

Original Paper

Imagery and the Construction of View on Death: A Conceptual Metaphor Approach to Nalan's and Poe's Elegies

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Abstract

Elegy is a poetic genre that mourns the deceased, which reflects national character and cultural values. Due to the difference of socioeconomic development and culture background, Chinese and Western elegies reflect different views on death. Under the perspective of conceptual metaphor, this study selects two elegies for comparative analysis, Die Lian Hua of Nalan Xingde and Annabel Lee of Edgar Allan Poe. By analyzing the conceptual metaphors in their images, the views on death behind the elegies could be constructed. While in Die Lian Hua, death is viewed as a renewal in life's cycle, it is endowed with romanticism in Annabel Lee. This study provides a cross-cultural perspective for the research of literary death-writing and how the view on death is constructed in conceptual metaphors.

Keywords

imagery, conceptual metaphor, view on death

1. Introduction

Death emerges as a central theme of Chinese and Western poetry research. The elegy, also called mourning poem, is a very important literary theme for literature. Generally, all the poems of mourning the dead should be called elegies, for example, mourning the late friends, can be added to the category. However, elegy traditionally refers to the poems of a husband mourning for the deceased wife.

Nalan Xingde (1655-1685) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) are two representatives of the most famous poets on the theme of death. Nalan Xingde, a renowned Ci poet in the Dynasty of Qing, is known for his delicate and pathetic poetry style. As the father of detective stories and the successor of Gothic novels, Edgar Allan Poe is a famous American writer, critic, and poet for his eccentricity in the 19th century. Both deliver profound but diverse thoughts on death in their poems.

In this study, conceptual metaphor theory is used to analyze how their views on death are constructed. Conceptual metaphor theory was proposed in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) by George Lakoff and George Lakoff. They believe that metaphor is a kind of rhetorical device. It also offers a cognitive approach for humans. Metaphors establish humans' perceptions through real experiences and help understand abstract conceptions.

The cross-cultural comparative analysis attempts to discover the similarities and differences of their views on death. In *Die Lian Hua* and *Annabel Lee*, both poets use images to express their feelings towards their wife's death. Nalan's *Die Lian Hua* connects death to rebirth in life's cycle; With the background of Goth and Romanticism, *Annabel Lee* connects death to romanticism. This cross-cultural perspective helps to enrich the research on elegy and highlights conceptual metaphor theory in the study of death-writing.

2. Literature Review

Nalan Xingde conveys his thoughts and emotions on love, death, and time through images, which leads to an outstanding position in the history of Chinese literature. Nalan's poems have been researched by scholars both in China and overseas. His elegiac poems are interpreted from diverse perspectives, among which imagery analysis and comparative study are the most important. The research on imagery in Nalan's elegies includes investigations into the thematic and stylistic functions of specific images (e.g., "flowers" and "the moon"), as well as international studies of the translation of culturally loaded images (e.g., "willows" and "swallows"). It is found that the images serve as a symbol of the elegantly restrained and quietly melancholic style in his poems (Kelen, 2007; Li, 2016; Robinson, 2016; L. Shao, 2018) and reflect the deep sorrow for his deceased wife and the transience of life. With diachronic and cross-cultural comparisons with classical Chinese and Western elegies, it has jointly shown Nalan Xingde's position in studies of elegy, which is marked by his distinctive rhetorical strategies and implicit natural images to express the grief (Ivanhoe, 2011; Yang, 2011; Zhao, 2007; Zhu, 2017).

Edgar Allan Poe's elegiac works also have drawn scholarly attention. Studies on Poe's elegies cover multiple dimensions. It includes the exploration of death and beauty (Hong & Lin, 2012; Mabbott & Poe, 1969), stylistic features including musicality and refrain (Jiang & Ma, 2021; Kennedy, 1987), psychoanalytic interpretations (Bonaparte, 1949; W. Shao, 2018), and intertextual influences (Hayes, 2012; Lu, 2018). Poe's view on beauty is closely related to melancholy, particularly in the case of a beautiful woman's death. Influenced by traumatic experiences, aestheticism, romanticism, religion, and the Gothic, his elegies are filled with love and longing for his deceased wife and resistance to fate. By raising death to a transcendental aesthetic object, he created a unique dark aesthetic style. In this scope, sadness is regarded as beauty, and melancholy is regarded as charm.

With death and beauty examined from different perspectives, elegies of Nalan and Poe have been the subject of wide-ranging research. It has shown that the comparative analysis can be used as an effective

way to explore views on death in elegies. Nevertheless, existing studies remain limited, which focus on the comparison of background, artistic conception, and phonological features (Zhao, 2007), while insufficient attention has been paid to the images in their works. Due to the differences between Chinese and Western imagery, a research scope still exists among paradigms of comparative literature study. Based on the above observations, this study employs conceptual metaphor theory to analyze characteristics of death imagery and embedded views on death in Poe's *Annabel Lee* and Nalan's *Die Lian Hua*, with an explanation of how these differences are constructed.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Imagery

Imagery is not only a tangible and concrete object but also a symbol of emotion and culture, serving as a link between the objective world and the subjective mind. Abrams (1999, p. 96) in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* states that imagery consists of the rhetorical devices capable of evoking sensory experiences. Cognitive linguists further emphasize that imagery works as a cognitive tool that constitutes the framework through which humans could understand abstract conceptions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 115). In *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, imagery is essential for emotional expression, as complicated thoughts are mapped onto more familiar domains (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 67). For instance, "sleep," "journey," and "darkness" are traditional metaphors for death. It enables people to understand their meanings through simple experiences in real life.

3.2 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The study of metaphor has a long history, with its origins traceable to ancient Greece. Aristotle is the pioneer to conduct systematic research on metaphors. In his major work *Rhetoric and Poetics* (1954), he highly valued the use of metaphor and claimed that the greatest achievement is to be a master of metaphor.

With the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, the study of metaphor entered a new phase, with increasing attention paid to the cognitive nature of metaphor. Subsequently, conceptual metaphor theory was proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They argue that metaphor is not a linguistic ornament or a literary device but a fundamental cognitive phenomenon. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is essentially understood as cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system. That is, the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. It is emphasized that metaphors are derived from real experiences and enable the construction of abstract concepts.

3.2.1 Mapping

Two cores can be identified from the above definition: source domain and target domain. The conceptual domain from which metaphorical expressions are drawn to understand another domain is

the source domain, whereas the domain being understood is the target domain (Kövecses, 2002, p. 20). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a metaphor is understood as a metaphorical mapping between two distinct conceptual domains. Mapping is regarded as a key term in conceptual metaphor theory. This process influences and reshapes the concepts of the target domain. Three characteristics of mapping can be distinguished.

First, mapping is systematic. For example, the following metaphorical expressions are from the conceptual metaphor “SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS”:

Example 1:

a. The company is *growing*.

According to the Invariance Principle, which states that mapping preserves the cognitive topological structure of the source domain, its realization is consistent with the internal structure of the target domain.

We can summarize the correspondence between the source domain and target domain as follows: the plants (plant growth) in the source domain social organizations (company growth) in target domain. It allows people to understand the target domain through this correspondence. Consequently, abstract conception of SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS can be better understood through concrete conception of PLANTS.

Second, mapping works in one-way and cannot be reversed. For example, people often use the metaphor “time is money”. But they rarely say “money is time”. This difference can be explained by semantic features. Time is limited and cannot be created. Money can be earned and stored. The asymmetry between the target domain and the source domain leads to the one-way feature of mapping.

Third, mapping is partial. A certain metaphorical idea makes people ignore other parts of the concept that do not fit the metaphor.

3.2.2 Classification of Conceptual Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) divide conceptual metaphors into three kinds: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors.

Conceptual metaphor allows people to understand complex and abstract experiences through simple and real experiences. Ontological metaphors commonly consist of three aspects: entity and substance metaphors, container metaphors, and personification. Orientational metaphors are based on spatial orientations, such as up-down, in-out, and deep-shallow. UP is commonly associated with positive meanings, while DOWN tends to be negative.

4. Analysis of Images from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Based on conceptual metaphor theory, imagery plays a role in the construction of views on death. Conceptual metaphor functions as an abstract way of thinking, whereas image functions as its concrete form. In *Die Lian Hua* and *Annabel Lee*, imagery serves as the carrier of conceptual metaphors. This

study identifies seven metaphorical images in *Die Lian Hua* and eleven in *Annabel Lee*. Based on different source domains, these images can be divided into four groups: natural phenomena, religion, physical space, objects and humans.

4.1 Source Domain: Natural Phenomena

The moon changes from full to crescent and from bright to dim. As a common image in classical Chinese poetry, the moon is used in *Die Lian Hua* to show longing for his wife and the cycle of life. The moon is often mapped to the change and impermanence of life and becomes a clear carrier of emotion (Owen, 1997, p. 215). *Annabel Lee* takes more natural images, including the moon, stars, sea, wind, and clouds. These images carry clear Gothic features. Nature is the source of beauty and symbol of fate (Poe, 1969, p. 684). The sea symbolizes the separation between the speaker and Annabel Lee. The abstract feeling of loss maps onto waves of the sea. The sad and supernatural atmosphere prepares for stronger emotion in the later part of the elegy.

4.2 Source Domain: Religion

Religious images in both poems raise the elegy to a metaphysical level. In *Die Lian Hua*, the term “chenyuan” reflects Buddhist ideas. This image emphasizes the transience of temporal joys and spiritual impermanence. This notion agrees with the Buddhist principle that all is governed by karma and transience. The broken “chenyuan” reflects the poet’s deep love and sorrow for his wife.

In *Annabel Lee*, it is characterized by the Christian images, such as “the winged seraphs of heaven,” “angels,” and “demons.” Unlike the passive compliance in *Die Lian Hua*, Poe’s religious metaphors show a fighting against the heaven. The speaker believes that angels are jealous of his love, which is different from traditional Christian thoughts. The poet raises his love over the Christian belief, viewing angels as enemies rather than guiders.

4.3 Source Domain: Physical Space

The spatial images in both poems depict the line between the living and the dead. In traditional Chinese culture, autumn is related to partings and unhappiness, bringing cool weather and dying plants. “Autumn grave” in *Die Lian Hua* shows the changing of season and memory of the dead. As a common image in classical Chinese elegies, it strengthens the feeling of loneliness.

In *Annabel Lee*, space is mainly shown in “kingdom” and “tomb.” The kingdom represents an ideal place of love, not a real world. The sepulchre brings the reader from imagination to reality. The contrast between the imagined kingdom and the real sepulchre supports the Gothic theme: love goes beyond death and lasts forever.

4.4 Source Domain: Objects and Humans

The animate and inanimate objects further enrich the conceptual metaphors. In *Die Lian Hua*, the emotion is externalized and perceived in tangible objects in life. “Huan” is a circular jade artifact; “Jue” is a semi-circular jade ornament. These inanimate objects signify the circle of the moon, as well as meetings and separations of the couple; “Liangou”, the curtain hook, is used in daily life, signifying the

traces of lost love. The real scene brings back the poet's memories. The animate images, "swallow" and "butterfly", create a warm family scene. In traditional Chinese poetry, these images are related to the passing of time and romance but, in contrast, strengthen the poet's sadness.

In *Die Lian Hua*, explicit words to the beloved are avoided and love is symbolized in tangible objects. However, in *Annabel Lee*, the absence of objects shifts the poem's focus on a "maiden"—the Annabel Lee, the image of lost love, still retains liveliness after death. The poet arranges her in the most beautiful place in the poem, allowing her to enjoy the love that she doesn't have in real life. "Maiden" in *Annabel Lee* personalizes the speaker's loss and grief, as well as Annabel Lee's fleeting life. She is presented directly as a fairy-tale girl with innocence and beauty, blurring boundaries between life and death.

5. Analysis of Different Views on Death in *Die Lian Hua* and *Annabel Lee*

Based on 4 kinds of source domains, distinct conceptual metaphors in *Die Lian Hua* and *Annabel Lee* are analyzed. Their views on death are constructed and the difference between them can be attributed to different cultural backgrounds.

5.1 *Die Lian Hua: Rebirth in Life's Cycle*

Die Lian Hua is inspired by Nalan's wife, Ms. Lu, who died in childbirth. The poem was composed three days before the Double Ninth Festival, following Nalan's dream vision. In his dream, he meets his wife but doesn't remember the scene after waking up.

In *Die Lian Hua*, the first stanza makes the moon become the central image and makes a connection between the moon's waxing-waning and the cycle of life. The poet wishes that the moon could be full and unbroken forever, and the couple could meet again; the second stanza returns to reality. The contrast between dream and reality, the conflict between life and death, reflects his deep longing for his wife. This view holds that death is not an end, but an inevitable and cyclical transition, deeply influenced by traditional Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. This perspective is enhanced by imagery in this elegy. The moon also refers to the poet himself, with its cyclical waxing and waning, also functions as a metaphor for life and death, meeting and separation. It is suggested that separation is not the final but part of a metempsychosis. The concept of "chenyuan" further reflects the Buddhist notion of karma and causality. In this sense, death is not the end, but a continuation of a spiritual journey. *Die Lian Hua* places death within the laws of nature, emphasizing harmony between human beings and nature.

In addition, the allusion plays its role in the construction of view on death. The first allusion is derived from a tale recorded in *Shishuo Xinyu (A New Account of Tales of the World)* (Liu, 420-581/2007), which recounts the story between Xun Fengqian and his wife. The story tells that when his wife fell gravely ill with a high fever during winter, Xun Fengqian goes outside to cool himself, then returned indoors and hugged his wife to lower her temperature. Both passed away, but the behavior was mocked by neighbors. The poem reinterprets this allusion by reversing the original meaning. It is expressed that

the love could never be frozen even by death, and the poet would endure cold “ice and snow” to stay with the beloved. The second allusion, expressed in the phrase “turning into a butterfly”, is associated with *The Butterfly Lovers* (Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai), one of four great folktales of China. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai fell in love but their marriage was forbidden. A pair of butterflies flying together around their tombs symbolizes the pursuit of love and beauty. The use of these two allusions also indirectly reflects the author’s view: death is not the end of love, which makes love eternal in life’s cycle.

5.2 *Annabel Lee: Endow Death with Romanticism*

Annabel Lee is finished in 1849, and is widely regarded as Poe’s last masterpiece. It is deeply rooted in his personal experiences. Poe’s wife, Virginia, was cherished with profound affection despite being age-inappropriate. However, the age-inappropriate but affectionate couple endured immense suffering, and Virginia passed away in 1847. Poe holds a romanticized view on death in *Annabel Lee*. By romanticizing death, Poe holds that love is eternal and indestructible and never disappears.

During the 19th century, Romanticism prevailed in American literature and art, characterized by the emphasis on individual emotion, imagination, and the praise of nature and humanity. The pursuit of love permeates in *Annabel Lee*. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe (1969, p. 322) discusses that the purpose of poetry is to elicit specific emotional responses among readers. He holds that every component of a poem, from theme to form, should function in harmony to expand this resonance. In Poe’s elegies, recurrent conceptual metaphors like death-as-journey and afterlife-as-unreachable-ideal, are used to express his thoughts on death.

Meanwhile, the death of beauties is a recurring aesthetic image in Poe’s poems. In *Annabel Lee*, Poe constructs a romanticized view on death. It suggests that death is a spiritual connection between the speaker and his beloved rather than a physical separation. Poe’s view on death differs from the tradition that death is regarded as tragic. Regarding death as an obstacle that is unable to extinguish true love, the poem shows the power of love that transcends the boundaries of life and death.

Poe draws a beautiful but gloomy picture in *Annabel Lee*: the pale moon, cold wind, the ancient kingdom, grave, and a lonely maiden by the sea. The rhythm makes his power of love increase. The images of the “*kingdom by the sea*” are repeated, establishing a supernatural environment where the poet declares war on the angels in Heaven above and the demons down under the sea. Through the use of vivid images, the love between the poet and Annabel Lee continues to be unbroken, even beyond death.

6. Conclusion

With conceptual metaphor theory, this study explores how imagery functions cognitively to construct different views on death in Nalan’s *Die Lian Hua* and Poe’s *Annabel Lee*. The study shows that *Die Lian Hua* describes death as cyclic renewal in harmony with nature. *Annabel Lee* gives death romantic

and eternal meanings.

Although this study analyzes different views on death in the two elegies, its research range is still limited. The analysis mainly focuses on conceptual metaphors and images. The number of metaphors used for comparison is limited. Future research can choose more classical Chinese and Western elegies and use different research perspectives. These efforts will improve research on death writing and views on death in literature. In the future, more elegies in Chinese and Western literature and multiple research perspectives would improve the study of literal death-writing and views on death.

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