

## METAPHORIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CONCEPT “LOVE” IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE LITERATURE

**Zhu Mengqian**

Mogilev State A. Kuleshov University  
(Mogilev, Belarus)

*Love, as a profound and multifaceted emotion, is a central theme in literature across the globe. The way it is expressed and understood varies significantly in English and Chinese cultures, influenced by their unique histories, philosophies, and social structures. The study aims to dissect the metaphoric language of love in both literatures, highlighting the commonalities and divergences in their metaphoric representations.*

**Key words:** concept, love, English literature, Chinese literature, metaphor.

The conceptualization of love in literature is deeply rooted in the cognitive and cultural frameworks of a society [4, p. 164–171]. Metaphors serve as a bridge between the abstract nature of love and the tangible experiences that shape our understanding of it. Previous research has shown that metaphors are not arbitrary but are grounded in the embodied experiences of individuals and cultures [5, p. 18]. The methodology involves a qualitative content analysis of metaphors related to love in a corpus of English and Chinese literary texts, including poetry, novels, and plays. The analysis is informed by cognitive metaphor theory and cross-cultural communication studies.

Love is often compared to natural elements. In English, love is associated with roses, symbolizing beauty and passion. Chinese literature uses the peony, representing love and wealth, and the lotus, symbolizing purity and spiritual love.

The rose, with its vibrant petals and thorny stem, is a classic metaphor for love in English literature. It symbolizes the dual nature of love, encompassing both its beauty and the pain that can accompany it. Shakespeare, in his sonnets, often uses the rose to represent the fleeting nature of beauty and the transience of love (Shakespeare, 1609). For instance, in Sonnet 55, he writes, “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme,” suggesting that the memory of a beloved, like the scent of a rose, remains long after physical beauty has faded.

In Chinese literature, the peony, known as “国色天香” (guó sè tiān xiāng, meaning ‘national color and heavenly fragrance’), is a metaphor for love and prosperity. It is often associated with the emperor and the royal court, symbolizing wealth and high social status. The peony’s full, lush blooms are

seen as a sign of a rich and fulfilling love. In Chinese poetry, the peony is frequently used to convey the depth and opulence of romantic love, as well as its ability to bring good fortune and happiness to a marriage.

English metaphors frequently refer to the heart (e.g., “heartfelt”), while Chinese metaphors may refer to the liver (e.g., “肝肠寸断” [gān cháng cùn duàn], meaning “liver and intestines torn apart”).

In English literature, the heart is a central metaphor for love, symbolizing the core of emotions and the seat of the soul. Words like *heartfelt* convey deep emotional sincerity, while *heartbreak* encapsulates the profound pain of love lost. The heart is seen as the organ that pumps life and love through the body, a theme that resonates in sonnets and stories alike.

Chinese culture, on the other hand, often associates the liver with emotions, particularly love. The metaphor “肝肠寸断” (gān cháng cùn duàn), which translates to ‘liver and intestines torn apart’, is a vivid depiction of the intense pain and longing associated with love. This reflects a holistic view of the body in Chinese culture, where the liver is considered the storehouse of emotions, highlighting the interconnection between physical and emotional well-being.

Love may be depicted as a journey in both cultures, but English literature often frames it as a quest or adventure, while Chinese literature may emphasize the journey’s harmony and balance.

In English literature, love is often portrayed as a quest or adventure, a journey that requires courage, perseverance, and often, the overcoming of great obstacles. This is evident in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, where the knights embark on a journey to find true love [10, p. 17], or in the romantic tales of Sir Thomas Malory, where the search for the Holy Grail is paralleled with the quest for a perfect love. The metaphor of love as a journey is also prominent in the poetry of John Donne, where love is a voyage that one must navigate with faith and determination.

Chinese literature, with its roots in Confucianism and Taoism, tends to emphasize the harmony and balance of the journey of love. The concept of “缘” (yuán), or fate, plays a significant role, suggesting that love is a journey that is predestined and should unfold naturally. This is reflected in the classic Chinese novel “红楼梦” (Hóng Lóu Mèng, Dream of the Red Chamber), where the love stories are intertwined with the broader narrative of family, society, and the natural order.

In both cultures, the journey can serve as a test of the strength and sincerity of love. In English literature, this is seen in the epic poems like

“Beowulf,” where the hero’s journey is also a test of his love and loyalty to his people. In Chinese literature, the journey might be a test of the characters’ ability to maintain their love in adversity, as in the tale of “梁山伯与祝英台” (Liáng Shānbó yǔ Zhù Yīngtái), a tragic love story where the lovers’ journey is marked by societal pressures and personal sacrifice.

English love metaphors are influenced by Greek and Roman mythology (e.g., Cupid), whereas Chinese metaphors may draw from Confucian philosophy and ancient poetry.

In English literature, the figure of Cupid, the Roman god of love, is a prevalent metaphor for the sudden and irresistible force of love. Cupid’s arrow is a symbol of love’s power to strike unexpectedly and cause a profound emotional change. This metaphor is deeply rooted in the traditions of Greek and Roman mythology, where love was often depicted as an overwhelming and sometimes divine intervention.

Chinese literature often draws upon Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of social harmony and personal virtue, to frame its metaphors of love. The tale of “白蛇传” (Bái Shé Zhuàn, The Tale of the White Snake) is a classic example, where love is portrayed as a transformative force that transcends the boundaries between the human and the supernatural. In this story, the white snake spirit’s love for a human man leads her to adopt a human form, highlighting the transformative power of love.

Both cultures use fire to represent the passion and intensity of love, and water to symbolize the depth and fluidity of emotions.

In English literature, fire is a metaphor for the fervent and consuming nature of love. It represents the burning desire and passion that love can inspire. This is evident in the works of William Shakespeare, where love is often described as a ‘*burning flame*’ or a ‘*raging fire*’ that cannot be extinguished. The fire metaphor is also used to describe the transformative power of love.

Chinese literature uses water to symbolize the depth and fluidity of emotions associated with love. Water is seen as adaptable and life-giving, reflecting the nurturing and ever-changing nature of love. In Chinese poetry, love is often compared to flowing rivers or gentle rains, which can be both soothing and overwhelming. This is in line with the Chinese philosophical view of water as a powerful and essential element of life, embodying qualities of flexibility and endurance [6].

Love is metaphorically represented as food in both cultures, signifying its sustenance and necessity. However, Chinese metaphors might include specific dishes or ingredients that carry cultural significance. For instance, “年糕” (nián

gao, sweet sticky rice cakes) are a popular gift for lovers during the Lunar New Year, symbolizing the stickiness of their bond and the hope for a sweet and enduring relationship.

English literature sometimes uses war as a metaphor for the struggles and triumphs in love, while Chinese literature might use strategic games like weiqi (Go) to represent the strategic and contemplative aspects of love relationships [7].

In English literature, love is often depicted as a battlefield. This metaphor is evident in the works of William Shakespeare, where love is described as a war that must be fought with wit and perseverance. The phrase “*love is a battlefield*” encapsulates the idea that love requires strength, courage, and sometimes, sacrifice.

Chinese literature uses the strategic game of weiqi, or Go, as a metaphor for the contemplative and strategic aspects of love relationships. Go is a game of encirclement and territory, where players must think several moves ahead to outmaneuver their opponent. This metaphor reflects the idea that love, like Go, requires patience, foresight, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

The metaphors for love in English and Chinese literature reflect the cultural values and historical contexts of each society. English metaphors tend to emphasize individualism and romanticism, while Chinese metaphors often highlight collectivism and the interplay between human emotions and the natural world [8, p. 33]. These differences can be attributed to the distinct philosophical and cultural traditions of the two societies [9, p. 217]. The metaphoric representation of love in English and Chinese literature is a rich and diverse field that offers a window into the cultural and cognitive processes that shape the concept of love. By understanding these metaphors, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the cultural nuances that inform the way love is experienced and expressed across different societies.

## References

1. Рубанова, Е. В. Экзистенциальная метафора жизни сквозь призму цитат и афоризмов / Е. В. Рубанова // Вестник Минского гос. лингв. ун-та. Сер. 1. – 2019. – № 7(99). – С. 67–74.
2. Рубанова, Е. В. Модели метафорической репрезентации концепта «возраст» в английском языке / Е. В. Рубанова, Д. Н. Около-Кулак // Восточнославянские языки и литературы в европейском контексте –VII : сб. науч. ст. / под ред. Е. Е. Иванова. – Могилев : МГУ имени А. А. Кулешова, 2022. – С. 164–168.
3. Рубанова, Е. В. Метафорическая репрезентация концепта «судьба» в английском языке / Е. В. Рубанова, А. С. Бородавко // Романовские чтения - 16 : сб. ст. Междунар.

науч. конф., Могилев, 24 нояб. 2022 г. / под общ. ред.: А. С. Мельниковой, Е. И. Головач. – Могилев : МГУ имени А. А. Кулешова, 2023. – С. 152–153.

4. Kövecses, Z. *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling* / Z. Kövecses. – Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000. – P. 164–171.
5. Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By* / G. Lakoff, M. Johnson. – Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1980. – P. 18–26.
6. Shen, J. *Metaphor and Culture in Chinese and English Love Poetry* / J. Shen. – Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2012. – P. 40–95.
7. Chen, G. Chapter 6: Comparative Analysis of Metaphor in Chinese and English Literature / G. Chen // *In Metaphor and Cultural Identity in Chinese and English Literature*. – London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. – P. 60–77.
8. He, J., Zhou, L. Philosophical Foundation and Cultural Mapping of Love Metaphors in English and Chinese from a Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics / J. He, L. Zhou // *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*. – 2015. – № 15(11). – P. 30–35.
9. Barcelona, A. *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast* / A. Barcelona // *Clarifying and applying the notions of metaphor and metonymy within cognitive linguistics* / R. Dirven, R. Pörrings (eds.). – Berlin ; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 2002. – P. 207–277.
10. Chaucer, G. *The Canterbury Tales*, <The Knight's Tale> / G. Chaucer [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access : [https://e.kul.pl/files/10791/public/the canterbury tales penguin classics by geoffrey chaucer nevill coghill z-lib.org.pdf](https://e.kul.pl/files/10791/public/the%20canterbury%20tales%20penguin%20classics%20by%20geoffrey%20chaucer%20neville%20coghill%20z-lib.org.pdf). – Date of access : 1.10.2024.