lightly, and his heart gradually became desolate, and his despair was full of expression on the paper.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper makes a detailed and profound analysis of the images in the three stanzas of the whole poem, and maps the characteristics of the source domain "Captain" to the target domain "Lincoln" one by one around the "LINCOLN IS CAPTAIN" conceptual metaphor, which provides new ideas for readers to understand the poem and broadens the application of conceptual metaphor in the verse discourse. In the poem *O Captain! My Captain!*, the poet expresses his true feelings to the readers, that is, apart from his admiration for President Lincoln and indignation against the enemy, he pays more attention to expressing his mourning for President Lincoln. As a result, our understanding of poetry has been sublimated. Even as a bystander, we have never felt the same way, but by paying attention to the conceptual metaphor in poetry, which turns abstract into concrete, and presents a great image of the

president in front of us, so that we can feel the poet's emotion in the scene, and it is more beneficial to the understanding of poetry.

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