

## The Metaphorical Concept of Walden Pond

Xia Yan

New York University, New York, USA

Aprilyan0131@Outlook.Com

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**Abstract:** This paper first organizes the development of metaphor from Aristotle's classic opinion on metaphor as a rhetoric vehicle and persuasive language to the latest modern theory viewing metaphor as the core of our conceptual system. Then the paper explores the elements that influence the metaphor construction in Walden Pond and examines the basic concepts structured by metaphors. At last the core metaphorical concept of Walden Pond is concluded, followed with the core spirit the book brings about, that is, Thoreau's living philosophy.

### 1. Introduction

Metaphor is universally known as a rhetoric vehicle in literature work, especially in poems or poetic proses. But it may be more than that in its way of influencing our thoughts and life. Excelling its persuasive influence and aesthetic function, metaphor intersects with philosophy, semantics, psychology and more and more subjects, becoming a reflection of our conceptual system, which controls our attitudes and actions. The shift of metaphors towards certain concepts would influence people's attitudes and actions.

Walden Pond, one of the books charactering the US, is a classic nature literature written by Henry David Thoreau in 19th century. From the only "I" perspective and writing about only "my" experiences, the author details his two years and two months living alone in the wood near Walden Pond. But under the scenery observation and description lying Thoreau's deep thoughts about the world outside of the pond as well as its relation with the solitary pond world. This paper examines innumerable metaphors shining or hiding in the book, by analysing and categorizing them, revealing the core metaphor. This core metaphor delivers the author's deep reflection and thoughts he gains from living by Walden Pond and influences the same and following generations in their attitudes towards nature and living.

### 2. Metaphor

Metaphor is first came up with by Aristotle, who defines it as a noun that refers to something else in the literature work. The referring takes place in four types: from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, and by analogy. Among them, analogy is the best one. [1] It's applied in this way: when b for a is similar to d for c, a metaphor can be formed by replacing b with d or by replacing d with b. In this formula, similarity is emphasized. If used properly and proportionately, metaphor uniquely achieves clarity, pleasantness and unfamiliarity. If not, metaphor becomes unpersuasive and damages the whole work. Appropriate metaphors are drawn from concepts with affinity and of same species and from words beautiful in sound, image, effect or other senses, while inappropriate metaphors are too absurd, solemn and tragic. [2] Aristotle points out metaphor's function in persuasion and aesthetics, and gives directions on how to create persuasive metaphor. However, he limits the use of metaphor just to a rhetorical technique in writing.

In the 20th century, Richards proposes the interactivity in metaphor research, claiming that metaphor goes beyond substitution in language and relies on the mutual influence of thoughts. Richards opens a door for the research of metaphor and guides the research trend of turning to semantic, logical, philosophical and linguistic means of dealing with metaphors. [3] Until 1970s,

metaphor research is constructed as a theoretical paradigm. The leading theories are displayed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By*.

Not viewing metaphor merely as a device of delivering a persuasive speech, a modern perspective is to observe it as pervasive in everyday language, thoughts and actions, and as the key of understanding our world and ourselves. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson collaboratively published a book called *Metaphors We Live By*, in which they propose that our conceptual system, which governs our thoughts and actions, and even the most ordinary details, is naturally metaphorical.

Consistent with the classic view towards metaphor's referring function, they consider the essence of metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of the other." Besides, metaphor is endowed with many unique features. First, metaphor is systematic. A metaphorical concept is conceived of by a coherent system that's characterized by the metaphorical entailments. For example, we have the metaphorical concept *TIME IS MONEY* because it entails that time is a limited resource, which entails that time is a valuable commodity. Second, metaphor hides other aspects of a concept while highlighting certain aspects, because a metaphor deviates us from considering the aspects of a concept that are not consistent with that metaphor. Third, metaphors are rooted in the cultures and values that we live by and different cultures give priority to different metaphors. Forth, our experiences are metaphorically expressed by physical items, since we innately understand our experiences in terms of objects and substances that we interact with. Personification, by which people express their emotional experiences through nonhuman objects, clearly exemplifies this feature. Fifth, metaphor can not only structure one concept with respect to another, but also organize a whole system of concepts in terms of another.

A special and core theory of the modern understanding of metaphor is that metaphor influences our conceptual system, which governs our thoughts and actions. George and Mark propose that our conceptual system is grounded in our interaction with the physical environment, that is, our experiences. Since our experiences are structured by metaphors, metaphors that highlight specific aspects of those experiences influence the formation of our conceptual system. Also, any experience, or concept, is not structured solely, but with several dimensions and by many metaphors. Thus, a coherent system of metaphors forms one experience and innumerable experiences become the bases of our conceptual system.

In addition to conventional metaphors that structure our conceptual system, some metaphors are imaginative and creative, thus providing a new understanding and a new meaning to our experiences. Like conventional metaphors, new metaphors highlight certain aspects of a concept while hiding others, and they also have entailments. By focusing on the highlighted aspects and the entailments, we understand a concept in terms of its new meanings. And in turn, the new meanings change our thoughts and actions towards that concept. But remember, since metaphors are rooted in cultural experiences, for the same new metaphor, people with different cultural backgrounds have various understandings. And a shift from one understanding to another would create new reality. "New metaphors have the power to create a new reality." "Changes in our conceptual system change what is real for us and change how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions." [4]

In a short, as a vehicle of help understanding concepts, metaphor, with its referential function, not only promotes language effectiveness, but also fundamentally structures our conceptual system, which in turn guides our thoughts and actions.

### **3. The Metaphorical Concepts in *Walden Pond***

As we have known now, metaphor plays an essential role in understanding a concept by constructing this concept with regards to a system of other concepts. In the book *Walden Pond*, the concept of the pond is systematically and metaphorically structured by a series of concepts about and related to it. [4] Those concepts consist of pond itself, animals and plants in and around the pond, beach, hills and woodland surrounding the pond, as well as humans living around the pond. One of the most striking human in this literature work is Henry D. Thoreau, the author and a recluse

living close to the pond, intentionally looking for the nature of human life. To distinguish the referred concept and the referring ones, we call the pond as the core metaphorical concept and others basic metaphorical concepts, which form a foundation to understand the core concept and are also metaphorically formed by other concepts.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed that metaphors are rooted in the culture and values, and people with different cultural background and personal values understand the same things from various perspectives, thus making their special metaphors. [4] Therefore, in order to know how the metaphors, no matter the core or the basic ones, are created, we'd better first learn about the cultures and values, in which the creator's conceptual system is rooted, and which control his comprehension and metaphor creation process.

### **3.1 The Earth of Conceptual System – Cultures and Values**

Thoreau's motivation of moving to the wood and writing *Walden Pond* is strongly influenced by his era and his land. The Industrial Revolution developing in the US in the 19th century promotes capital increasing and steers people's attention to materialism. The Revolutionary War was initially fired in Concord, Thoreau's hometown. Living at the time of sophisticated and dramatic social change, in the place where tradition is challenged, Thoreau criticizes the blind dream of his generational peers. Moreover, Transcendentalism and Emerson encourage Thoreau to explore human nature and the development of nature literature provides him with the earth for practicing his exploration. Thoreau's personal values and pursuit also ensure that his practice is thoroughly carried out.

#### **3.1.1 19<sup>Th</sup> Century**

In the first half of 19th century, American writers and artists argue about whether they should follow Romanticism popular in Europe or explore American style. Though Europe has a long history and well-developed culture, America is like a wild plain, with no history or cultural tradition. However, Americans regard this wildness as the most moving feature of their land; it's pure and closer to the God. They have a special emotional connection with the nature and believe nature is the origin of American art creation.

The New England region where Thoreau lives is a group of protestants who come from Europe and they are based on Christian creationism in their attitude towards nature. They believe that everything is created by God, and so is nature. Unlike the rational religion represented by the Enlightenment, and disagreeing with the Bible and rationalism as the sole basis of faith, Protestantism emphasizes spiritual religious doctrine and believes that nature is the embodiment of God. People can approach the god by studying nature. These all lead to the importance of the sublimation of the human spirit and the inevitability of people to protect nature, advocating a lifestyle that is different from traditional European pursuit of luxury.

#### **3.1.2 Transcendentalism and Emerson's Influence**

As an enlightenment ideology movement, American transcendentalism is a rebellion against the modern scientific view of nature and the Enlightenment in Europe. This is especially evident in the Concord area, which is known as the symbol of American cultural independence. Transcendentalism confronts it with romanticism and spiritual doctrine, inherits romanticism in natural aesthetics, appreciates the nature of natural wildness, and does not examine human nature under scientific laws.

Thoreau read *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson at his youth, and at later time they became life-long close friends. In *Nature*, Emerson examines the relationship between human and nature, arguing that nature is the symbol of spirits, the guide leading humans' morality, the origin of American culture, and the wisdom for human. Humans studying nature is to know about themselves.

#### **3.1.3 Nature Writing**

Nature writing is a kind of non-fiction prose literature, written in the first personal, exploring the relation between human and nature as well as the author's spiritual experience gained from getting

closer to the nature. The origin of nature writing goes back to Aristotle, who lays a foundation of academic animal study in the book *History of Animals*, and Publius Vergilius Maro, in whose classic work *Bucolica*, he delineates a harmonious rustic life, expressing wishes for a peaceful world. Natural history writer Gilbert White and his *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne* published in 1788 greatly influenced Thoreau and other nature writers, such as John Burroughs and Rachel Carson. The origin of American nature literature dates to 17th century when the first generation of European immigrants reached America, because they hold the view that the prerequisite for knowing themselves is to know the land they dwell in. Land Ethic, which advocates humans living harmoniously with the nature, is one of the important theories of nature literature. Lying in the same land community, human is as an equal part of this community as other constituents, such as soil, rivers, plants and animals. Human is an integrated part of the nature. Wildness Consciousness, another principle feature of nature writing, means the spiritual enjoyment humans get from wildness goes beyond the material enjoyment. Meanwhile, nature writing is closely connected with nature painting, painting showing images delineated in the writing, while images can be reflected in readers' mind through descriptive wording. For example, "images" described in *Walden Pond* are similar to those expressed by Hudson River School through Luminism. [5]

### **3.1.4 Thoreau's Personal Pursuit**

Thoreau was born and lives in Concord, the town where American Revolutionary War took place, in 1817, during the most culturally active period. Graduating from Harvard, Thoreau gives up the mundane pursuit of material desire in the age of industrialization but goes after simplicity, nature, the essence of life and spiritual development. The rapid development of industry and commerce in New England since the industrial revolution has led to an increase in the exploitation of natural resources, bring different degrees of damage to the original ecological environment. At the same time that people and land are tense, people are constantly seeking more economic benefits from nature. All of these have made Thoreau feel the relationships between civilization and nature in the process of social observation, and it has become the realistic starting point for Thoreau to think about the relationship between human and nature. He regards nature and wildness as hope and future, believing the future lies in where human has not set foot in. Thoreau believes life is wild, and the wildest is the most beautiful and truest.

## **3.2 Basic Metaphorical Concepts of Human**

### **3.2.1 The Metaphorical Concept of "I"**

At the beginning of the book, the author brings readers' attention to the use of first personal "I". He explains that it is because except for himself, he does not know anyone else very well. But as we think further, we realize that the main content of this book is about living by *Walden Pond*. The author "I" is the only person living there, with no other human companies. So the use of "I" also emphasizes the intention and spirit of being alone and independent. But who am "I"? Why do "I" live alone by *Walden Pond*?

In nature, "I" am a ball of the earth. Outside, "I" am a recluse building "my" house and farming for food all by my own hands. "My" house is not a personal and private home, but a sheltering to accommodate "I" and visitors from the woods, human or animal. "I" move to the wood with the intention of getting more leisure time and becoming the first to watch the coming of spring. Living in the wood, "I" am amazed at the unexpected scenery that the nature brings and surprised by the "thunder of pond" during the melting season. During the time when the snow never stops and nobody comes, "I" live as a mouse buried by the snow for days or weeks, enjoying the loose time. But when the wind becomes most fierce and violent, "I" wait for the only visitor, a poet, who's coming with his purest passion. "I" am also a writer, who writes the ending chapter after Spring.

Though without human companions, "I" am not lonely, companied by the earth and the heavens, the pond and its surrounding beaches and hills, animals feeding in "my" house or fighting for their principles, as well as ambrosial fruits and insignificant leaves. "I" also have solitude and hear the

sound of nature.

Do “I” have a profession to make a living? Out of the instinct of seeking for a better and poetic life, “I” have no desire for tea, coffee or milk, so “I” don’t bother to work. Since “my” body doesn’t work hard, the needed food is little. This logic implies that human’s desire is created by themselves and they themselves choose to work for the sacrifice of their body, in return of continuous poverty. The harder they work, the poorer they become. But “I” have work, which is to question the common life townsmen deliberately choose. [6]

On the whole, the metaphorical concept “I” is the embodiment of independence, friendliness, openness, curiosity, wildness, freedom and wisdom concealed in the human body.

### **3.2.2 The Metaphorical Concept of Fishermen**

Human that “I” befriend with are fishermen. Fishing in a boat on the pond, the fisherman is silent and motionless that he looks like “a duck or a floating leaf”. [6] Usually we comprehend experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics and activities, such as the use of personification. In that case, human and their experiences are the center, other concepts serving them. But here in the metaphor “fisherman is leaf,” human is used to refer to an insignificant leaf from the nature, expressing the meaning that human is not the controller of the world. It is as equal as an unimportant leaf but an integrated part of the nature. Thoreau regards nature as independent life and self-sufficiency, that is, nature does not depend on human beings and is not controlled by human beings, embodying the idea of ecological centralism.

### **3.2.3 The Metaphorical Concept of Townsmen**

The book talks about two opposite places humans live in: the town and the woodland surrounding the pond. Living in the town, townsmen who “inherit farms, houses, bars, cattle, and farming tools” “deliberately choose the common mode of living,” [6] have their better part “ploughed into the soil for compost,” become machines and “the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself,” and “begin digging their graves as soon as they are born.” Because of systematicity and coherence of metaphors, those metaphors coherently convey that townsmen don’t even think about their unique and valuable life. They just follow the common social mode, burying their special human spirits and individual specialty. When they passively accept the most common lifestyle and social rules, they follow the rules day by day, just as a 24h working machine does. Every day is the same, every life is the same, so many days have no meaning to be spent and many life have no meaning to be born, and what they are doing is just waiting for the day of death. In that case, their life time is only spent on “digging their slaves.” Therefore, the metaphorical concept of townsmen is human with no individual thoughts of humanity.

## **3.3 Basic Metaphorical Concepts of Nonhuman Objects**

Influenced by Emerson, Thoreau believes the human wisdom and living guidance are derived from the nature. Water, animals and plants grow in the wildness, representing the nature’s characteristics, and human should find their innate nature from them.

When nonhuman objects share similar features or situations with humans, human experiences, such as their emotions, feelings and sophisticated thoughts, are usually expressed by being transferred to nonhuman objects, endowing nonhuman objects with human features. [4] This process is called personification, a type of metaphor. In Walden Pond, in addition to using metaphor for its referring function, Thoreau creates innumerable personification to convey his personality and living philosophy by means of things dwelling in the same natural environment as him.

### **3.3.1 The Metaphorical Concept of Water**

As Lakoff and Johnson have pointed out, metaphors come to concepts that share similarities. One similarity between the human and the pond is that they both live in a world circled by the earth and the heavens. If the pond is metaphorically referred to as a person, its colour, reflective of its surroundings as human tempers, is its personality. The colour of pond water is sometimes blue of the sky, sometimes green of the verdure, and sometimes yellow of the sand. “Lying between the

earth and the heavens, it partakes of the colour of both.” [6] So are humans. Living between the earth and the heavens, humans imbibe the spirits of both the earth under their feet and the sky above their head.

Water’s another personality is being unchangeably pure, just as a person persistently obeying his pure nature. Thoreau mentions that blue is the colour of pure water, whether liquid or solid. A pure person is also like that, whatever his condition is, he always shows the true self.

Water is also personalized with a humble feature. “Though very beautiful,” It “does not approach to grandeur.” [6] But at the same time, it is proud, never concerning one “who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore.” It has an implicit beauty, showing it not explicitly to anyone who just has a glance at it but only to those close to it and familiar with it. It is right like people with reserved personality and deep thoughts. They are silent among strangers, but gush glistening thoughts in front of their close friends.

The pond water is extremely light and colourless. “A single glass of water held up to the light is as colourless as an equal quantity of air.” [6] Metaphor is systematic. When the air is used to refer to the water, the water shows all the features of the air, not just its colour. If water is taken as colourless as a piece of glass, we feel the water is transparent, heavy and cold. Metaphor also highlights certain aspects of a concept while hiding others. In the “water is air” metaphor, we focus on the colour and weight of water, and ignores other aspects, such as its smell, flavour and nutritional elements. It is the author who chooses this specific metaphor, “water is air”, and only concentrates on water being light and colourless, because he intends to praise the water for its purity, with no extra impurity, which is metaphorically defined as being with colour and weight.

Water is personified as a pure, persistent and humble person with little desire but deep thoughts. Isn’t it like the recluse?

### **3.3.2 The Metaphorical Concepts of Animals**

The humble but proud Walden Pond only unveils its beauty to those frequent it or live by it. Perch is a lucky one. Perches plainly dress in transverse bars, distinguishing themselves from other fish. They are metaphorically taken as “ascetic fish that find a subsistence there.” [6] Doesn’t this ascetic fish metaphorically refer to the author himself? Thoreau always wears plain clothes in the mix of grey, green or brown, the colour of the earth and the heavens. Perches live in the pure water with few companion, just as the recluse, who lives a solitary life in a pure environment, watching them. From this metaphor, Thoreau implicitly states his “finding a subsistence” intention of living in Walden Pond, which for human is to run for a philosophical lifestyle.

Tetrao umbellus is the nature’s animal. [6] They are of the same colour and same feature with the nature. Their eyes are full of nature’s innocence and wisdom, pure as the well and glistening as the gem. Though metaphorical description of their eyes, tetrao umbellus is personified with human innocent personality and wisdom. But we can also say human find their innermost natures from tetrao umbellus.

Squirrels come to “my” house for food. Though at first they look shy, gradually grabbing food naturally like at home. They feel so freely to stay with “me” that they step on my feet while walking around the house. Squirrels stay at “my” house as freely as staying in the nature and take me as their friends from the wood. In the metaphors “my house is nature” and “I am an animal from the wood”, the author highlights that he lives such a natural life and he’s blended into the nature, because even squirrels can’t distinguish him.

### **3.3.3 The Metaphorical Concepts of Plants**

Fruits like huckleberries and blueberries growing in the fresh woods are personalized as humans with distinctive personalities. “The fruits do not yield their true flavour to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market.” [6] To those who don’t care about their original living conditions and natural features, only eating them for feeding or raising them as products in change of money, they don’t show their true self. Fruits are also metaphorically endowed with souls borne by the ambrosial, and their bloom is the fresh body. When humans’ fresh body dies, their souls are lost, so as fruits, “The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is

rubbed off in the market cart.” [6] The “dead body” becomes “mere provender.” The “provender” here also metaphorically refers to another kind of human death companied with soul lost, that is, humans giving up spiritual development and indulging themselves in material enjoyment.

#### **4. Conclusion: the Core Metaphorical Concept of Walden Pond**

Walden Pond is variously structured by distinctive metaphors. Walden Pond is unique since it has a patent of the heaven to be the only Walden Pond; it is the purest on the earth that it is appointed as distiller of celestial dews; it never changes itself regardless of the alternation of kings; and it's so priceless to the United States that it is “a gem of the first water which Concord wears in her coronet.” [6] But in this book, the concept of Walden Pond goes beyond the single physical pond to embrace everything growing from the central of its environmental system.

The metaphorical concept of Walden Pond, the core metaphorical concept, is systematically structured by the basic metaphorical concepts, including the human and nonhuman concepts. These metaphors are related, “neither of which can exist without the other, and either of which can be focused on.” [4] Together they give a coherent understanding of what the pond is. Through metaphors, nonhuman objects are endowed with human personalities while human beings have the features of the nature. Human and nonhuman are integrated to be one. Thoreau's initial motivation of moving to Walden Pond is to find the true meaning of living. His practice is by living a life as wild and independent as animals and by gaining wisdom from observing the nature and thinking upon it. His finding is that humans are instinctively not different from animals, plants, water, stones and other objects “lying between the earth and the heavens.” absorbing from the nature, they all “find a subsistence” in their individual way. [6] At the same time, human's living wisdom is hidden and reflected by the nature. Humans only need to follow the existence rules of the nature and form their living mode. Being imaginative and creative, metaphors create new meanings which modify people's understanding of specific experiences. The new meaning of Walden Pond after the author's living experience is a spirit commonly shared by human and the nature: to be extremely pure and simple while have deep thoughts and broad wisdom. On the one hand, metaphor is rooted in the cultures and values. And on the other hand, metaphor influences people's conceptual system, their attitudes and actions. The metaphorical concept of Walden Pond conveyed by Thoreau inspires people of the same and the following generations to rethink the life before their eyes and return to the primitive, wild and natural lifestyle to explore the meaning of their existence.

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