

# A Poetic Journey in the Soul - A Cognitive Poetic Interpretation of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

Xuanxuan Lai<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

## Email Address

xuanxuanlai10@gmail.com (Xuanxuan Lai)

\*Correspondence: xuanxuanlai10@gmail.com

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## Abstract:

Sylvia Plath is one of the most significant American poets of the 20th century. This paper applies the cognitive poetics approaches of conceptual metaphor theory and figure-ground theory to analyze Plath's poem *Ariel*. The study finds that the poem employs the conceptual metaphors to map elements of the familiar domain of journey onto the abstract concept of life, allowing readers to grasp its profound philosophical implications. Additionally, the dynamic figure-ground shifts vividly illustrate the poet's psychological changes. Through this, Plath constructs a bridge between sensual experiences and abstract understanding, providing a new perspective on her unique philosophy of death.

## Keywords:

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, Cognitive Poetics, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Figure-Ground Theory

## 1. Introduction

As one of the most significant American poets of the 20th century, Sylvia Plath is known for her confessional and intensely dramatic poetry. Her works convey complex emotions and ideas through natural images and metaphors, delving into themes of death, struggles of women, and psychological struggles. Current researches on Plath's poetry, both domestically and internationally, mainly focus on feminist perspectives, narrative analysis, ecological viewpoints, death themes, imagery studies, and inter-art poetics. However, there has been little exploration of her works through cognitive poetics. With the development of cognitive poetics, scholars increasingly apply its theoretical frameworks to analyze poetry. Therefore, this paper tries to apply the cognitive poetics approaches of conceptual metaphor theory and figure-ground theory to analyze Plath's poem *Ariel* and aims to explore how this poem employs metaphorical mapping and dynamic figure-ground shifts to reflect on the dilemmas of life, enabling readers to better understand the philosophy of life of Plath.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Cognitive Poetics

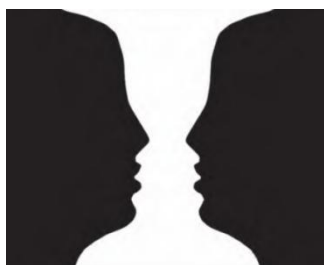
With the publication of *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* by Peter Stockwell and *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* by Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen, cognitive poetics has emerged as an interdisciplinary study. Grounded in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, cognitive poetics integrates theories of cognitive science with literature [10]. Stockwell believed that cognitive poetics is fundamentally a way of thinking about literature rather than a self-contained theoretical framework. It explores both the stylistic features of literary works and the real experiences of readers during reading, offering a panoramic view of literary cognition [4]. Cognitive poetics provides a theoretical foundation for literary reading and criticism, introducing concepts such as figure-ground theory, conceptual metaphor theory, schema theory, and cognitive deixis, etc [9]. These theories provide new perspectives for the interpretation of literary texts.

## 2.2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory was introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argued that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also in thought and action [1]. According to Lakoff and Johnson, the ordinary conceptual system through which we think and act is fundamentally metaphorical [1]. Human cognition often moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the concrete to the abstract, using metaphor to achieve understanding. Abandoning the traditional triple model of metaphor, which include tenor, vehicle, and ground, Lakoff and Johnson proposed source domain and target domain as the two poles of metaphorical mapping [1]. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, “war” serves as the source domain (concrete), while “argument” is the target domain (abstract). The characteristics of war are mapped onto the concept of argument, allowing the abstract idea to be understood in more concrete ways [1].

## 2.3. Figure-Ground Theory

Figure-ground theory is a foundational concept in cognitive poetics. First introduced by Danish psychologist Rubin in 1915, the concept was later adopted by psychologists to study perception and vision [8]. The concept of salience is important in distinguishing figure and ground [5]. According to Langacker, figure-ground relationships are determined by the degree of perceptual salience [2]. Objects that stand out and capture attention are perceived as figure, while the surrounding environment is relegated to the ground. However, the distinction between figure and ground is not absolute. For instance, in the famous face-vase experiment (see Figure 1), whether the figure is perceived as faces or a vase depends on the observer.



**Figure 1.** The famous face-vase experiment [6].

Figure-ground shift dynamically based on the observer's cognitive perspective, focus of attention, mode of recognition, interests, knowledge, and cognitive needs.

Similarly, an author's rhetorical choices and stylistic variations influence the reader's perception of figure and ground.

### 3. Conceptual Metaphors in *Ariel*

According to Lakoff and Johnson's book, *the Metaphor We Live By*, "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" is a very conventional and common conceptual metaphor [1], where the characteristics of the familiar concept JOURNEY are mapped onto the relatively abstract concept of LIFE so that people are easier to understand the philosophy of LIFE. Similarly, "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" is the most important and fundamental conceptual metaphor that can be extracted in *Ariel* to interpret and understand the thought-provoking philosophy of the poem.

The poem *Ariel* describes the poet's experience of riding the horse Ariel through the countryside at dawn. Riding, depicted as JOURNEY, serves as the main clue and central theme of the poem. However, instead of directly identifying the target domain, the poet constructs the conceptual metaphor through the creation of a large number of images. By presenting elements of the source domain, the poem invites readers to engage in cognitive mapping, thus grasping its profound philosophical implications. This metaphor aligns with the structural metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson [1], in which the properties of the source domain are mapped onto the target domain. Then, the following paragraphs will analyze the images and concepts in the poem to explore how the concrete source domain of JOURNEY corresponds to the abstract target domain of LIFE (see Table 1), thereby reveal the philosophical view of life in the poem.

**Table 1.** Conceptual Metaphors in *Ariel*.

|     | Source Domain        | Target Domain                           |
|-----|----------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| (1) | The static state     | The restless and confused stage         |
| (2) | The vast landscape   | The unknown and infinite possibilities  |
| (3) | The galloping horse  | The power of life                       |
| (4) | The split furrows    | The disruptions and destruction in life |
| (5) | The berries          | The temptation in life                  |
| (6) | The child's cry      | Depressed family relationship           |
| (7) | The goal of the ride | The end of life                         |

The opening line, "Stasis in darkness." [3] describes a still and motionless state before the ride begins. This "the static state" maps onto the target domain as "the restless and confused stage", reflecting the confusion and depression in life. This conceptual metaphor of stillness not only shows a sense of difficulty in the life course, but also predicts the sprint of the subsequent journey.

In the beginning part of this poem, the poet also portrays the vast landscape in the countryside. The line of "then the substanceless blue / pour of tor and distances" [3] conveys the vastness and emptiness that the poet feels during the ride, which corresponds to the exploration of life and the stride to the unknown direction. So "the vast landscape" during the ride can be mapped to "the unknown and infinite possibilities" of life.

In the poem, as the ride goes on, the "God's lioness" [3], the poet and the horse become one, and the line of "Pivot of heels and knees" [3] emphasizes the physical coordination and the effort of the rider during riding. The galloping horse, as well as the rider, represents the power and instinct to survive, which corresponds to "the

power of life” in the target domain, illustrating the effort and energy required to push forward in life.

In the line “the furrow / splits and passes” [3], the poet describes the split and stretching furrows encountered during the ride. This image maps onto the target domain as “the disruptions and destruction in life”, which alludes to the uncertain and inevitable upheavals and obstacles encountered in the life course.

On the way, the poet also saw “Berries cast dark / hooks” [3]. The image of berries easily reminds people of the religious story of Adam and Eve, which contains the theme of temptation. Moreover, the action of “cast hooks” depicts the berry as a predator. So, the image of berry can be easily mapped onto “temptation in life” in the target domain.

The poet also heard “the child’s cry / melts in the wall” [3] on her ride. The image of “child” reminds people of the “family” or the intimate relationship in life. The “child” can be projected as the one in the family with more emotional needs and less power, such as the oppressed partner, or people who is more dependent on the intimate relationship. In the line, the child’s cry is isolated by the wall, which indicates that their sound or voice is not heard, meaning that their emotions are not responded by the family. So “the child’s cry” is mapped onto “repressed family relationship”. Combined with the poet’s own life experience, it is not difficult to find that this is a metaphor for her failed marriage relationship with her husband.

At the end of the ride, the poet sees the daylight and rising sun, which means that her journey is coming to an end. In the line of “the red eye, the cauldron of morning” [3], the image of the sun symbolizes both the brilliance of new life and the danger of destruction. It represents the end of life’s journey, a contradictory goal that combines hope and destruction. So “the end of the ride” is mapped as “the end of life” in the target domain.

Through the analysis of the conceptual metaphors above, readers can utilize concrete elements from everyday life as the source domain to comprehend the abstract target domain of the poem, transforming something intangible into something tangible. This enables readers to get a deeper understanding of the life philosophy, psychological struggles, and spiritual transcendence in poem.

#### **4. Dynamic Shifts of Figure-Ground in *Ariel***

In *Ariel*, Plath employs continuous figure-ground shifts to depict her mental journey through the struggles of life and death and toward spiritual liberation. The dynamic shifts not only enrich the poem’s structural layers but also emphasizes the progression in themes.

##### **4.1. Figure-Ground Shifts in *Ariel***

In the opening section of *Ariel*, Plath writes:

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor and distances.  
  
God’s lioness,

How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees!...[3]

The image of the poet riding a horse dominates as the focal point of the poem. This image functions as the figure. Meanwhile, the surrounding somber landscape, such as the “stasis in darkness”, “the substanceless blue” and “the tor and distances”, recedes into the ground, serving as a supporting cognitive framework. The poet on horse emerges as the dynamic figure standing out against the static ground of the countryside. According to figure-ground theory, the figure represents the focus of perception, while the ground provides contextual support for understanding the figure. Against the endless darkness and expansive landscape, the poet’s movement takes center stage, symbolizing her inner turmoil. Through the figure-ground arrangement, the poem directs readers’ attention to the dynamic figure — the poet on horse. This creates a vivid visual contrast that emphasizes the motion against the stillness. Such a cognitive pattern prompts readers to construct a mental space, allowing them to intuitively perceive the individual’s struggle within the confines of darkness and oppression.

In the second section of *Ariel*, Plath writes:

—The furrow  
  
Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch,  
  
Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks—  
  
Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows.  
Something else  
  
Hauls me through air—  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.[3]

A notable shift occurs between figure and ground in this section. The poet and the horse, initially occupying the dominant and dynamic role as the figure, recede into the ground, becoming relatively static and passive. However, the previously grounded elements of the landscape acquire dynamic qualities and become the figure. All these elements become motional relative to the poet: furrows splitting and stretching; berries casting dark hooks; external force hauling the poet through the air. The previous static external world, represented by “furrow”, “berries”, and “external

forces” now occupies the foreground, symbolizing the external pressures, temptations, and disruptions sweep away the poet. The poet herself, receding to the ground, appears increasingly fragmented: her body reduced to flakes peeling away from her heels. This shift between figure and ground emphasizes the poet’s sense of being manipulated and eroded by external forces. The reader’s focus transitions from the poet herself to the natural elements, leading a cognitive shift in attention. What’s more, as the landscape transitions from ground to figure, it creates striking visual and conceptual tension, emphasizing the poet’s fragility and the relentless pull of external force. This tension increases the dramatic intensity of the poem, providing a vivid portrayal of the poet’s psychological struggles in the journey of life.

In the final section of *Ariel*, Plath writes:

White  
Godiva, I unpeel—  
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.[3]

At the moment, the dawn breaks fully into daylight. “I” shifts once again from ground to figure, reclaiming dominance. The poet becomes the “White Godiva,” shedding “dead hands and dead stringencies”. The poet rides across the morning fields with an unrestrained freedom. At this moment, the child’s cry is heard from behind, but when the ride goes on, it “melt in the wall” until it is completely unheard. The “foam to wheat, a glitter of seas” and “the child’s cry” recede into the ground, emphasizing the figure’s liberation. Having shed all obstacles, the riding force now reaches its maximum, pushing the poet toward the journey’s destination. The poet, as the figure, becomes an arrow this time, flying toward its goal: the rising sun. The “red eye, the cauldron of morning” stands as the ground, representing the end of the journey. So, in the final rush to the end or death, the poet, as a figure, is the cognitive focus. Through such figure-ground arrangement, readers can better perceive the psychological changes of the poet: she is no longer confused by death but takes the initiative to run to death, and also enables readers to better understand her unique

view of death: death is no longer the end, but the opportunity for rebirth, symbolizing the spiritual transcendence from death to rebirth.

#### **4.2. Effects of Figure-Ground Shifts**

Cheng believed that “shifts” emphasizes the flowing process of human cognitive psychology, so that reading poetry can also get a dynamic feeling like watching a movie [7]. Based on the analysis above, the dynamic shifts in *Ariel* profoundly prolongs the aesthetic process of this poem. Firstly, the figure and ground in the poem are not fixed, but constantly changing. The image of the poet serves as the figure at first, then recedes to the ground, and finally becomes the figure again. Through the transformation of readers’ cognitive focus, the poet’s complex inner struggle is perceived. Secondly, different images changes constantly when served as the ground. This kind of change constructs the beauty of space and rhythm of poetry, makes the poem rich in visual sense of layers, and enhances the performance of the poem. The change of the scenic images in the poem is highly consistent with the poet’s inner world, which increases the sense of space and creates an immersive experience for the readers. Finally, the alternating shifts of figure and ground reveals the dialectical relationship of the theme: the interplay between the individual and the environment, life and death, struggle and liberation, reflecting the complexity of life states. This dialectical relationship well proves Plath’s view of death: life and death are not a single existence opposed to each other, but fluid and interweaving, reflecting a life philosophy of “living to death”, which makes the poem a more general philosophical reflection.

### **5. Conclusions**

Through the perspective of cognitive poetics, this study analyzes Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, revealing its philosophy of life. The study finds that the poem employs the conceptual metaphors to map elements of the familiar domain of journey onto the abstract concept of life, allowing readers to grasp its profound philosophical implications. Additionally, the dynamic figure-ground shifts vividly illustrate the poet’s psychological changes. Through this, Plath constructs a bridge between sensual experiences and abstract understanding, providing a new perspective on her unique philosophy of death.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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