

What is Happiness: A Study of Metaphoric Conceptualizations of Happiness in Poetry

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Introduction

Since Lakoff and Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), studies in conceptual metaphors have changed the way people understand the relationship between human thought and language. Metaphors help humans communicate complex thoughts by relating them to our experiences. While other theories of metaphor conceptualization (such as the discourse dynamics framework (Cameron, 2010)) have advanced metaphor theory, this study will focus on conceptual metaphor theory as defined by Lakoff and Johnson. While humans use conceptual metaphors in their daily language, metaphor usage is most discernible in poetry. The purpose of this study is to analyze conceptual metaphors, particularly conceptual metaphors of happiness, in twentieth-century American poetry to see how poets use cultural conceptualizations of happiness in their poetic expression.

Conceptual Metaphors

Metaphors are more than comparisons not using *like* or *as*. A conceptual metaphor (which is the type of metaphor referred to throughout this paper) is most simply defined as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”¹ When humans have shared cultural or physiological experiences over time, they can classify these experiences in more concrete terms by imposing “artificial boundaries that make physical phenomena discreet just as we are: entities bound by surface.”² These classifications become so engrained in our cultural and cognitive systems that we often do not realize we are using them. One such classification HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER can be seen in the phrase “She was bursting with joy”³ and in the poem “The Trickle-down Theory of Happiness,” which says happiness falls down “to the pitchers and pails on the ground.”⁴ In this conceptual metaphor, happiness is the target domain, often an abstract concept, while the fluid in the container is the source domain, something more concrete that helps us understand the abstract target domain. As Lakoff and Johnson say, “The metaphors come out of our clearly delineated and concrete experiences and allow us to construct highly abstract and elaborate concepts.”⁵ Through metaphor, we can better understand the world we

1. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 5.

2. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 25.

3. Zoltán Kövecses, “The Conceptual Structure of Happiness,” PDF File, *COLLeGIUM* 3 (2008): 135, <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/25772>.

4. Philip Appleman, “The Trickle-down Theory of Happiness,” *Poetry* 142, no. 5 (August 1983): 262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20599554>.

5. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 105.

live in.

However, not everything can be a source domain for a particular target domain. There must be some perceived similarity between the two domains based on our experiences for us to make the correlation between them.⁶ However, there can be two or more source domains for a particular target domain. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “The reason we need two metaphors is because there is no one metaphor that will allow us to do the job.”⁷ Each conceptual metaphor for a particular domain allows us to emphasize or conceal an aspect of that domain.⁸

Because conceptual metaphors are based on cultural and physical experiences, some metaphors are universal while others appear only within a particular cultural group. Similarly, some metaphors change over time within these cultural groups while others remain static. This is because while all humans physiologically experience the world similarly, they interpret these experiences differently because of their cultural values and contexts.⁹ If the way we understand the source or target domain changes, the way we classify the domain will too. However, studies have shown some conceptual metaphors span several cultures and time periods. According to Kövecses, “In general, embodiment appears to be a key component in cross-culturally similar conceptualizations of the same domain.”¹⁰ Embodiment is essentially the way we experience emotions physiologically. For universality to occur, both groups must experience and interpret the domain similarly. Likewise, for a metaphor to be diachronically static, the way a particular cultural group interprets the domains must remain the same. Changes are caused by new knowledge or values within a society.¹¹ Not every researcher agrees on the exact nature of metaphoric universality and stability. Kövecses argues that new cultural, technical, and scientific developments likely change only the expression of a conceptual metaphor rather than the underlying conceptual metaphor itself.¹² Although scholars dispute the exact manner this occurs cognitively, conceptual metaphors are inherently linked to cultural and diachronic shifts.

Conceptual Metaphors of Emotion

Because emotions are abstract concepts, they are generally common target domains. In fact, almost all the ways we view emotion are conceptualized because emotions are so abstract. Emotions also tend to have a

6. Lakoff and Johnson, 147.

7. Lakoff and Johnson, 95.

8. Lakoff and Johnson, 105.

9. James J. Mischler, III, *Metaphor Across Time and Conceptual Space: The Interplay of Embodiment and Cultural Models* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 204, EBSCOhost.

10. Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162.

11. Mischler, *Time and Conceptual Space*, 161.

12. Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion*, 34.

wide range of source domains to capture all the distinct ways we experience emotion. Within the emotion target domains, there are ranges of shared source domains: some source domains apply to all, apply to some, or only apply to one emotion. Kövecses explains that shared sources often characterize emotions' "existence, intensity, passivity, control, evaluation, difficulty, desire, and harm."¹³ These aspects of source domains are shared because they characterize how we experience all emotions. The aspects concerning an emotion's cause and lasting effect tend to be specific to that particular emotion.¹⁴ A unique cause metaphor for happiness is HAPPINESS IS A PLEASURABLE PHYSICAL SENSATION, and a unique effect is HAPPINESS IS BEING OFF THE GROUND.¹⁵ Conceptual metaphors are essential in the way we experience, structure, and understand emotions.

Poetic Conceptual Metaphors

Because all humans use conceptual metaphors in their daily lives, the poet's use of metaphor is not exclusive. However, poets must stretch how these common expressions are used to create the novel images and powerful figurative language we see in poetry. Novel metaphors are made by extending the unused parts of a metaphor, which is to say the parts "not used to structure part of our normal conceptual system but as a new way of thinking about something."¹⁶ Lakoff and Turner theorized four specific ways poets uniquely use ordinary thought: extending, elaborating, questioning, composing.¹⁷ Extending is when poets take the conventional metaphor and map other aspects related to the source domain to the target domain.¹⁸ Elaborating entails explaining the source domain in unique details in a way that makes us think differently about the target.¹⁹ We can question the boundaries of our normal conceptual understanding when a poet reveals an inconsistency within our conventional conceptualization.²⁰ Poets can also combine more than one metaphoric conceptualization of a domain to compose a composite metaphoric conception.²¹ Because poets experiment with our normal conceptualizations, poetry is harder for people to interpret. In our normal conversations, we often do not see the mixing or extending of our conceptual systems the way poets do to make us think about the world in different ways, which makes poetry unique despite its dependence on the basic conceptual metaphors.

13. Kövecses, 47.

14. Kövecses, 48.

15. Kövecses, 49.

16. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 53.

17. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 67–72.

18. Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 67.

19. Lakoff and Turner, 67–69.

20. Lakoff and Turner, 69–70.

21. Lakoff and Turner, 70–71.

Collection of Data

The purpose of this study was to analyze how twentieth-century American poets used conceptual metaphors of happiness in their poetry. To do this, sixteen poems published from 1916–1995 and written by sixteen different American poets were analyzed. Each poet was born and lived in the United States for the majority of his or her life with the exception of May Sarton, who was born in Belgium but moved to the United States at age four and lived there the rest of her life. By limiting the years of publication and the places the poets lived, the analysis could compare poems of similar cultural influences because conceptualization of metaphors can change based on diachronic and geographic factors.²² Because these poets shared historical and cultural experiences, the data set could more accurately represent how twentieth-century Americans conceptualized happiness through poetry. All these poems were published in literary magazines or books, but the scale of the poets' fame and readership ranged to obtain a cross section of American poetry. Additionally, each poem had to contain the word *happiness* and contain at least one conceptual metaphor pertaining to happiness. The sixteen poems in the data set were then analyzed for conceptual metaphors of happiness.

Rubric of Analysis

Analysis guidelines were established to ensure a systematic classification of happiness conceptual metaphors across the data. For a metaphor to be considered conceptual, the target domain is understood in terms of a source domain. For the purposes of this study, happiness must be the target domain for the metaphor to be evaluated. Because of Lakoff and Turner's classification of personification as a specialized type of conceptual metaphor, instances where happiness is personified were included in the analysis.²³ Similarly, metaphorical similes, when the basic and contextual meanings of the source domain contrast, were analyzed as conceptual metaphors because this distinction between metaphorical and non-metaphorical similes is common in contemporary metaphor studies.²⁴ Very common nouns and verbs as defined by Cameron and Maslen were excluded along with all prepositions and articles because their high frequency would have diverted the goal of this project.²⁵ When necessary, words were checked for etymological changes using the Oxford Standard Dictionary to ensure the basic meaning was incongruous with the contextual meaning. Words contextually used as synonyms for happiness within the poems were included to see how conceptualizations work in synonyms.

22. Mischler, *Time and Conceptual Space*, 7.

23. Lakoff and Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 38–39.

24. Lynne Cameron and Robert Maslen, "Identifying Metaphors in Discourse Data," in *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. Lynne Cameron and Robert Maslen (London: Equinox Publishing, 2010), 110.

25. Cameron and Maslen, "Identifying Metaphors," 111–112.

These words included *pleasure, content, bliss, benediction, fun, and joy*. These guidelines ensured each poem and conceptual metaphor were analyzed using the same criteria within the confines of this study.

Once all the conceptual metaphors of happiness were identified, each was classified by twenty-two different source domains according to lists of metaphorical sources domains found in Kövecses (2003) and Kövecses (2008). Those that fit more than one category and those that did not exactly match but were related to one of the categories were noted. This method of classification was intended to show how poets used existing conceptual metaphors in their cultural frameworks in their poetry.

Observations

Within the data, 107 conceptual metaphors pertaining to happiness were found and classified. Twelve metaphors fit more than one of the twenty-two metaphorical source domains, seven did not clearly fit one of the categories but were novel metaphors based on the existing categories. In four instances, a metaphor was not directly stated but implied throughout the poem or a section of the poem. The most common source domain in this data set was HAPPINESS IS A DESIRED HIDDEN OBJECT. Two of the source domains used in this analysis were not found in any of the poems: HAPPINESS IS WARMTH and HAPPINESS IS FORCE DISLOCATING THE SELF. In the fifteen poems that had more than one conceptual metaphor for happiness, thirteen poets used more than one source domain throughout the poem although they tended to rely the same one or two source domains. These observations were then analyzed to determine how twentieth-century poets used the conventional conceptual metaphors.

Discussion

Conventional Conceptual Metaphors

Most of the conceptual metaphors of happiness used one of the twenty-two common source domains found in everyday speech. For this study's purposes, the use of everyday source domains will be called conventional. It is important to note that any list of conventional conceptual metaphors is not conclusive because of the fluid nature of language and categorization.²⁶ The most common source domain, HAPPINESS IS A DESIRED HIDDEN OBJECT, shows happiness as something to be pursued and found, even if it remains elusive. In "Sonnet 10: I have sought Happiness, but it has been," the poet said he had "sought happiness" but it was "baffling all pursuit."²⁷ Another common and closely related source metaphor is HAPPINESS IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY. This source domain reveals why happiness is desired. Kizer states this clearly in "Afternoon

26. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 122–124.

27. Alan Seeger, "Sonnet 10: I have sought Happiness, but it has been," Poetry Foundation, last modified 1916, <https://www.poetry-foundation.org/poems/57351/sonnet-10-i-have-sought-happiness-but-it-has-been>.

Happiness” when she sees “happiness as gift.”²⁸ Kövecses states that these views of happiness, along with the conceptual metaphors of HAPPINESS IS UP and HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN, reveal how we see happiness as “a quiet state with hardly any noticeable responses or even a clearly identifiable specific cause.”²⁹ The prevalence of these conceptual metaphors throughout twentieth-century poetry suggests a distance between happiness and ourselves so that while we may seek happiness, we are not guaranteed to find it.

However, we can also describe happiness as a force we experience. Hoyt uses the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS A PHYSICAL FORCE throughout her poem “Happiness Betrays Me.” By saying happiness betrays and slays her, she personifies it and implies she feels its actions impact her physical body. The conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS A HIGH OR BEING DRUNK can be seen in “Stolen Happiness” when the poem’s narrator describes a happy couple before saying, “I tasted the wine they were quaffing/...I was intoxicated.”³⁰ These mappings of happiness, while seemingly opposite the idea that happiness is distant, are simply a different dimension happiness; it is both a distance yet valued ideal and a physical experience.

Novel Metaphors

While poets can use the conventional conceptualizations of conceptual metaphors in their poetry, they often build off from these conventional conceptualizations to highlight a unique dimension or way of thinking about happiness, giving even more ways for us to understand happiness. In “The Work of Happiness,” Sarton starts with the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS VITALITY. In our everyday lives, we only map some characteristics of vitality onto happiness, like energy or pep. Sarton extends this mapping to include the life of nature, particularly trees. She sets up the metaphor in the line happiness is “like the growth of a tree.”³¹ Then, she can extend it without mentioning the word *happiness*:

Another circle is growing in the expanding ring.
No one has heard the root go deeper in the dark,
But the tree is lifted by this inward work
And its plums shine, and its leaves are glittering.³²

This stanza combines the HAPPINESS IS VITALITY metaphor with the HAPPINESS IS UP (“lifted”) and HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (“shine” and “glittering”). Her extension created a composite metaphor, which allows us to see happiness with the aspects attributed to trees, such as growth and beauty although the conventional metaphor does not

28. Carolyn Kizer, “Afternoon Happiness,” *Poetry* 163, no. 3 (December 1983): 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20599700>.

29. Kövecses, “Conceptual Structure,” 139.

30. John J. Chapman, “Stolen Happiness,” *The Sewanee Review* 30, no. 2 (April 1922): 192. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27533536>.

31. May Sarton, “The Work of Happiness,” *Poetry Out Loud*, last modified 1993, <https://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/the-work-of-happiness/>.

32. Sarton, “Work of Happiness.”

allow for these insights.

Kenyon uses the metaphoric simile “it [happiness] turns up like a prodigal” to elaborate the conventional conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS A DESIRED HIDDEN OBJECT in the first two stanzas in the poem.³³ By comparing happiness to a prodigal, Kenyon is able to give unique details of the source domain of a desired hidden object, which provide new meaning on the target domain. In this poem, happiness is what creates and closes the distance of happiness. Happiness is what “comes back to the dust at your feet” while the “you” persona forgives happiness and welcomes it home.³⁴ This elaborating of the conceptual metaphor puts the blame for the feeling of distance happiness creates on happiness instead of on the person who cannot find it.

In “Happiness: The Forbidden Subject,” Ludvigson questions the conventional conceptual metaphor of HAPPINESS IS UP. Typically, this conceptualization has a positive connotation, especially compared to the opposite SADNESS IS DOWN. However, Ludvigson reveals an inconsistency in this metaphor when she says, “When they arrived [at happiness] the air was thinner than they’d imagined.” Although the people in the poem are traveling up toward happiness, the air has thinned, and it has become hard to breath. This poetic metaphor asks the question if happiness is the desired, valued object they search for.

In “The Trickle-down Theory of Happiness,” Appleman describes happiness as a rain that comes “out of heaven” that the “residents catch” in “pails and pitchers on the ground.”³⁵ This poem is the combination of several conceptual metaphors. Rain itself is a natural force (HAPPINESS IS A NATURAL FORCE), which comes from heaven (HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN). Appleman uses the word *down* in this poem although the conventional conceptualization is HAPPINESS IS UP because when Appleman he is questioning this conceptualization. The conventional metaphor distances happiness while Appleman closes this distance. This poem also shows HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, which is a conventional conceptual metaphor, but by using it with other metaphors, Appleman implies this desired object does not have to be hidden or distance but can be collected and shared. Conventional conceptual metaphors are used in novel ways by poets to highlight the richness of language and the complexities of life.

Limitations of the Study

While the parameters of the study were set to assess a range of twentieth-century American poets with similar cultural and historical experiences, it would be impossible to get a complete picture of how this

33. Jane Kenyon, “Happiness,” *Poetry* 165, no. 5 (February 1995): 288, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20604323>.

34. Kenyon, “Happiness,” 288.

35. Appleman, “Trickle-down Theory,” 262.

group conceptualized happiness without accessing all their poems. There is also the possibility that a poet was expressing a conceptualization found in a subculture group they belong to. Because of the size of the United States, the existence of numerous subcultures, and the historical changes that occurred within this one-hundred-year period, it can be difficult to determine if an expression is a conceptual metaphor for a particular subgroup.³⁶ Additionally, while one researcher will create uniform judgments across the data set, having multiple researchers decreases the likelihood of metal overload, bias, and misinterpretation of metaphors.³⁷ In future, a similar study could be done to decrease the current limitations.

Conclusion

This study found that twentieth-century poets used conceptual metaphors of happiness in both conventional and novel ways. For people to read poetry how it was intended, a conceptual definition of a metaphor should be introduced into schools, colleges, and the general public. The traditional definition of metaphor as a comparison does not account for the ways that metaphor helps us structure our thoughts and language. Poetic expressions of metaphor are based on conventional metaphors people use in their everyday lives. By better understanding conventional metaphor, people would have a better understanding of how poets apply metaphor to create new ways of thinking about a target domain, even if these ways of thinking are not incorporated into our society's conventional conceptualizations. This study of happiness could be expanded to show these same principles apply to other eras, cultures, and conceptual metaphors. Additionally, future study could be done to see how the happiness conceptual metaphors interact with other conceptual metaphors in a particular poem to see if the interaction creates another sphere of nonconventional poetic expression of metaphor. Poetic expression has always been known to open new ways of thinking. Conceptual metaphor research reveals a reason why poetry challenges readers to see happiness—and the rest of the world—with fresh eyes.

36. Cameron and Maslen, "Identifying Metaphors," 112–113.

37. Graham Low and Zazie Todd, "Good Practices in Metaphor Analysis: Guidelines and Pitfalls," in *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. Lynne Cameron and Robert Maslen (London: Equinox Publishing, 2010), 218–221.

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