

# Minimalist metaphors

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We suggest that the impact of metaphoric language does not depend entirely on the conceptual metaphor that is evoked, nor on the form the metaphoric language takes, but also on the steps involved in evoking a given metaphor. This is especially apparent in minimalist poetry. Readers are given hints, cultural conventions, or no guidance at all, on how to fill in missing metaphoric domains and mappings. We place minimalist metaphors at the “effortful” end of the cline proposed by Stockwell (1992), and suggest that the other end can be associated with maximalist metaphors, which corral the reader into a highly specific interpretation. The degree of minimalism or maximalism depends on the specific mappings that are linguistically indicated, the degree of conventionalization of the metaphor, and reliance on cultural background knowledge.

## 1. “A bare minimum of necessary elements”

Metaphoric language that holds back some of the structure of a conceptual metaphor forces readers to complete the metaphor themselves. When Emily Dickinson describes a desire to pick forbidden strawberries in “Over the fence”, for example, she tells us neither the metaphoric target domain nor how the “strawberries” should be mapped to this domain:

Over the fence —  
Strawberries — grow —  
Over the fence —  
I could climb — if I tried, I know —  
Berries are nice!

But — if I stained my Apron —  
God would certainly scold!  
Oh, dear, — I guess if He were a Boy —  
He’d — climb — if He could!

If we choose to understand the poem metaphorically, the target domain is relatively easy to retrieve. The narrator's yearning to climb a fence and eat strawberries — a JOURNEY — clearly corresponds to a desire to achieve some forbidden goal in the target domain LIFE, as part of the conventionalized metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. Mapping the 'strawberries' presents more of a puzzle. Dickinson does not tell us what type of PURPOSE eating the strawberries would represent, leaving an open-ended range of forbidden activities as possibilities. The poem omits two crucial pieces of information: one, the target domain, which is part of a highly conventionalized metaphor and therefore relatively unproblematic; and two, the target-domain PURPOSE, which remains mysterious.

Both types of omission and resultant ambiguity are characteristic of certain poetic styles associated with the philosophy of "minimalism" (Barth 1986; Trussler 1994; Hallett 1996; Delville & Norris 2007). In the above example, for instance, we will argue that the metaphor in Dickinson's poem is consistent with her minimalist esthetic (Barth 1986: 3). Based on the tendency for these underspecified metaphors to appear in minimalist works, we will denote this style of metaphoric language itself as "minimalist" when its intent appears to be consistent with the minimalist philosophy. (Of course, the minimalist style bears no relation to the Minimalist theory of syntax, which adopted the name seven years later.)

Minimalism is an artistic and literary style based on sparseness of form. It has been described as an "aesthetic of exclusion" (Hallett 1996: 487) or an esthetic "of which a cardinal principle is that artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means" (Barth 1986: 1). The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines minimalism as a "literary or dramatic style based on the extreme restriction of a work's contents to a bare minimum of necessary elements, normally within a short form, e.g. a haiku, epigram, dramatic sketch, or monologue ... often characterized by a bareness or starkness of vocabulary" (Baldick 2009: 207). In minimalism, then, something is "excluded," "economized" or "restricted". What, exactly, does this omission achieve? Hemingway suggests that consciously omitted material may be more powerful than that which is included, saying "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (qtd. in Barth 1986: 2). We suggest here that minimalist metaphors may make people feel more than they understand, and may additionally offer them multiple alternate ways of understanding, as in the different interpretations of the PURPOSE in Dickinson's "Over the fence".

Conceptual metaphor has been a tool for stylistic inquiry for decades (one early example is Lakoff & Turner 1989). An even longer tradition of stylistic work addresses the surface forms of metaphor, categorizing these by grammatical construction (Brooke-Rose 1958) or by the apparent reader effort required for their

interpretation (Stockwell 1992, 2002). However, the interaction of these two factors — conceptual structure and linguistic expression — is only considered peripherally by either the metaphor theorists or the stylistics scholars. For example, Lakoff and Turner (1989) discuss metaphoric language chiefly to distinguish it from the conceptual metaphors that it expresses. Stockwell's cline of metaphor effortfulness comes closer to integrating conceptual structure and surface form. For example, "deep" metaphors in the theory lack target domain reference and so "can be read perfectly literally," as is technically possible for the Dickinson poem above (1992: 10). Allegory, for example, can consist of whole texts that decline to designate a metaphoric target domain. At the other end of the scale we find some forms that render both metaphoric domains completely explicit, as in similes.

However, finding the appropriate metaphoric domains is only half the battle, as the above example from Dickinson illustrates. Not only the domains, but also the mappings between them, must be identified for a conceptual metaphor to be fully evoked. The current study, then, builds on the work within metaphor theory and in stylistics in two ways. First, it adds nuance to Stockwell's cline by considering a wider range of conceptual structures that can be added or omitted, such as mappings and the combination of multiple source domains. Second, it relates these various types of metaphoric expression to the stylistic trends of minimalism and maximalism, placing these metaphoric strategies within the context of larger esthetic movements. The current paper focuses only on the two extremes of Stockwell's cline: the "deepest" and subtlest metaphors, focusing on allegory; and the most superficial and obvious metaphors, which Stockwell calls "extended" but which, we argue, may involve a series of different metaphors rather than an extended one.

Sections 2–5 concentrate on metaphors from minimalist genres of poetry, and illustrate how a minimalist style only partially constructs metaphors, leaving readers to finish building the metaphors themselves. Reader tasks typically include target domain identification, though this omission may be less dramatic if the relevant conceptual metaphor is highly conventional (Section 2), or if background knowledge helps supply the target domain or mappings (Section 3); and has increasingly drastic results if more structure is omitted (Section 4). Section 5 relates these types and degrees of omission to the minimalist style.

Section 6 then considers the stylistic characteristics and advantages of the other end of the scale from minimalism, sometimes called "maximalism" (Barth 1986; Delville & Norris 2007). In contrast to minimalism, the maximalist approach to metaphor directs the construction of one or more metaphors in fine-grained detail. This section focuses on the work of Shakespeare, who we argue was a master of maximalist metaphors. Comparison of examples of the minimalist and maximalist approaches to metaphor (Section 7) highlights the range of options

available to authors, and the breadth of stylistic effects that can be achieved by interweaving multiple metaphors and manipulating the explicitness with which these metaphors are communicated.

## 2. Conventionalization of the “missing” domain in analogy

To compare how metaphors are built, a logical first consideration is what prompts the metaphor’s construction. For example, what domains and mappings are explicitly mentioned? When these are not mentioned, what clues are available to readers to allow them to identify appropriate domains and/or mappings? Simply omitting direct reference to a target domain may not have much of an effect by itself. For example, Frost’s “The road not taken” uses language referring only to a choice between roads and other concepts related to the JOURNEY domain. The last two lines (*I took the one less traveled by, / and that has made all the difference*) suggest that the decision was somehow momentous, perhaps more so than an actual decision between two roads at an intersection.

Because Frost never explicitly mentions the target domain of LIFE, a purely literal reading of the poem is technically possible, allowing us to define it as “allegory” (Brooke-Rose 1958; Crisp 2001; Crisp et al. 2002; Stockwell 1992). However, it is a particularly easy type of allegory, in that LIFE IS A JOURNEY is well entrenched and readily accessible. A metaphoric reading is arguably easier than a literal meaning. This is, in fact, what makes “The road not taken” a “tricky poem,” according to Frost (qtd. in Pritchard 1984: 128). Frost claimed that the poem was about his friend Edward Thomas, “who when they walked together always castigated himself for not having taken another path than the one they took” (qtd. in Pritchard 1984: 128). To Frost’s disappointment, not even Thomas interpreted the poem as about himself and his walks. Thomas defended himself, writing “I doubt if you can get anybody to see the fun of the thing without showing them and advising them which kind of laugh they are to turn on” (qtd. in Pritchard 1984: 128).

Thomas seems to have been correct; generations of readers of “The road not taken” have effortlessly, perhaps even unconsciously, accessed the domain of LIFE via the entrenched metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. Since this metaphor includes the mappings PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS and CHOICES IN LIFE ARE CROSSROADS (Lakoff & Johnson 1999), of course it makes “all the difference” which path is chosen at the crossroads of a major life decision. There is no need for any overt mention of the target domain, when readers have entrenched conventional access to the relevant metaphor and its mappings. We can speculate whether Frost intended to draw attention to both the potential non-metaphoric reading and the ease of the metaphoric interpretation. Frost had some hidden intention with the poem, for he

wrote that “I bet not half a dozen people can tell who was hit and where he was hit by my Road Not Taken” (qtd. in Pritchard 2000: 7).

Certainly, Frost’s intention was subtle. However, it does not seem appropriate to characterize “The road not taken” as minimalist based on its omission of reference to LIFE. Given the public’s inability to read the poem as other than metaphoric, the target domain of JOURNEY seems to be difficult to avoid. Mappings in the metaphor are also readily apparent and unambiguous. A less frequently traveled road, leading to a less frequented destination, maps onto a more unusual life choice leading to a more unusual life goal. Frost mentions a “less traveled” road to give us these mappings.

Metaphor in “The road not taken,” then, falls short of minimalism in two ways. First, though the target domain is unnamed, mappings between the source and target domains are unmistakable. Second, LIFE IS A JOURNEY is highly conventionalized. In a less conventionalized metaphor, the target domain may require more effort to recognize, and consequently come closer to the minimalist goal as expressed by Hemingway, of “making people feel something more than they understood” (qtd. in Barth 1986: 2). Convention and availability of mappings, then, can render even an “allegorical” poem relatively obvious in its metaphoric structure.

### 3. Cultural background as a means of target domain identification

In general, more indirect reference to the target domain fosters a more minimalist impression. “The road not taken” makes use of a highly conventional metaphor. However, other cultural and conventional resources are available for poets who wish to communicate the target domain of a metaphor in a more subtle way, making the reader draw on their cultural knowledge to understand the poem and so participate to a greater degree in its interpretation. This strategy is more subtle, and, we argue, both “deeper” in Stockwell’s sense, and more associated with the minimalist esthetic.

Cultural expectations may be required even to appreciate minimalism in metaphor. For example, Higley (1993) argues that medieval Welsh and Irish poetry was devalued by English critics, who simultaneously elevated and admired medieval Anglo-Saxon poetry at least in part because the latter poetic style was more obvious about its metaphoric mappings. As an example of this directness, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* (Book 2, ch. 13) contains a famous passage where a bird flies from a cold night outdoors through a window in the roof of a hall, swoops above the firelit feasting company, and flies out another window. Bede remarks that this is just like the brief life of a human being, who soon returns to the cold and dark of death. Bede’s explanation leaves no doubt as to the target domain of the metaphor,

or indeed the precise mappings intended by the author. The addition of this explanation renders the metaphor completely transparent, and shifts the poem from allegory to the opposite end of Stockwell's spectrum of reader effortfulness.

In contrast to the explicitness of an Anglo-Saxon poem, a Medieval Welsh poem might say:

Frigid the lake from the onslaught of winter;  
Withered the reeds, stalks broken;  
Fierce is the wind, trees bare.

Frigid the fish beds in icy shade;  
Lean the stag, reeds are bearded;  
Evening is short, trees bowed down.

....  
Snow falls, white hoarfrost;  
Idle the shield on an ancient's shoulder.  
Fierce the wind, grass is frozen.

(from *Canu Llywarch Hen*, trans. Patrick Ford [Ford 1974: 121])

Medieval Welsh *englynion* poems such as *Llywarch Hen* are sometimes termed “the Welsh haiku” (Bruch 2005). *Englynion* differ from Japanese *haiku* in that they involve rhyme and half-rhyme, but resemble *haiku* in their short form and frequent reliance on “deep” metaphors such as allegory.

For example, *Llywarch Hen* is allegorical in that OLD AGE (in the domain of a LIFE) is mentioned only within the context of WINTER (in the source domain of YEAR) and EVENING (in the source domain of DAY): *the shield on an ancient's shoulder* is idle while the *snow falls* during the short *evening*. LIFE is not explicitly presented as a target domain in itself.

In medieval Wales, winter was normally a hiatus for military activity, given the difficulties of transportation and of supplying an armed force with food. The mention of OLD AGE serves to suggest a particular target domain, and the idleness, frustration and emotional destitution of wintertime and evening can be mapped to that of old age, especially for readers who have seen old warriors in the Welsh winter. The conventional metaphors LIFE IS A DAY and LIFE IS A YEAR, combined with background knowledge about warfare and winter, help forge connections between these domains. With these mappings in place, related image metaphors become apparent. For example, the frost-bearded reeds and the bent trees topped with snow are old bent men with white beards and hair. And the barrenness of the landscape — the hungry deer, the fish which are not accessible to a hungry human, the broken and withered stalks — suggest not only old age but emotional desolation. Indeed, other parts of this poetic sequence make clear that the elderly narrator has lost all his sons, though no explicit mappings are made between this

and the barren winter landscape. This subtlety stands in sharp contrast to Bede's detailed explanation, making it easy to see how the metaphors of Welsh poetry might bemuse critics from a tradition such as Bede's.

The brevity and subtlety of *englynion* explain their comparison to Japanese *haiku*. *Haiku*, like *englynion*, frequently mention only a source domain, often a nature image. *Haiku* may not mention the target domain even implicitly as part of the source domain, as in *Llywarch Hen*, but may rely almost entirely on cultural references for the target domain's retrieval. Hiraga (1999a, 1999b, 2005) analyzes haiku poems such as this one, by Matsuo Bashō, which she translates as below:

Rough sea:  
 lying toward Sado Island  
 the River of Heaven

(Matsuo Bashō, trans. Masako K. Hiraga [Hiraga 1999b:29–30])

The Milky Way is standardly referred to in Japanese as The River of Heaven, and Sado Island is an island off the Japanese coast. The poem, then, describes a night-time view from the Japanese mainland over a rough sea towards Sado Island, with the Milky Way visible above in the same direction as the island. However, readers at the time would have been aware that Sado Island was a place where political exiles were sent. The poem might therefore evoke the frame of an exile's lover or family member on the main island, separated from the exile. The rough sea conventionally evokes bad weather and specifically winter; seasons are also symbolic in Japanese poetry, and winter represents sadness. The Milky Way is understood to be a river which forever separates two celestial lovers, who are only allowed to cross it and meet once a year. So the Milky Way, like the water between Sado Island and the Japanese coast, is a barrier separating loved ones.

Hiraga offers a much more detailed analysis covering the sound structure of the Japanese words and the spatial structure of the kanji characters in the poem. But it is clear that the poet had no need to mention other elements in the metaphor in order to evoke the metaphoric correspondence between the celestial lovers and the exile-separated viewer and loved one, or between the rough winter sea and the harshness of life, especially for readers with the cultural background knowledge to trace these associations and identify the target meaning of the poem.

Cultural background knowledge, then, plays a greater or lesser role in the interpretation of most of the traditions termed "minimalist". This can also be said of "Over the fence," the Dickinson poem mentioned earlier; without the background knowledge of the limitations faced by women in Dickinson's America, we would be less likely to map the physical obstacle in the poem to the metaphoric challenges faced by women. A reader unfamiliar with this background knowledge could still interpret the poem metaphorically via LIFE IS A JOURNEY, just as readers

without the appropriate cultural knowledge might still appreciate the *englynion* and *haiku* examples above. The background knowledge merely guides a particular metaphoric interpretation without the need to make that interpretation, target domain and mappings, more explicit.

Cultural knowledge, then, may be one of the keys to unlocking metaphoric structures that are not directly specified in a poem. This requirement may make poetry less accessible to readers from other cultures, as shown by English criticism of Welsh and Irish poetry. However, if one has the background knowledge, the poem need not restate it. This allows styles of poetry such as *haiku* and *englynion* to focus on the “bare minimum of necessary elements”.

#### 4. Unspecified mappings and domains

Poets' omission of the target domain may serve goals in addition to Frost's “fooling (his) way along” (Pritchard 1984: 128) or to the evocation of cultural background knowledge in *haiku* and *englynion*. As mentioned, Emily Dickinson's “Over the fence” uses the omission of the target domain to give the poem multiple possible interpretations within the LIFE target domain, by declining to specify how the ‘strawberries’ should be mapped. As in Frost's “The road not taken,” we bring conventional metaphoric mappings to bear in understanding Dickinson's text. PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS suggests that the fenced berry patch DESTINATION, more forbidden to girls than to boys, is a PURPOSE not acceptable for girls or women. STATUS IS UP suggests that climbing (condoned for boys but not girls) might have to do with making a career and gaining authority and status in the world.

Unlike “The road not taken,” Dickinson's poem evokes source-domain structure that can be mapped in multiple ways. The strawberries metaphorically represent some enticing life option more open to men than to women, but it is unclear what type of life purpose this is. The visual image of a strawberry-stained apron suggests sexuality, as does the Biblical connection between stolen fruit, women, sexuality and sin. The STATUS IS UP mapping suggests careers and social authority, a reading supported by the poem's assumption that obedience is more strongly demanded of little girls than boys. An additional interpretation is suggested by the fact that published authorship was a questionable endeavor for a 19th century woman and generally narrowly constrained in genre and content, suggesting that the forbidden PURPOSE might be writing poetry, or writing particular types of poetry.

In “The road not taken,” one single coherent and conventional metaphor is evoked and extended by the use of purely target-domain language, made possible by the metaphor's deep entrenchment. Dickinson, on the other hand, alludes to



the target domain only in her mention of *God*, if we may assume that God judges life choices and not children's minor disobediences, which therefore helps evoke the LIFE target domain. And yet, even with LIFE IS A JOURNEY and the mapping PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS in place, the reading of her text is left open, due to the inclusion of source-domain entities without clear target-domain correspondences. We know what Frost's *roads* are; but what are Dickinson's *berries*?

This omitted explanation is characteristic of Dickinson. Even in her personal letters, Dickinson tended to leave out "the circumstance too well known to be repeated," that is, the topic of her writing, or the one line in a Biblical or literary quotation that was relevant to her point (Leyda 1960:xxi; qtd. in Bennett 1990:129). Leyda (1960) suggests that Dickinson's poetry was similarly riddling. However, Bennett (1990) argues that the omission of "important pieces of information" in her poems "was less because she wanted us to guess the answer than because providing a center ... would have restricted her poem's meaning and thus reduced the range of applicability it could have" (1990:129–130). Bennett's explanation most closely aligns with ours. That is, Dickinson omits key instructions on how source-domain structures should map, allowing readers to "fill in" this information according to their own interpretation; for example, which PURPOSE is represented by collecting berries in "Over the fence".

Dickinson's poem, "The road not taken" and the examples of *haiku* and *englynion* can all be classified as "allegory" in that none directly mentions the target domain. However, these poems demonstrate several possible levels of omission of metaphoric structure and hence several different levels of minimalism. Frost omits reference to the metaphoric target domain of a highly conventionalized metaphor, which is easily and effortlessly filled in by most readers. Bashō's poem requires several types of background knowledge, in addition to conventionalized metaphors, and therefore relies on the reader to a greater extent to fill in the missing information needed to understand the poem. Dickinson also omits the target domain in "Over the fence," relying on the conventional metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and additionally omits any clarification of how the elements of JOURNEY that she mentions should be mapped onto elements in LIFE. This type of omission may help explain why both *haiku* and Dickinson's poetry have been described as minimalist — an esthetic characterized by "exclusion," "economy" and "restriction".

As omissions multiply, poetry becomes increasingly identifiable as minimalist, as can be seen in the work of William Carlos Williams (Trussler 1994:29). In "The red wheelbarrow," Williams applies some of the same strategies as Dickinson does in "Over the fence," but without even the reference to *God* to suggest a metaphoric reading:

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens.

(William Carlos Williams, 1923)

More than any of the poems we have considered, this poem does not necessitate a metaphoric reading. On a non-metaphoric reading, it gives a brief description, in simple everyday words, of an undramatic scene. There is no rhyme, and there is no particularly “poetic” vocabulary. The shape of the text evokes an image metaphor: the poem’s layout creates an iconic mapping between the shape of each pair of lines and the shape of a wheelbarrow — the long “handle” of the first line in each pair projects outwards past the shorter “wheelbarrow body” below it. The repetition of the shape every two lines is reminiscent of working with a wheelbarrow, which requires multiple loads and return trips. This complex image-metaphoric structure contrasts with the apparent lack of sophistication in the descriptive language (just two adjectives are used, *red* and *white*), at the same time as it repeats and emphasizes the wheelbarrow described in the poem. Both the shape and content of the text, then, present a physical wheelbarrow, which might further encourage a reader to wonder why *so much depends upon* it. The poem leaves plenty of room for reader speculation, and for both non-metaphoric and metaphoric interpretations.

The non-metaphoric reading of this poem seems more natural than that of Frost’s “The road not taken,” which, as we’ve seen, is difficult to interpret non-metaphorically. A non-metaphoric reading of “The red wheelbarrow” is consistent with William Carlos Williams’ philosophy that poetry should be based in concrete perceptual images, which don’t have to be “fancy” things, or accessible only to a few. Noticing beauty in everyday things is a valid topic for a poem, and “The red wheelbarrow” does not insist on a metaphoric interpretation.

Another possible reading is that Williams sees poetic composition as a craft, and the well-built poem is a VEHICLE for carrying OBJECTS. This metaphor is a special case of COMMUNICATION IS OBJECT EXCHANGE, in which an OBJECT, carried in a VEHICLE, maps to an IDEA, “carried” in a POEM or other linguistic form. This special case of COMMUNICATION IS OBJECT EXCHANGE has a long history in Indo-European poetics. But unlike some of the older Indo-European traditions (where a poem may be an elaborate chariot with beautiful horses, carrying a petition to a god, or a ship bringing praises to a chieftain), Williams apparently thinks a simple VEHICLE/POEM is often most effective for carrying OBJECTS/IDEAS.

The humbleness of the wheelbarrow, then, maps to simple syntax and vocabulary. A poem is a wheelbarrow carrying a meaning which is not abstruse, as a wheelbarrow might be likely to convey rather ordinary loads. Like “Over the fence,” *haiku* and *englynion*, this reading relies to some degree on background knowledge (here, only that Williams is a poet) and on an established metaphor (here, potentially COMMUNICATION IS OBJECT EXCHANGE).

Even more than the authors of these other poems, Williams declines to promote either the metaphoric or the non-metaphoric reading in “The red wheelbarrow”. He mentions no target domain, which allows readers to read the poem as a simple visual image. This straightforward reading does not appear to be at odds with either the author’s intentions or with the available metaphoric readings. In this, Williams’ poem differs from those of Frost and Dickinson, which are arguably difficult to appreciate from a non-metaphoric perspective. Without metaphor, both “The road not taken” and “Over the fence” are rather banal descriptions of literal JOURNEYS. Williams’ poem is more akin to Bashō’s, which can be appreciated without metaphor as a description of the Milky Way, or *Canu Llywarch Hen*, which can be read as a description of winter.

##### 5. A cline of minimalist strategies of omission

In the poems we’ve examined, then, we can see a cline in the degree to which the metaphoric structures are directly provided to the reader. All five poems are allegorical and avoid naming the target domain of the metaphors they potentially involve. However, “The road not taken” involves a metaphor that is conventional enough that it does not need to be named, and Frost provides so much detail regarding the metaphoric source domain that there is little doubt as to the metaphoric mappings he intended the poem to convey. Dickinson provides none of the detail that makes Frost’s poem so easy to interpret. However, “Over the fence” is unlikely to give a satisfying non-metaphoric reading, if it is read as describing a little girl’s longing for berries and has no other meaning. The author of *Llywarch Hen*, Bashō, and Williams offer poems that are more easily appreciated without drawing on metaphor, in that they describe static outdoor scenes in a manner that is novel and interesting even without a metaphoric interpretation. Bashō’s poem and *Llywarch Hen*, like “The road not taken” and “Over the fence,” draw on metaphoric and cultural convention to make their target domains apparent. Williams is perhaps more subtle than these authors, as his poem’s metaphoric interpretation is not aided particularly by the application of cultural information beyond our knowledge that the poem is written by a poet.

When authors omit naming a domain or other metaphoric structure, this “allegorical” trait is consistent with the minimalist esthetic. Like other aspects of minimalist writing, such as syntax, vocabulary, rhetoric, emotiveness, characters, and plot (Barth 1986:2), metaphoric structures have been “excluded,” “economized” or “restricted”. Poetry considered minimalist, such as *haiku*, medieval Welsh poetry, Dickinson, and Williams, tends to demonstrate more of these metaphoric omissions than poetry not usually considered minimalist. Therefore minimalist metaphors can be considered one of the traits of minimalism. These metaphors may, in their structure and intricacy, equal metaphors built up in more explicit ways. However, we believe that the manner in which they are constructed, with omissions and potential ambiguity, can be as important in their analysis as the metaphoric structures that ultimately result.

## 6. Shakespeare’s maximalist extended metaphors

Minimalist metaphors, then, may encourage readers to draw on conventionalized conceptual metaphors, context, or cultural knowledge, thereby engaging them in the construction of the metaphor and the assignment of meaning to a poem. How does this contrast with metaphors in poetry that is not minimalist? What advantages are offered by metaphors with completely specified, detailed and explicated structures?

If we compare William Carlos Williams’ minimalist poems with Shakespearean sonnets, for example, we see that Shakespeare was ready not only to indicate his metaphoric mappings but to engage in overt meta-commentary on them. Elizabethan sonnets can technically contain any content which the writer can adapt to the tightly constrained poetic form. However, there are traditional associations between the sonnet form and content concerning love and other emotional states. There is also a canonical rhetorical structure associated with the form. In metaphoric examples, the three quatrains set up one or more metaphors, while the final couplet gives a rhetorical resolution in some unexpected new mapping, or twist. The metaphoric structure associated with the sonnet form encourages the specification of the target and source domains in the three quatrains and the new mapping in the final couplet, rendering the sonnet best suited for more maximalist metaphors.

In Sonnet 130, we see both explicit mappings and a meta-commentary on them from Shakespeare. The sonnet overtly denies and mocks the conventional image metaphors associated with description of female beauty in Elizabethan poetry, in which women’s eyes might be called suns, their lips coral, and so on. Despite this satiric anti-lyrical commentary, the poem has the conventional

rhetorical structure, in which the final couplet is a rhetorical twist. Here, the final couplet suggests that the earlier twelve lines were not meant to disparage his beloved, but that the non-metaphoric colors and shape of his beloved's normal human form are beautiful enough.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white  
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
 And in some perfumes is there more delight  
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
 As any she belied with false compare.  
 Shakespeare, Sonnet 130

Without the explicit mention of each image metaphor in the three quatrains of Sonnet 130, the metaphors could not each be playfully negated. The metaphoric domains and correspondences therefore cannot be left unspecified as they might be in more minimalist poetry. The poem makes these mappings even clearer by drawing on grammatical constructions often used to explicitly express given metaphoric mappings, such as equations, similes and conditionals (Sullivan 2009, in press; Moder 2008). As such, the poem might be considered extended metaphor (Stockwell 1992), and would certainly rank as highly visible and involving low reader effort. However, these traits in no way render the poem simpler; to the contrary, the explicitness of each mapping allows Shakespeare's complex meta-commentary on the metaphors themselves.

Another use of highly explicit mappings and domains is to combine multiple metaphors in a controlled, specific manner. Combinations of different metaphors are not typically considered "extended metaphor," but we suggest that repeated metaphors can lead to a system of mappings that is at least as complex and as completely specified as a set of mappings from a single domain. In Sonnet 73, Shakespeare gives three conventional metaphors for old age, explicitly stating the source domains in expressions such as *time of year*, *sunset*, and *fire*; and clearly linking each of these source domains to the target domain of the author's lifetime (*That time of year thou mayst in me behold; In me thou see'st; In me thou see'st*).

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, of none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold  
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang  
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie  
As on the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.  
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.  
Shakespeare, Sonnet 73

The three metaphors here are LIFE IS A YEAR (mapping from autumn to old age), LIFE IS A DAY (mapping from twilight to old age), and LIFE IS A FIRE (mapping from dying coals to old age). All of these are instances of LIFE IS A LIGHT/HEAT CYCLE (Lakoff & Turner 1989), in which old age is conceptualized as a late stage in the cycle. The final couplet makes the point that we appreciate LIGHT/HEAT CYCLES that are almost over, producing the inference that the addressee should love the speaker all the more for no longer being young.

The explicit references to the speaker and his old age ensure that the material from all three source domains is mapped to this target. The similar mappings from autumn, twilight and embers to old age reinforce each other, and all generate the inferences that are relevant in the final couplet: that a LIGHT/HEAT CYCLE inspires the greatest love and appreciation when it is almost over, and a LIFE should therefore be most valued in its old age. Explicit reference to these domains and mappings permits these metaphors to be evoked at once and fitted together in a precise manner, with little room for different interpretations.

Shakespeare's use of explicitly defined metaphoric mappings and combinations of metaphors becomes even more extreme if we leave the realm of sonnets, for the moment, and visit the following famous soliloquy from *Macbeth*, where Shakespeare makes his source and target domains clear, and uses this explicitness to play with inferences and map from multiple sources onto a single target:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V:5 19–28

Given the number of metaphors in this passage, it might seem astonishing that they do not detract from one another, give the impression of mixed metaphors, or trail away into incoherence. To the contrary, the passage gives readers an all too coherent and forceful picture of Macbeth's despair, and of the lack of any alternative to his situation at this point in the play. In the terms of Freeman (1995), who points out the centrality of path metaphors in *Macbeth*, there is at this point "no exit": Macbeth is trapped. How, then, does the passage pull readers or listeners into this trap with Macbeth?

Shakespeare traps the audience by blocking their every potential escape from the conclusions that Macbeth has reached about life, using a possibly unprecedented torrent of metaphors, including:

TIME IS MOVEMENT THROUGH SPACE (*creeps, pace*) (Note that here time moves, not the viewer)

TIME IS LANGUAGE (*syllable, recorded*)

LIFE IS A CYCLE OF LIGHT AND HEAT (*lighted, candle*)

LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Ego movement) into an underground location (*lighted fools to dusty death*)

LIFE IS A MOVING SHADOW (*walking shadow*)

LIFE IS A PLAYER (*player, stage...*)

LIFE IS A STORY (*tale*)

Many of these are conventional metaphors. The various metaphoric source domains do not have much in common, beyond that they are all temporally structured, and that most involve specifically limited time spans of activity. A story, play, candle flame, text or journey normally has a clear beginning and end.

Although this is a gloomy passage, these are not inherently gloomy metaphors (with the possible exception of the Moving Shadow metaphor<sup>1</sup>). The conventional mappings of these metaphors do not generate the inference that LIFE (or the metonymically associated target domain of TIME) is hopeless and meaningless. A play, a text or a story is something we might well enjoy or find meaningful. A journey is often under agentive control of the traveler, who could potentially choose a pleasant route to a good destination. A light-heat cycle such as a day, a year, or a burning candle comes to an end — but this is often seen as all the more reason to make the most of it while there is light and heat.

In this passage, however, Macbeth has altered the specifications of the source domain in each of the relevant metaphors, generating despairing inferences about the target domains of LIFE and TIME. Life, then, is a journey, but a creeping, tedious one, whose sole destination is dusty death. Life's a play, but it's a terrible, incoherent play. Life's a message or a story, but a melodramatic and meaningless one. Life's a light-heat cycle, but so short that it is worthless and we end up wanting to blow out the candle ourselves. This last usage contrasts vividly with Shakespeare's uses of light-heat cycles as metaphors for life elsewhere: like many of his contemporaries, he urges making the most of your day or your summer, before night or winter (i.e. Death) arrives, as in Sonnet 73, discussed above. The *Macbeth* passage, however, generates only inferences that life is meaningless and not worth living, and reinforces this conclusion with each new metaphor.

One way to approach Macbeth's multi-metaphoric tour de force is to examine it in terms of successive metaphors that gradually build up the larger structure. As an example:

TIME IS AN OVERLY SLOW AND CHANGELESS MOVING OBJECT (*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ creeps in this petty pace from day to day*)

Inferences: Human experience of time (and hence of life) is tedious and dull.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY TO (ONLY) A NEGATIVE DESTINATION, THE GRAVE. (*and all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ the way to dusty death*)

Inferences: Life is tedious, unpleasant, *and* one can't hope for it to get better, even though people are "fools" who may harbor this hope; life inevitably ends in death.

LIFE IS A SHORT CYCLE OF LIGHT/HEAT. (*Out, out, brief candle!*)

Inferences: As well as being tedious, unpleasant, etc., life is also so short that it's no use — you may as well end it now.

(Note the play on objective and subjective time: it's simultaneously slow, tedious and short.)

LIFE IS A PLAY(ER), a bad melodramatic one whom nobody calls back. (*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ that struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ and then is heard no more.*)

Inferences: As well as being tedious, unpleasant, doomed to end in death, and uselessly short, life is not meaningful or esthetically pleasing, though it is full of useless melodrama.

LIFE IS A STORY, an incoherent, emotional, melodramatic, meaningless one. (*It is a tale/ told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/signifying nothing.*)

As well as being tedious, unpleasant, doomed to end in death, uselessly short, meaningless, esthetically lacking, and pointlessly melodramatic, life lacks any narrative unity which might lend it meaning.



People go on living for many reasons, including current pleasure or happiness in life, a feeling of beauty in the world, hope for a better future in their lives or in the afterlife, hope to achieve some life goals in the time left to them, or the feeling of enacting a satisfying life “narrative”. This speech precludes each of these reasons from being relevant. Each new metaphor’s inferences take away more possible reasons to want to go on living. The result is that the differing metaphors, which may not share much structure besides reference to a delimited span of time, are suddenly made coherent in a new way.

Why does Macbeth transform these potentially positive metaphors for LIFE into ones with deeply negative inferences? Presumably he realizes that his own life cannot have a positive outcome. Nothing can reverse his many crimes, bring his wife back to life, or, at this point, prevent retribution from coming down on him. In this scene, he seems to be trying out a sequence of different metaphors in a desperate hope that some one of them might turn out to have less disastrous inferences. This is not necessarily a pointless exercise. It may be worthwhile in a tough situation to try to re-frame matters in order to deal with things more positively. Often we can think of competing metaphoric construals of our situation which actually produce different, competing inferences. But Macbeth cannot. Since he is systematically building in the disastrous inferences, they are there in every case. Each source domain is retailored to include these inferences and force them onto the target domain where Macbeth knows they belong. This is why we feel that he is building an inferential cage around himself. Every time a new metaphor shares the coherent and worsening inferential structure which he has predetermined, another potential alternative turns out to be a non-alternative, until Macbeth has nothing left.

A novice writer who brings in a new metaphor in every line might produce an incoherent mishmash of inferences. Shakespeare’s strategy works because he takes a range of metaphors and uses Macbeth’s psychological state to give them both added coherence and shared cumulative inferential force. The sequence of metaphoric inferences gives us a unique entryway into Macbeth’s thought processes, ultimately producing a more powerful text than could have been achieved with any one of the component metaphors. This is not a conventional strategy of metaphor construction. Shakespeare loves to play at length with metaphoric mappings, reshaping, taking apart, and rebuilding metaphoric connections. Consider, for example, the *to be or not to be* passage where Hamlet thinks of death as sleep, and then adds a novel mapping by wondering *in that sleep what dreams may come?* (Hamlet III: 1), or the *As You Like It* (III:2) passage where Rosalind enumerates all the possible metaphors for time’s passage (*ambling, trotting and galloping*). The extremely complex multiple blending of the *tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* passage is of course specially tailored to the requirements of the *Macbeth*

scene. However, given the complexity and specificity of the mappings in the blend in this scene, it is unsurprising that a fully explicit approach was best-suited to Shakespeare's purposes. It is unlikely that a reader would arrive at precisely this blending structure without clear, direct reference to the domains and mappings involved.

Shakespeare, then, is about as far removed in his metaphor construction strategies from the minimalists as is possible. Based on this, and on the established opposition of minimalism and maximalism (Barth 1986; Delville & Norris 2007) we suggest that metaphors such as those in *tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* can be termed "maximalist".

## 7. Minimalist and maximalist methods of metaphor construction

In the works we have examined, neither conceptual metaphor nor large-scale classification as "allegory" or "extended metaphor" suffices to explain the impact of the metaphoric language. The conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, for example, appears in several of the texts, from "Over the fence" to the Macbeth soliloquy, yet the manner in which LIFE IS A JOURNEY is evoked by the author's language varies substantially between these works. The Shakespeare sonnets included here state numerous mappings and both the source and target domains of their relevant metaphors; whereas "Over the fence," for example, does not mention the target domain LIFE and leaves it up to the reader to decide how to map certain elements from the source domain. Identification of conceptual metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY is a crucial facet of the analysis of examples such as the above, but does not, in many cases, appear to be sufficient.

Similarly, a classification of examples such as "The road not taken" and the *haiku* by Bashō as "allegory," as in Stockwell's cline of reader effort (1992), is a useful but insufficient determination. The conventionalization of LIFE IS A JOURNEY renders "The road not taken" almost impossible to read without evoking this metaphor, and even more difficult to read as involving a different metaphor. The mappings are provided to the reader in detail. Bashō's poem, on the other hand, seems intended to be interpretable as a literal scene. If it is read metaphorically, the metaphor is less conventional; its mappings are less fully specified for the reader; and retrieval of both target domain and mappings can depend on background knowledge. These distinctions have been recognized implicitly by critics, who label *haiku* as minimalist but have never described "The road not taken" in these terms.

Of course, not all authors choose to present their metaphors in a minimalist or even allegorical fashion. Other authors' metaphors instead explicitly evoke

specific domains and mappings, some to the extent that we suggest they can be called “maximalist”. The conceptual structures built in this manner can be extremely complex, and are built under the complete control of the author. When Shakespeare writes *Life ... is a tale*, there are no two ways to interpret this. The source domain is a STORY, which maps onto the target domain of LIFE. With this structure in place, Shakespeare can freely elaborate the metaphor, adding that the tale is one *Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing*. These qualities of a STORY map onto the meaningless melodrama of LIFE.

The explicit domains and mappings of maximalist metaphors can be manipulated by a skilful author to criticize conventional metaphors, evoke highly specific target structures, or combine particular mappings from particular domains. Shakespeare’s *tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* speech in *Macbeth* keeps flooding out new metaphors for life and death, evoking the disastrous entailments of each mapping, and layering them until we are convinced that Macbeth has no way out but death. In this passage, Shakespeare radically *overdetermines* the relevant metaphoric mappings. Shakespeare brings in multiple domains and creates novel mappings from each of them, thereby repeatedly underscoring the similar inferences for LIFE produced by all of these mappings.

Maximalist style, then, excels at specifying multiple source domains, all of which are referred to by the author and mapped to a common target. Minimalist style, in contrast, excels at making available a range of target-domain structures, when no single structure is named, as in “Over the fence”. Presented with a source-domain structure and no corresponding target, readers are encouraged to activate and consider multiple target structures. The same is not true if they are given only a target-domain structure; in this case, readers are unlikely to reach a metaphoric interpretation at all, since they have no incentive to map from any source. For example, reference to LIFE without any mention of JOURNEY will probably not cause readers to interpret the references metaphorically, whereas reference to the JOURNEY source domain, as in “The road not taken,” can be manipulated to virtually ensure that readers will think of LIFE CHOICES.

In conclusion, maximalist and minimalist metaphors each have advantages that poets can exploit to good stylistic effect. The existence of metaphors that can be considered minimalist or maximalist despite both involving LIFE IS A JOURNEY, for example, indicates that there is more to metaphors than the cognitive structures they ultimately evoke. The fact that some allegorical poems are considered minimalist and some are not, for instance, and that the metaphoric language in these poems can be shown to differ, illustrates that a more fine-grained typology of metaphoric language is called for. Neither conceptual metaphor nor linguistic surface structure alone is sufficient to classify metaphors as minimalist or maximalist, but each of the steps involved in evoking metaphor from the surface

language, whether the retrieval of a mapping or the application of cultural background knowledge, must be considered. In metaphors, as in life, the journey can be as important as the final destination.

## Note

1. The moving shadow could be a ghost; but it could also refer to Plato's Man in the Cave metaphor, in which case the "Moving Shadows" seen by humans as their experience of the world are powerful sources of illusory or inessential knowledge. These shadows lack substance in the same way that the players on a stage (in the next metaphor in the passage) lack reality.

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