

The Cognitive Construction of Yank's Identity through Deliberate Metaphors: A Cognitive Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Deliberate metaphor, as an emerging theory in the field of metaphor research, revises and advances the cognitive-oriented approach to metaphor studies, injecting new vitality into the analysis of metaphors in literary texts. Grounded in deliberate metaphor theory, this study takes Eugene O'Neill's classic play *The Hairy Ape* as the subject, constructing a corpus to explore the role of deliberate metaphor in the cognitive construction of the protagonist Yank's identity. The study employs NVivo11 to identify deliberate metaphors in the text and AntConc (ver. 4.0) to analyze the corpus, revealing how Yank's identity is shaped through two interconnected themes: the pursuit of belonging and the exploration of self-worth. These themes not only reflect Yank's identity crisis in the modern industrial society but also demonstrate his profound self-conflict. The findings show that deliberate metaphors are not merely rhetorical tools; they deeply influence Yank's self-perception and play a crucial role in his quest for belonging and recognition. This research could provide new perspectives for understanding the cognitive function of deliberate metaphors in drama and other literary texts, offering valuable insights for future in-depth metaphor studies.

KEYWORDS

Deliberate metaphor; Yank; Identity construction; Corpus

1 Introduction

Since Lakoff^[1] introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphor research has shifted from poetics and rhetoric to linguistics and cognitive science, though it has faced criticism regarding its foundations and mechanisms^[2]. Steen^[3] further developed this theory by introducing "deliberate metaphor", incorporating communicative and referential dimensions alongside linguistic and cognitive aspects. Steen's four-dimensional model for metaphor analysis includes linguistic, conceptual, referential, and communicative layers, emphasizing metaphors as communicative tools^[4]. This approach revises and extends traditional cognitive metaphor research, revitalizing the study of metaphors in literary texts. In literary works, creators often use metaphors deliberately to achieve specific communicative purposes. Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*^[5] exemplifies this technique, exploring the theme of "searching for the self" through the protagonist Yank, who struggles to find belonging in an industrial society.

This study applies deliberate metaphor theory to *The Hairy Ape*, using NVivo11 for metaphor identification and AntConc (ver. 4.0) for text analysis. The study expects to explore how these metaphors contribute to Yank's cognitive identity construction and to introduce new perspectives for future metaphor research in dramatic texts.

2 Literature review

2.1 Research on deliberate metaphor theory

Steen^[6] defines deliberate metaphor as a process where the speaker encourages the hearer to adopt a "defamiliarized" perspective to understand the target domain. Research on deliberate metaphor theory mainly focuses on its definition, identification, processing, and functions^[7]. In China, studies predominantly address its introduction and theoretical aspects^[8], with fewer applying it to discourse analysis^[9], translation strategies^[10], and other areas. Although deliberate metaphors are frequently used in literary discourse analysis, the cognitive processes underlying their use have not been sufficiently explored. Except for a few studies on poetry and Paul's letters^[11], research on deliberate metaphor in dramatic texts is still limited.

2.2 Research on Yank's identity construction

Research on Yank's identity in *The Hairy Ape* has primarily focused on his tragic image, identity crisis, and psychological dilemmas. Scholars have explored Yank's tragic nature^[12], identity crisis through zoocriticism^[13], and his ethical dilemmas^[14]. Psychological analyses include trauma theory^[15] and spiritual journeys^[16]. Some scholars have also started to explore

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the role of metaphor in shaping Yank's image. For instance, Karagöz^[13] uses animal metaphors to suggest that animals symbolize common traits with the working class Yank represents, highlighting the social and psychological significance of metaphor in the play.

As a cognitive tool, deliberate metaphor reflects a character's psychological state. This study aims to examine how these metaphors contribute to Yank's identity construction by analyzing the following questions: (1) What are the main types of metaphors in the characters' discourse? (2) How do these metaphors shape Yank's cognitive identity?

3 Research design

This study applies a data analysis approach, combined with deliberate metaphor theory, to systematically analyze the deliberate metaphors in *The Hairy Ape*. The analysis consists of two main steps:

(1) Identification of Deliberate Metaphors: Deliberate metaphors in the corpus were identified based on deliberate metaphor theory. To ensure accuracy and reliability, NVivo11 was used for detailed text coding, and the Deliberate Metaphor Identification Procedure (DMIP)^[17] was applied for manual identification. The metaphors were categorized into five types, with 173 occurrences, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Deliberate Metaphors in *The Hairy Ape*

Metaphor Type	Frequency	Theme Words
Animal Metaphors	56	a beast in a cage, them lazy, bloated swine, bloody apes, chained gorillas, a leopard, the bloody cow, bleedin' monkeys, dogs, a queerer kind of baboon, a great hairy ape escaped from the Zoo, etc.
Human Metaphors	30	sons of the sea, feeding the bloody furnace, de muscles in steel, part of their bodies, feed de baby, a foul ulcer on the fair body of our Democracy, the heart of the greatest nation, etc.
Object Metaphors	39	Git a soapbox, enormous brazen gong, a cold pork pudding, a pivot from the coal, like black make-up, phonograph horns, gaudy marionettes, de hoistin' engine, Rodin's "The Thinker", etc.
Mechanical Metaphors	28	wheel, part of de engines, de ting in coal dat, steam and oil, steel, de punch behind it, express trains, steamers, factory whistles, de whole ting, etc.
Religious Metaphors	20	ell, wid divil a sight of sun, Come on down in hell, the ghoul, a white apparition, I owned de woild, etc.
Total	173	

(2) Text Analysis: A corpus of *The Hairy Ape* was established, comprising a total of 16,218 words. AntConc (ver. 4.0) was employed for text processing. A stopword list was used to exclude function words, and a frequency list of high-frequency keywords was generated. After preprocessing, high-frequency keywords were analyzed, and a co-occurrence list was created. The co-occurrence results were examined, and the context of keywords was compiled. Through inductive summarization, two major themes in Yank's cognitive identity construction were identified: the pursuit of belonging and the exploration of self-worth. These themes will be analyzed in detail in the following sections.

4 Results and analysis

4.1 Yank's pursuit of belonging

The defamiliarization of the concept of "home" drives Yank into a relentless pursuit of belonging, culminating in his tragic downfall. An unhappy childhood and blind worship of industrial power contribute to his identity loss. Proud of his role as a laborer, Yank regards the stokehole as his "home". Through mechanical, animal, and cage metaphors, the play portrays his shifting sense of self when confronted with external disruptions.

4.1.1 Mechanical metaphors

Mechanical metaphors conceptualize the human body as part of a machine, illustrating how industrial labor erodes individuality. At the beginning of the play, Yank is portrayed as confident and powerful, fully integrated into the mechanical system.

Example (1):

The men shovel with a rhythmic motion, swinging as on a pivot from the coal which lies in heaps on the floor behind to hurl it into the flaming mouths before them... (O' Neill, 42)

Example (2):

The chorused word has a brazen metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns. (O' Neill, 16)

Example (3):

Sure I'm part of de engines! ... I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles... And I'm what makes iron into steel! (O'Neill, 25-26)

Examples (1) and (2) depict the workers' repetitive, mechanical labor. Their bodies function like pivoted components; their voices resemble phonograph horns, mechanical in both movement and sound. These metaphors vividly convey the physical toll and dehumanization imposed by industrial labor.

In Example (3), Yank embraces this mechanical identity, proudly equating himself with engines, steel, and industrial power. This reflects his internalization of industrial values and a misplaced sense of belonging. Though still human, he becomes metaphorically mechanized, alienated from his own identity. Ironically, he perceives this alienation as empowerment, unaware of his loss of self. Yet this identity, forged within the closed system of the ship, is inherently unstable. Once disrupted by external forces, Yank's perceived belonging begins to unravel.

4.1.2 Animal metaphors

Animal metaphors draw on the traits and behaviors of animals to conceptualize human identity. In *The Hairy Ape*, the central metaphor of Yank as a "hairy ape" frames his shifting self-perception—from rejection to acceptance and ultimately identification.

Example (4):

she utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him... Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast! (O'Neill, 47)

Example (5):

Sure ting! Ain't dat what youse all are—apes?... (O'Neill, 79-86)

Example (6):

Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only—(His voice weakening)—one and original—Hairy Ape from de wilds of— (O'Neill, 106-107)

In Example (4), the ape metaphor is first made explicit when Mildred recoils from Yank and calls him a "filthy beast". As the first representative of the upper class he encounters, her revulsion shatters Yank's self-image as a dignified laborer, triggering his crisis of identity and rejection of the "ape" label.

Example (5) reflects a turning point. After being arrested for disturbing public order, Yank begins to internalize the metaphor, questioning fellow inmates, "Ain't dat what youse all are—apes?" This signals a reluctant acceptance of his dehumanized identity. Nonetheless, hope emerges as he envisions the World Workers' Alliance as a collective space for "human-apes", reviving his pursuit of belonging.

Example (6) marks the collapse of this hope. Rejected by the alliance, Yank visits the zoo, seeking kinship with a real ape. His attempt at connection ends in death, as he is fatally embraced and discarded by the animal. His final words, "one and original—Hairy Ape from de wilds of—", reveal bitter self-mockery and the ultimate failure of his search for identity.

4.1.3 Object (cage) metaphors

As a type of object metaphor, the cage typically signifies confinement, repression, or entrapment. In *The Hairy Ape*, the cage metaphor appears repeatedly, marking key shifts in Yank's psychological journey and his deteriorating sense of belonging.

Example (7):

The room is crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing... the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage. (O'Neill, 09)

Example (8):

I thought I was in a cage at de Zoo. (O'Neill, 77-78)

Example (9):

She wasn't wise dat I was in a cage, too... (O'Neill, 105)

In Example (7), the metaphor of "a beast in a cage" maps the oppressive physical and mental conditions of the stokehole onto an iron prison, highlighting the workers' dehumanized existence and Yank's illusion of belonging. In Example (8), after his failed act of revenge, Yank is imprisoned. The zoo-like setting, with its low ceilings and dim corridors, deepens his disorientation, leading him to believe he is literally in a cage at the zoo. The metaphor here emphasizes his psychological entrapment and growing alienation. Example (9) presents Yank's final reflection: while the ape is physically caged, he too is mentally imprisoned. Despite being outside the bars, Yank recognizes his spiritual captivity, caught in an inescapable existential cage.

Yank's path traces a descent from the ship's engine room, to the jail cell, and finally to the zoo, each a literal and metaphorical cage. The recurring metaphor underscores his failed quest for belonging and his inevitable fall into despair, culminating in a tragic end within the ultimate cage of alienation.

4.2 Yank's exploration of self-worth

Yank's descent from "human to non-human" in *The Hairy Ape* reflects his inner journey from "primitive pride and excessive ego" to a yearning for truth and freedom. Through religious, human, and object (statue) metaphors, the play reveals the evolution of Yank's mindset in his pursuit of self-worth. Yet, his individual struggle proves futile against an overwhelming social machinery, even his hopeful attempt to bond with an animal ends in disillusionment.

4.2.1 Religious metaphors

Religious metaphors employ imagery from the religious domain to interpret experiences in secular contexts. Examples (10) and (11) illustrate this device: the furnace is metaphorically framed as "hell", and Yank, as its master, assumes a god-like identity.

Example (10):

It takes a man to work in hell. Hell, sure, dat's my fav' rite climate. (O'Neill, 25)

Example (11):

It's me makes it hot! It's me makes it roar! It's me makes it move! (O'Neill, 25)

In Example (10), Yank metaphorically casts the furnace as "hell," presenting hardship as a mark of masculine pride. In Example (11), he likens himself to a god, claiming authorship over heat, motion, and power. While these metaphors exalt his labor, they reflect an illusory self-image, his perceived control masks deep alienation and the fragility of his self-worth.

4.2.2 Human metaphors

Human metaphors frame non-human entities through human motivations and traits. In Examples (12) and (13), the ship's furnace and the zoo gorilla are personified to reflect Yank's shifting perception of self-worth.

Example (12):

Drink it up, baby!... We gotter feed de baby! Come on! (O'Neill, 44-46)

Example (13):

Yuh're de champ of de woild. (O'Neill, 105)

In Example (12), Yank treats the furnace as a "baby", issuing orders as if tending to a dependent loved one. This metaphor reflects his emotional investment in work and his affirmation of identity through labor. Yet it also hints at isolation, he connects more with machinery than with people, foreshadowing his final monologue to the gorilla. In Example (13), he calls the gorilla a "champ", attributing it with agency and mockery. Through this metaphor, Yank expresses frustration and despair, concluding that even a caged animal has more symbolic power than he does in society, his self-worth remains unfulfilled.

4.2.3 Object (statue) metaphors

Rodin's *The Thinker*, part of *The Gates of Hell*, serves as a recurring metaphor for Yank, marking key psychological transitions, from pride to doubt, reflection, and eventual collapse.

The metaphor appears five times, each marking a psychological shift. The first occurs after Yank is insulted by Mildred, where he assumes *The Thinker* pose, still full of confidence and defiance. The second comes when his peers mock him, shaking that confidence and introducing self-doubt. The third appears in prison, where Yank adopts the posture again, not out of contemplation, but as a desperate grasp at dignity. The fourth follows his realization that Mildred's family controls the steel industry, shattering his illusion of self-worth and fueling his anger. In the fifth and final instance, rejected by the World Workers' Alliance, Yank once more takes *the Thinker* pose, but this time, thinking has failed him. Disillusioned and broken, he slips from human into beast.

The repeated statue metaphor charts Yank's existential descent, from pride to doubt, from resistance to despair, culminating in his tragic end within the zoo cage.

5 Conclusion

Metaphor plays a vital role in shaping human perception and conceptual communication. As a theoretical framework, deliberate metaphor highlights how metaphors function across linguistic, cognitive, and communicative dimensions, offering a bridge between discourse processing and metaphor studies. In *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill employs a rich array of deliberate metaphors in both dialogue and monologue. This study finds that O'Neill primarily uses mechanical, animal, and object (cage) metaphors to illustrate Yank's pursuit of belonging, and religious, human, and object (statue) metaphors to depict his exploration of self-worth.

Yank's psychological journey—from initial confidence to confusion and eventual disillusionment—reveals his struggle for identity in an alienating industrial society. Through the lens of deliberate metaphor, this study uncovers a deeper layer of meaning behind Yank's fragmented expressions, exposing his persistent search for self-worth despite repeated denial and marginalization. Although his journey ends in tragedy, it underscores the play's broader commentary on modern existential crisis and gestures toward a hope for reclaiming human dignity in a dehumanizing world.

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