



Poetic Imagery as Cognitive Landscape: Fragility, Transition, and Resilience in Mary Oliver's *Breakage*

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Article History

Received: 25/02/2026

Accepted: 02/03/2026

Published: 04/03/2026

Vol – 4 Issue –3

PP: - 01-06

Abstract

This study examines the thematic and cognitive structures within Mary Oliver's poem Breakage through the lens of cognitive-linguistic theory, specifically Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphor framework. A meticulous line-by-line analysis reveals how Oliver's natural imagery functions as an interconnected web of embodied metaphors, articulating themes of fragility, transition, resilience, and enlightenment. The findings demonstrate that her poetic language constructs a cohesive cognitive landscape where sensory and bodily experiences map onto abstract life processes, fostering emotional resonance and interpretative depth. This inquiry advances understanding of poetic metaphor as a vital aesthetic and pedagogical device rooted in embodied cognition, offering insights for literary theory, cognitive poetics, and intercultural literary studies.

Keywords: Mary Oliver, metaphor, cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson, resilience, transition, poetic imagery, embodied cognition

Introduction

Poetry is a profound expressive medium capable of encapsulating the multifaceted dimensions of human experience through language that often transcends literal meaning. Central to this expressive power is metaphor, which is not merely rhetorical but serves as a fundamental cognitive tool. Metaphors shape perception, evoke deep emotions, and facilitate an intricate understanding of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Among poets, Mary Oliver stands out for her profound connection to nature and her ability to convey complex emotional and philosophical truths through vivid, accessible imagery. Her work exemplifies embodied cognition, creating poetic landscapes where tangible natural sensations intertwine with abstract emotional and spiritual realities—making her poetry an ideal subject for exploring the cognitive underpinnings of metaphor.

First published in *House of Light*, Oliver's *Breakage* exemplifies her poetic style, accessible diction, vivid natural imagery, and contemplative introspection. The poem explores themes of mortality, healing, and spiritual growth through refined imagery of shells, water, and light, evoking fragility and resilience. Reflecting her transcendental sensibility, *Breakage* underscores a reverence for nature's cyclical processes and affirms life's transformative potential. Situating

this poem within Oliver's broader poetic framework enhances our understanding of her natural imagery as a symbolic lexicon of healing and resilience.

This research employs a cognitive-linguistic approach grounded in Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory (2003). It investigates how Oliver's metaphors are rooted in embodied experience, structuring perception and evoking emotional responses. Drawing upon her cultural background—particularly her New England upbringing and American transcendentalist influences—her frequent references to coastal landscapes and marine life serve to explore universal themes such as boundaries, transitions, and interconnectedness. This context enriches the interpretation of her metaphors, revealing how cultural and ecological milieus inform her poetic language.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to cognitive poetics by demonstrating the centrality of embodied metaphors in poetic meaning-making. It also offers a nuanced literary analysis of *Breakage*, illuminating how natural imagery encodes complex cognitive and emotional processes. By systematically decoding Oliver's metaphors, this research reveals how poetic language constructs a shared experiential space that fosters resilience amid fragility.



Aim and Objectives

This study aims to provide a comprehensive cognitive-linguistic analysis of Mary Oliver's *Breakage*, elucidating how embodied metaphors structure its themes of fragility, transition, and resilience. The objectives are:

1. To identify and categorize primary metaphorical expressions within *Breakage* using Lakoff and Johnson's framework.
2. To analyze source-target domain mappings, exploring their cognitive foundations and thematic contributions.
3. To examine how Oliver's metaphorical language evokes emotional and perceptual responses, linking these to embodied cognition.
4. To demonstrate how these metaphors collectively construct a cohesive cognitive landscape that underscores fragility, facilitates transition, and fosters resilience.

Research Questions

In line with these objectives, the study seeks to answer:

1. How do Oliver's metaphors function within a cognitive framework, particularly regarding source-target mappings and embodied foundations?
2. What themes of transition and resilience emerge through her metaphorical language, and how are they organized through poetic imagery?
3. How does Oliver's natural imagery, via its metaphors, facilitate emotional engagement and perceptual responses in readers?

Literature Review

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphor is a universal feature of human cognition, structuring thought through the mapping of familiar, concrete source domains onto abstract target domains. They categorize metaphors into structural, orientational, and ontological types, which have been widely applied in poetic analysis (Mulyati, 2019; Sinthya et al., 2022; Puadah, 2017; Humagain et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate how metaphors reveal underlying conceptual patterns in poetry, shaping perception and emotional response.

While prior research has extensively applied conceptual metaphor theory to classical poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Poe, there remains a research gap regarding contemporary poets like Mary Oliver, whose themes of nature, spirituality, and vulnerability offer unique cognitive-linguistic insights. Oliver's poetic language, characterized by accessible imagery and philosophical depth, warrants investigation to understand how her metaphors encode cultural and individual consciousness.

Recent debates question the universality of the theory, highlighting the influence of context and culture (Gibbs, 2017; Barsalou, 2017). Critics advocate for integrating embodied cognition perspectives, emphasizing sensorimotor experiences in meaning-making (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). Recognizing these debates underscores the importance of a

nuanced approach that considers cultural and experiential variability in metaphor analysis.

Further Research Directions and Gap Analysis

Although the application of conceptual metaphor theory to poetry has yielded valuable insights, most studies tend to focus on classic poets such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Edgar Allan Poe. These works have significantly contributed to understanding how metaphors shape poetic meaning and influence reader perception. However, contemporary poets like Mary Oliver, whose poetry often emphasizes themes of nature, spirituality, and human vulnerability, remain underexplored within this framework.

Mary Oliver's poetry uniquely combines accessible language with profound philosophical reflections, often employing metaphors that reflect her deep connection to the natural world and her introspective worldview. Analyzing her metaphors through the lens of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphor theory could reveal nuanced cognitive-linguistic patterns that distinguish her poetic voice from traditional Romantic or Modernist poets. This underexplored area presents an opportunity to expand our understanding of how metaphors function in contemporary poetic discourse and how they encode cultural and individual consciousness.

Significance of the Study

By focusing on *Breakage*, this study uncovers the cognitive structures underlying Oliver's use of metaphor, contributing to both metaphor studies and broader literary criticism. It demonstrates how natural imagery functions as embodied schemas, integral to human understanding of fragility, resilience, and transition, thus enriching interpretive frameworks and pedagogical approaches in literary studies, creative writing, and poetry therapy.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that metaphors are rooted in embodied experience, mapping physical, sensory, and motor domains onto abstract concepts. Source and target schemas organize thought and language, with natural imagery, such as shells, water, and light, serving as concrete anchors for complex themes like vulnerability, transition, and resilience.

Applying this framework to Oliver's *Breakage* reveals how her natural imagery activates tactile, visual, and kinesthetic modalities, grounding abstract ideas in sensory experience. For instance, shells symbolize fragility and endurance; water signifies ongoing transformation; light embodies clarity and hope. These embodied schemas facilitate emotional engagement, allowing readers to experience life's delicate, transformative processes viscerally.

Mark Johnson (The Body in the Mind) and Gallese & Lakoff (2005) emphasize that cognition is fundamentally grounded in bodily experience, supported by neural mechanisms that underlie sensorimotor simulation. Oliver's use of natural imagery exemplifies this embodied cognition—activating sensory schemas that mirror internal emotional states—thus constructing a cohesive cognitive landscape.

Methodology

This qualitative, hermeneutic study involves a detailed line-by-line analysis of *Breakage*, focusing on metaphorical expressions, their source and target domains, sensory imagery, and emotional implications.

Methodological Procedures for Metaphor Identification, Categorization, and Analysis

The data analysis employed a deductive coding approach based on Lakoff and Johnson's (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) theory.

Data Preparation and Selection: The primary data consisted of Mary Oliver's poem "Breakage." The researcher first read the poem multiple times to become familiar with its thematic and linguistic nuances. Secondary data sources included relevant literary and cognitive linguistic literature to support interpretation.

Identification of Metaphors

Initial Close Reading: Systematic line-by-line reading of the poem to highlight potential metaphorical expressions—phrases or words that suggest a figurative comparison beyond literal meaning.

Application of Coding Rules: Using predefined criteria derived from Lakoff and Johnson's (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) framework, expressions were marked that fit the following conditions:

- Evoke imagery or emotions beyond their literal sense.
- Imply a comparison or mapping between two conceptual domains.
- Serve as linguistic realizations of conceptual metaphors (e.g., "edge of the sea" as a boundary or transition).

Linguistic Markers: Keywords and contextual cues such as "like," "as," "resemble," "becomes," "is," or metaphoric imagery facilitated identification.

Criteria for Metaphor Classification: The identified metaphors were classified into the three main types based on Lakoff and Johnson's (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) framework (structural, orientational, ontological), as previously defined in the Theoretical Framework. Additionally, some expressions were identified as metonymies or related figurative devices, such as "barnacle scarred" representing external influences.

Establishing the Mapping: Once metaphors were identified and classified, the next step involved analyzing the underlying conceptual mappings:

1. **Mapping Analysis:** For each metaphor, the source domain (concrete or familiar concept) and the target domain (abstract or complex concept) were identified.
2. **Correlation Establishment:** The relationship between source and target domains was mapped at a conceptual level, following principles of ontological correspondence.

3. **Cultural and Contextual Influences:** The mappings were examined considering cultural knowledge, personal experiences, and contextual clues, acknowledging that these influence the metaphorical understanding.

Analytical Framework and Interpretation: The metaphors were then analyzed systematically:

1. **Emotional and Imagery Analysis:** For each metaphor, the associated emotions and vivid imagery were documented based on the context and linguistic cues.
2. **Profound Meaning Evaluation:** The deeper symbolic or thematic significance of each metaphor was interpreted, connecting it to broader cognitive and experiential themes.
3. **Cross-Referencing with Cognitive Theory:** Each metaphor's cognitive underpinnings were discussed in light of Lakoff and Johnson's (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) theory, emphasizing how they reveal human perceptions and conceptualizations of experience.

Validation and Reliability: To ensure rigor, the metaphor identification and classification process included:

Peer Validation: The second author independently reviewed the identified metaphors and classifications to establish inter-coder reliability.

Consensus Building: Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring the robustness of the coding process.

Having established the methodological procedures for metaphor identification, classification, and conceptual mapping, the subsequent section presents a detailed line-by-line cognitive-linguistic analysis of Mary Oliver's "Breakage." This analysis systematically applies Lakoff and Johnson's (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) conceptual metaphor framework, as outlined in the preceding methodology, to elucidate how individual metaphorical expressions contribute to the poem's broader themes of fragility, transition, and resilience, thereby revealing the intricate cognitive landscape constructed by Oliver's poetic imagery.

Analysis of "Breakage": A Line-by-Line Cognitive-Linguistic Dissection

Line 1: "I go down to the edge of the sea."

The phrase "edge of the sea" functions as a spatial metaphor, mapping the physical boundary of the shoreline onto a conceptual threshold—symbolizing transitions or liminal states is Orientational metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The verb "go down" emphasizes exploration and engagement with the unknown, aligning with the searching schema. Visually and physically, the shoreline evokes contact, boundary, and transition, stimulating sensory imagination and feelings of anticipation and wonder.

This metaphor of boundary and transition is fundamental in conceptualizing life's liminal moments, those points of change and transformation. Oliver's movement toward the shoreline

encapsulates an embodied act, approaching a threshold, highlighting the human tendency to seek meaning at edges and borders.

Line 2: "How everything shines in the morning light!"

Here, "shines" is a metaphor for brightness and clarity, mapping physical illumination onto spiritual or intellectual enlightenment (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The morning light embodies renewal, awakening, and insight, aligning with the Up is Good and Light is Knowledge schemas.

The imagery of dawn's illumination fosters feelings of hope, renewal, and optimism—integral themes in poetic reflection on life's fragility and resilience. This Ontological metaphor underscores how sensory experiences, light, brightness are intertwined with understanding and emotional warmth, positioning the natural world as an agent of spiritual awakening.

Line 3: "The cusp of the whelk,"

The "cusp" functions as a metaphor for a delicate, pivotal moment—an intersection, a threshold in a process of transition (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The shell's pointed tip ("cusp") symbolizes a fragile boundary, one that can be broken, yet also signifies potential for transformation.

Visually, the shell's tapering shape evokes anticipation, vulnerability, and the possibility of rupture. This Structural metaphor encapsulates the liminal space of change, emphasizing that critical moments—like the cusp of a shell—are delicate and require careful navigation.

Line 4: "the broken cupboard of the clam,"

This Ontological metaphor employs the shell as a container ("cupboard") that has been damaged ("broken"), emphasizing vulnerability and fragility. The damage signifies exposure, loss of safety, and the potential for rupture.

This ontological metaphor "The body/mind is a container" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) is evident here: the shell as a vessel that can be compromised, mirroring human vulnerability. Tactile imagery of cracked shells evokes tenderness, loss, and exposure, reflecting life's transient security and the inevitability of breakage.

Line 5: "the opened, blue mussels,"

Open shells symbolize revelation, vulnerability, and accessibility. The color blue adds depth, serenity, and calmness. This aligns with the Ontological Metaphor metaphor "The inner self is accessible and vulnerable" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

The visual of the opened shell with exposed flesh fosters curiosity, trust, and the acceptance of vulnerability as part of life's natural cycle. This imagery encourages embracing openness, both emotional and perceptual as essential to resilience.

Line 6: "moon snails, pale pink and barnacle scarred—"

The shells, marked by barnacle scars, symbolize external influence, endurance, and resilience. Scars represent survival and persistence, while the delicate pink hue suggests tenderness and fragility.

The "scarred shell" , Ontological metaphor embodies resilience in the face of external hardships. This intricate imagery underscores that scars are marks of resilience, often inscribed in its vulnerabilities, which evoke admiration and empathy.

Line 7: "and nothing at all whole or shut, but tattered, split,"

This line encapsulates impermanence and vulnerability through Ontological metaphors of torn, fragmented objects. The Ontological metaphor "Life as a series of fragments" underscores that wholeness is an illusion; life is inherently transient and incomplete (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Visually, the imagery of torn and split shells emphasizes fragility and the ceaseless process of breakage and renewal. This perspective fosters acceptance of impermanence, framing it as integral to resilience and growth.

Line 8: "dropped by the gulls onto the gray rocks and all the moisture gone."

The act of "dropping" signifies loss or rejection, while "moisture gone" symbolizes vitality dissipating. The barren scene evokes depletion, dryness, and emptiness, Ontological metaphors for emotional exhaustion or the aftermath of trauma.

The schema "Vitality is moisture" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) underpins this imagery. This scene reflects life's ephemeral nature, emphasizing that vitality can be lost, yet also reconstituted through resilience.

Line 9: "It is like a schoolhouse"

The "schoolhouse" as a Structural metaphor denotes a space for learning, growth, and transformation (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Framing adversity and fragility as pedagogical, it suggests that hardship is a teacher—a place where resilience is cultivated.

The visual of a schoolhouse evokes nurturing, discipline, and enlightenment. This Structural metaphor highlights that vulnerability and breakage are not solely destructive but can be fertile grounds for learning and renewal.

Line 10: "of little words,"

Small words symbolize nuance, subtlety, and the importance of detail. They serve as Ontological metaphorical building blocks—each word carries weight. This Ontological metaphor aligns with the schema "Understanding is decoding" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), emphasizing that comprehension involves piecing together small, meaningful units. This imagery underscores the significance of attentiveness and patience in understanding life's complexities.

Line 11: "thousands of words."

The abundance of words reflects life's richness, complexity, and depth. The structural metaphor "Life as a vast narrative" suggests that understanding requires engagement with myriad details.

The imagery fosters awe and patience, emphasizing that life's meaning is woven through countless small moments and details.

Line 12: "First you figure out what each one means by itself,"

This line emphasizes active interpretation, decoding individual symbols before grasping the overarching story.

It aligns with the Ontological metaphor "Understanding is decoding" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). It underscores effort, patience, and attentiveness in making sense of life's intricate details.

Line 13: "the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop"

Specific objects symbolize joy ("jingle"), beauty ("periwinkle"), and exploration ("scallop"). These serve as symbolic building blocks in the narrative of understanding, emphasizing that small details contribute to larger meaning confirms the Ontological metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Line 14: "full of moonlight."

Moonlight as a Ontological metaphor signifies serenity, inspiration, and poetic insight. The imagery of moonlit shells evokes calmness and mystical depth. This aligns with the schema "Poetry is illumination" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), emphasizing tranquility and inner light.

Line 15: "Then you begin, slowly, to read the whole story."

This final line encapsulates the process of comprehension, gradual, deliberate engagement with life's narrative. The act of "reading" underscores attentive reflection and patience, aligning with the overarching metaphor of understanding as a process of unfolding and interpretation is a structural Metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

The above line-by-line analysis of Mary Oliver's "Breakage" systematically demonstrates the pervasive use of natural imagery as embodied metaphors, meticulously revealing how these linguistic structures map concrete sensory experiences onto abstract conceptualizations. This detailed dissection consistently highlights the poem's thematic focus on fragility, transition, and resilience, illustrating how Oliver's strategic metaphorical choices, through their source and target domain mappings, generate profound emotional and perceptual responses in the reader.

Also, throughout "Breakage," Oliver employs metaphors that align with the three categories: *structural* metaphors organize and frame processes (e.g., "schoolhouse of little words"), *orientational* metaphors depict spatial relationships and states (e.g., "nothing at all whole or shut," indicating disintegration), and *ontological* metaphors treat abstract concepts as tangible entities (e.g., shells, words, and brightness). This layered metaphorical framework enriches the poem's exploration of fragility, perception, and understanding.

Discussion

This analysis reveals that Oliver's *Breakage* constructs a cohesive network of embodied metaphors rooted in natural imagery. These metaphors map sensory, bodily, and emotional experiences onto themes of fragility, transition, and resilience. For example, the shoreline signifies thresholds;

shells and scars depict vulnerability and endurance; light and water symbolize enlightenment and transformation.

This interconnected web aligns with Lakoff and Johnson's assertion that metaphors fundamentally shape human cognition. Oliver's natural imagery functions as an embodied schema, creating a shared experiential space where physical sensations and emotional truths resonate—fostering resilience amid fragility. Her strategic use of metaphors demonstrates that embracing vulnerability can be a pathway to renewal, illustrating the therapeutic and pedagogical potential of poetic language rooted in embodied cognition.

Furthermore, her metaphors reflect cultural narratives of resilience and fragility, emphasizing universal schemas like "life as a journey" or "vulnerability as strength." Recognizing these metaphors' cultural embeddedness enriches their interpretive relevance across diverse contexts.

Cross-Cultural and Ecocritical Perspectives

Metaphors of fragility and resilience vary across cultures. Western metaphors often emphasize strength ("bouncing back"), whereas East Asian traditions highlight flexibility ("bending like bamboo") (Kövecses, 2012). Oliver's natural imagery aligns with ecocritical perspectives, positioning her poetry within a culturally embedded ecological discourse. Her motifs of interdependence and renewal resonate with contemporary environmental paradigms, fostering ecological awareness and ethical reflection.

However, ecocritical scholarship cautions against uncritical romanticization, recognizing that cultural constructions of nature are ideologically shaped (Williams, 1980). Oliver's metaphors, while emphasizing interconnectedness, also reflect cultural values and perceptions that shape ecological narratives.

Embodied Metaphors and Emotional Resilience

Engagement with embodied metaphors in poetry facilitates emotional processing and resilience. According to Damasio (1999), bodily sensations are integral to emotional experience. Oliver's natural imagery—evoking tactile, visual, kinesthetic sensations—serves as a therapeutic mechanism, rendering internal states accessible and fostering catharsis. Her metaphors translate complex emotions into concrete sensory experiences, enabling readers to navigate vulnerability and strength simultaneously.

Conclusion

Mary Oliver's *Breakage* exemplifies how poetic metaphors rooted in embodied experience articulate themes of fragility, transition, and resilience. Through detailed analysis, this study demonstrates how natural imagery constructs a cohesive cognitive landscape, mapping sensory and bodily experiences onto life's delicate, transformative processes. These metaphors evoke emotional depth and foster shared vulnerability and hope, illustrating that embracing impermanence can be a pathway to renewal. The findings reaffirm the centrality of metaphor as an embodied, experiential process shaping poetic understanding and emotional engagement.

Future research could extend this approach across cultures or explore pedagogical applications in literary education and therapy, further emphasizing the vital role of embodied metaphor in human cognition and artistic expression.

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