



A Study of the Conceptual Metaphor of “Grapes” in “*The Grapes of Wrath*”

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Abstract

By utilizing Lakoff’s conceptual metaphor theory and Fauconnier’s Blending Theory, the article explores and elaborates on three metaphors about “grapes” in *The Grapes of Wrath* in light of the connection between the book’s descriptions and Biblical allusions, namely, “grapes as oppressed toilers,” “grapes as hope,” and “grapes as abundance.” “Grapes are the oppressed toiling masses,” “Grapes are hope,” and “Grapes are abundance.”

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

Keywords

The Grapes of Wrath, Conceptual Metaphor, Blending Theory, Grapes, Bible

1. Introduction

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), the preeminent American writer during the Great Depression, was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. Born into a devout Christian family in California, Steinbeck’s literary journey began under the tutelage of his mother, who taught in the public schools of Salinas. Thanks to her influence, he was exposed to European classical literature from an early age. This exposure, coupled with his deep-rooted faith, is quite evident in his works, particularly in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where biblical allusions and allegories enrich the plot structure and characterization, imbuing his writing with profound metaphorical and extensive symbolic significance.

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of farmers seeking a way out of the economic depression of the 1930s by leaving their hometown and traveling long distances. In the book, the poor farmers, represented by the Tom Joad’s family,

have exhausted all their assets, brought their young and old with them, and travelled to California through all the hardships. However, when they arrive in the “paradise” they longed for day and night, they are treated coldly and abusively by the wealthy and greedy estate owners. Instead, they are treated coldly and abusively by the rich and greedy owner of the manor. By the end of the novel, the Joads has found a place to live and a job, which demonstrates the author’s faith in the future. In his book, Steinbeck passionately praises the goodness and beauty of working people and their positive and optimistic attitudes in the face of hardships, thereby revealing the truth that goodness is society’s soul, which is the implication of the Christian moral will to the essence of human freedom. Many of his works are influenced by the Bible, and the ideological theme of this work is the continuation and development of the Christian concept of morality. It is Steinbeck’s belief that the moral principles of the Bible, which provide comfort to the poor, the weak, and the good with happiness in heaven and the beauty of the other side, and punish the rich and powerful with hell and suffering in the afterlife, pervade his work and form the core theme of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the metaphors involved in *The Grapes of Wrath* based on conceptual metaphor theory and synthetic theory, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the theme and development of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

2. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Blending Theory

2.1. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that can be divided into grammatical metaphors and conceptual metaphors. A conceptual metaphor is expressed at the lexical level of language and consists of the substitution or mapping of one thing to another. The *Metaphors We Live By*, by Lakoff [1], suggests that metaphors are important ways of thinking about the world, *i.e.*, conceptual metaphors. According to the mapping theory involved in the operation of conceptual metaphor, conceptual metaphor is “a mapping across cognitive domains, a mapping from the source domain to the target domain.” Among other things, Lakoff uses the example of “argument is war” and similar sentences to explain the conceptual metaphor theory’s specifics and operation.

Your claims are indefensible.

He attacked every weak point in my argument.

His criticisms were right on target.

.....

Lakoff illustrates through these examples that conceptual metaphors have two domains, namely the origin domain and the target domain. The metaphor is an interaction between two concepts, the target domain is the object of the metaphor, which is a relatively unfamiliar and abstract thing, and the source domain is the concept of the metaphor, which is familiar and concrete in people’s daily

life and is the material basis of people's survival. To understand the abstract concept of argument, we use the concrete concept of "war". It is not arbitrary to select the source domain and establish the connection between the source domain and the target domain, but motivated by people's daily experiences and then mapped according to some similar elements between the two domains. In mapping, people tend to focus on the similarities between the two domains and ignore their differences (Ahrens, 2010) [2]. In the above metaphor, war and argument share a warlike, offensive aspect, while argument contains a cooperative aspect, such as the possibility of convincing one side, *i.e.*, accepting the other side's viewpoint, understanding that the other side chooses to cooperate or accept, is a key difference that is hidden in the above metaphor. A metaphorical relationship can also be established between elements of two concepts under their metaphors, for example, the above examples are all sub-metaphors of the main metaphor (Gibbs, 2004) [3].

2.2. The Blending Theory

Based on mental space theory, Fauconnier [4] examined a universal cognitive process, conceptual blending. In everyday life, conceptual blending occurs when people engage in creative thinking and activity. The computer desktop, for example, is based on two concepts: computer commands and an office with desk files and folders. Fauconnier (1997) [5] proposes that the synthesis process is based on the operation of two input mental spaces to create a third space, the blending space, which extracts part of the structure from the two input spaces and assembles it as a whole. During the extraction process, some of the structure from each input space is extracted and an emergent structure is formed.

It is possible to analyze metaphor in depth and detail using blending theory, particularly the meaning construction and reasoning mechanisms involved in real-time metaphor. In this theory, the cross-spatial mapping is not a specific correspondence between the two input spaces, but rather a structural correspondence between them. Similarly to the creation of a new species, the formation and organization of the generic space and the emergent structure is an abstract process. While the formation of blending space may seem unfathomable, it provides a valuable opportunity to dig deeper into the semantic structure of human thought and language by using the semantic concept as the starting point. It provides an insightful perspective on the mysteries of human thought and language. The well-organized and detailed analysis of cognitive processes provides us with a new set of interpretative schemes for analyzing metaphors. An emergent structure is at the core of the synthetic space. The logic of emergent structure is sometimes different from the logic in reality because of the virtual nature of the emergent structure. Using blending theory, we can interpret metaphors to construct new concepts and categories.

In-depth analysis and exploration of the imagery, characters, and plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* have been conducted by certain scholars. Zhang (2000) [6] focuses on the portrayal of female characters in the novel, analyzing the decipher-

ing of the deep meaning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Wang (2011) [7] employs Conceptual Metaphor theory and Blending theory to conduct a comprehensive analysis and exploration of the imagery, characters, and plot in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In his analysis, he metaphorically interprets the title in relation to “grapes” and “anger” and delves into the profound symbolism associated with the novel’s theme.

3. Analysis of the Metaphor of “Grapes” in *The Grapes of Wrath*

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the author examines the tragic situation of working people and criticizes the social and economic ills of American society during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Throughout the novel, the Joads recount the hardships they endure as they flee from Oklahoma to California. Their home is sold in exchange for a broken-down car, and they escape westward in the vehicle. During their journey, Grandpa Chowder and Grandma Chowder passed away one after another, and Noah and Connie left the family halfway. When they arrived in California, everything was not as good as they had anticipated. There was still unemployment, hunger, and hardship to be faced. The rich class there exploited the surplus labor to depress the wages of tenant farmers and to extort and persecute wandering farmers. Peasants are angry and united in their struggle. In the novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the word “wrath” is used to protest the unjust social system which leads to poverty, as well as the word “grapes” as a title, and imagery throughout the novel is characterized by two metaphors: the oppressed masses are represented by grapes, hope is represented by grapes, and abundance by grapes. This paper examines three metaphors related to grapes, the last two of which are similar in meaning and appear in the book together.

3.1. “The Grapes Are the Oppressed Tiling Masses”

The Bible has a great influence on Steinbeck, and most of the scenes described in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the behavior and characteristics of the characters, and their fates are influenced by Biblical references.

In the New Testament, John 15, “The Lord is the True Vine,” Jesus preaches to the people, “I am the true vine, and my Father cultivates it.” He cuts off all branches that do not bear fruit and repairs those branches that do bear fruit so that they may bear more fruit. You are now clean through the word that I have spoken to you. I am the vine, and you are the branches; remain in me, and I in him.

This demonstrates that in the Bible Jesus sees himself as a “true vine” and the suffering people who follow him as “branches” of the “vine”. As the Bible has a profound influence on the West, and the characters appear in the novel are essentially Christians, in the worldview of the novel, Jesus’ people are the masses, and the masses are the “branches” of the “vine,” *i.e.*, the masses are metaphorically expressed as The masses are the “branches” of the “vine,” that is, the masses are metaphorically represented as “branches”. It should be noted that Steinbeck

uses this meaning of “grapes” in the Bible to symbolize the people in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, and not the “branches” in the allusion directly.

We can conclude from conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory that there is a basic metaphor, namely, “the branches of the vine are the people of Jesus”; at the same time, the reader has two input spaces:

1) The grapes are the people of Jesus. Grapes are more fragile than vine branches, which need nutrients to survive, and when the growing environment becomes harsh, grapes are easily damaged, malnourished, and even unable to bear fruit.

2) The bankrupt peasants in the book are generally Christian believers. In order to survive, the oppressed toiling masses are forced to leave their hometowns because their land is taken from them.

As the two input spaces blend, their vital relation is identity, *i.e.* both the “vine” and the oppressed peasants are vulnerable and passive, and both represent Jesus’ people as the “vine.” Unlike the “branches of the vine”, the “grapes” need the vine to absorb water and sunlight, while the oppressed peasants are the main group of “people” described in the book. According to the book, the main group of “people” are oppressed peasants, who are displaced and have to leave their homeland for survival, not as branches of the vine, but as fragile grapes that require nutrition and sunlight. Through completion, composition and elaboration, a new structure is created, *i.e.* “the grapes are the oppressed toiling masses”. There is an echo of this theme in the novel, highlighting the miserable and passive situation of the toiling masses at that time.

3.2. “The Grape Is Hope” and “The Grape Is Abundance”

The “grape” also symbolizes abundance and hope in the Bible.

According to the 13th chapter of Numbers in the Old Testament, God gave the people Canaan, a land of blessing, and Moses sent messengers to explore it, saying, Go from the south to the mountains, and see how it is? Are the people living in it strong or weak? Are they many or few? Is the land inhabited by good or bad? And whether the place where they live is a camp or a fortress. And see whether the land is fertile or barren? Are there any trees in it? Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.’ It was the time when the grapes were first ripe. And they went up to spy out the land, from the wilderness of Seek to Rehoboth, and to the mouth of Hamath. And they went from the south land to Hebron, where were the people of the tribe of Annas, and Ahimael, and Shemesh, and Tartarus. It turned out that the city of Hebron was built seven years before the city of Rehoboam in Egypt. And they came to the valley of Ishmael, and from there they cut down a branch of the vine, and there was a bunch of grapes on it. Two men carried it on poles, and brought some pomegranates and figs. And because of the grapes which the Israelites had cut down from there, the place was called the Valley of Ishkosh. And he told Moses, “When we came to the land to which you sent us, it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, and this is the fruit of the land.”

In this instance, “grapes” represent the delicious fruit of the blessed land of Canaan, proof that it is a “land of milk and honey” and that God’s people followed the instructions of God to find a land that is easy to live in: hence, “grapes” symbolize abundance and hope. Thus, “grapes” represent abundance and hope.

In chapter 8 of *The Grapes of Wrath*, “grapes” appears for the first time as a metaphor:

“..... Let me go to California. When I arrive, I will see an orange and I will pick it and eat it. Grapes are my favorite. I will pluck a bunch from the vine, place it against my face and squeeze it hard, allowing the juice to run down my chin.” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 101) [8]

As the Joads’ family prepared to move, Grandpa spoke these words. Grape-producing California became the blessed Canaan of Oklahoma’s bankrupt farmers.

Despite the fact that the bankrupt Oklahoma farmers could only eat grapes to survive, their dream was a happy and beautiful life in the west, and these imaginary “grapes” were their hopes to make a living in California and to build a new life for themselves. Since “grapes” are still in the imagination of eastern farmers and are never described in the book, they are only a product of imagination, a hope and a vision. As a result, the metaphor “grapes are hope” has been established. It is the “grapes” that give wandering tenant farmers the courage and hope to overcome all the hardships and difficulties that they encounter along the way. The author of the novel exclaims: “Where are they? Where did they get the courage? Where did they get that remarkable confidence? They encounter rare things, some tragic, some wonderful, which restore faith in man and never despair.” (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 151) [8]

The journey left them physically and mentally exhausted. However, when they saw a city far below the beautiful valley, beneath many orchards, vineyards, and small houses in the distance, they became excited and were able to take it all in stride, even as they faced death and life. In the minds of the Joads, who had not yet traveled to western California, their hometown of Oklahoma was no longer a fertile land, and even less a pleasant place to live, as a result of mechanized cotton cultivation and natural disasters. There are many vineyards in California that provide these farmers with an incentive to think: in the rich and fertile state of California, grapes are free to eat and grape pickers are in great demand. Against the barrenness of their home town, the metaphor of “grapes are bountiful” is established.

Using conceptual metaphor theory and synthesis theory, it can be concluded that when combined with the thirteenth chapter of Numbers, there are two input spaces in the reader’s mind:

3) In Canaan, grapes were produced, and the messenger went to investigate and brought back grapes, informing Moses that the land represented hope for survival and abundance.

4) The Joad family leaves Oklahoma, where the land has lost its fertility and is

plagued by natural disasters, for California, eager to eat the endless grapes and to obtain employment.

By blending the two input spaces, their vital relation is identity, that is, both “Canaan” and the farmers’ imaginary California are bountiful and livable, and both have abundant and delicious grapes. Through completion, composition and elaboration, an emergent is created, *i.e.* “grapes are hope and abundance”, which becomes an important clue metaphor in the book.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that “grapes” are a metaphorical and symbolic reference to the Bible in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The title of the novel uses the imagery of “grapes” in an innovative and subtle way, combining it with the descriptions in the book and the allusions in the Bible to establish the metaphors of “grapes are oppressed toiling masses,” “grapes are hope,” and “grapes are abundance”. Besides deepening the meaning of the work, these metaphors provide it with a deep cultural heritage and make the theme very clear. Further, the three metaphors derived from ‘grapes’ are not obvious, and in order to distill and comprehend these metaphors, the Bible must be read and referenced. Accordingly, one of the important roles of synthetic theory in the interpretation of metaphors is for the reader to construct the more abstract and uncommon metaphors based on his or her own experiences and understanding, suggesting that more abstract and uncommon metaphors need to be constructed by the reader. However, this paper has several deficiencies that need to be addressed. For instance, it solely examines the metaphor of “grapes” and its connection to the theme of the book from a biblical standpoint, while neglecting to analyze it from cultural, political, economic, ecological, and geographic perspectives. Furthermore, there are numerous other imagery, plots, characters, and elements within the book that deserved further study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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