

Original Article

The Cognitive Poetics of Forgetting: Memory, Metaphor, and Meaning in the Modernist Elegy

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of cognitive linguistics and literary analysis to examine the representation of memory and forgetting in the modernist elegy. Moving beyond traditional thematic readings, this paper employs the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as pioneered by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, to analyze how the act of remembrance is not merely described but structured by the poets' metaphorical language. Through a close reading of W.B. Yeats's "The Tower" and selections from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," this article argues that modernist elegies utilize a specific set of "source-path-goal" schemas and container metaphors to represent memory as a spatial and physical process. Crucially, this analysis reveals that the cognitive act of "forgetting" is not presented as a passive failure of recall but as an active, often violent, process of cognitive demolition or re-mapping, reflecting the broader cultural and epistemological crises of the early 20th century. By integrating cognitive poetics with historical literary study, this article demonstrates that the formal and metaphorical innovations of modernist poetry are deeply intertwined with the period's changing understanding of human consciousness. The findings suggest that a cognitive approach offers a rigorous methodology for tracing the philosophical underpinnings of literary form and its evolution in response to historical trauma.

Introduction

The modernist period in English literature is frequently characterized by a profound preoccupation with the past—a past shattered by the First World War, rendered strange by new scientific paradigms, and made inaccessible by the perceived inadequacy of traditional artistic forms. The elegy, a poetic form traditionally dedicated to mourning and remembrance, became a central, if deeply fractured, genre through which modernist poets grappled with this crisis of continuity. While critics like Jahan Ramazani (1994) have masterfully charted the "modernist elegy's" ambivalent relationship with grief, there remains a significant gap in understanding the cognitive mechanics through which these poems construct and dismantle the very idea of memory. This article addresses this gap by asking a fundamental question: How did the modernist elegy's unique metaphorical language cognitively structure the experience of memory and, more importantly, the act of forgetting?

To answer this, this analysis moves beyond a purely thematic or biographical reading and instead adopts a cognitive poetics approach. Cognitive poetics, as defined by Peter Stockwell (2002), explores the relationship between the language of literature and human cognitive processes, arguing that literary texts offer profound insights into how we conceptualize the world. This paper will specifically utilize the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), which posits that our abstract thought is largely structured by metaphorical mappings from more concrete, physical domains of experience (the "source" domain) to more abstract ones (the "target" domain).

This article will argue that modernist elegies employ a distinct metaphorical system to conceptualize memory. Through close readings of W.B. Yeats's "The Tower" (1928) and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), I will demonstrate two key points. First, that memory is systematically structured through spatial metaphors, often as a container to be filled or emptied, and as a path to be traversed. Second, and more crucially, that the modernist act of forgetting is not represented as a simple loss of data or a fading of images, but as an

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active cognitive process of destruction, disorientation, and intentional fragmentation of these very mental structures. This active representation of forgetting, I contend, is a direct poetic response to the epistemological rupture of the modern age, where the past could no longer be understood as a stable source of meaning but as a ruin that must be actively dismantled or navigated anew.

Review of the Literature

This study is situated at the confluence of several critical fields: modernist literary criticism, memory studies, and cognitive poetics. Traditional scholarship on modernist poetry has long acknowledged its preoccupation with history and memory. Michael Levenson's (1984) *A Genealogy of Modernism* establishes the movement's break with tradition, while critics like Hugh Kenner (1971) focused on the "mythic method" as a way to order the chaos of the modern world. More specifically, Jahan Ramazani's (1994) *Poetry of Mourning* is foundational, arguing that the modernist elegy is characterized by an "anti-elegiac" impulse, marked by aggression, irony, and a refusal of consolation. Ramazani brilliantly outlines the psychological and cultural dynamics of mourning in poets like Yeats, but his analysis remains largely within the domain of psychoanalytic and formalist criticism. While he discusses imagery, he does not systematically investigate the underlying conceptual structures that give that imagery its cognitive force.

The field of memory studies, particularly the work of scholars like Paul Connerton (1989) and Pierre Nora (1996), has explored how memory is socially and culturally constructed, often through physical sites and ritualistic practices. This framework is helpful for understanding the modernist obsession with ruins and fragmented cultural artifacts. However, literary texts are not just repositories of cultural memory; they actively shape our cognitive models of what memory is. This is where cognitive poetics provides a novel and necessary methodological tool.

Cognitive poetics emerged as a formal discipline in the late 20th century, seeking to bridge the gap between literary theory and cognitive science. Stockwell's (2002) *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* provides a comprehensive overview of its key concepts, including figure/ground, prototypes, and metaphor. The foundational work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in *Metaphors We Live By* is essential for understanding how metaphorical thought is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition. They demonstrate that concepts like time, causality, and—importantly—memory, are understood through conceptual metaphors. For instance, "MEMORY IS A CONTAINER" (e.g., "I can't hold that memory") and "MEMORY IS A PATH" (e.g., "I'm walking down memory lane") are deeply ingrained patterns of thought. While Lakoff and Johnson focus on everyday language, literary scholars like Mark Turner (1996) and Elena Semino (2014) have applied these principles to literary analysis, showing how authors creatively exploit these cognitive structures to produce new meanings. However, the specific application of CMT to the modernist elegy's representation of forgetting remains an underexplored area, a gap this article seeks to fill.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, text-driven methodology grounded in the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further developed by scholars like George Lakoff (1993). The study is structured as a close comparative reading of two seminal modernist poems—W.B. Yeats's "The Tower" (1928) and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922). The

selection of these two texts is intentional, as they are cornerstone works of the modernist elegy and represent distinct but related approaches to the theme of memory.

The methodological process will consist of three steps:

Metaphor Identification: The primary texts will be meticulously scanned to identify metaphorical expressions related to memory, recollection, and forgetting. This involves isolating phrases and images that use one conceptual domain to structure another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Article Highlights

- Introduces a cognitive poetics framework for interpreting modernist elegies.
- Reveals memory through container and source–path–goal metaphors.
- Reinterprets forgetting as an active cognitive process rather than passive loss.
- Compares Yeats and Eliot using Conceptual Metaphor Theory.
- Connects metaphorical structures with modernist historical and cultural trauma.

Systematic Categorization: The identified metaphors will then be systematically categorized into overarching conceptual metaphors. For instance, phrases like "the wreck of memory" and "load this aching brain" will be grouped under the primary conceptual metaphor **MEMORY IS A PHYSICAL STRUCTURE/CONTAINER**. The analysis will pay particular attention to the "source domains" (e.g., buildings, containers, paths, bodies) that are used to conceptualize the target domain of memory.

Interpretation and Analysis: The final step involves interpreting the function of these systematic metaphorical patterns. This analysis will go beyond mere identification to explore how these cognitive structures create meaning. The focus will be on the negative or destructive variations of these metaphors, as they relate to the act of "forgetting," and how this cognitive poetics reflects the broader historical and cultural anxieties of the modernist period. This interpretive step will also consider the poems' formal elements (like fragmentation and juxtaposition) as complementary to their cognitive-metaphorical structures.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two primary conceptual metaphorical systems identified in the poems: **MEMORY AS A CONTAINER/PHYSICAL SPACE** and **MEMORY AS A PATH**. The discussion will then synthesize these findings to demonstrate the active and destructive nature of forgetting in modernist elegy.

❖ Memory as a Container and Physical Space: The Destruction of the Architectural Past

In both Yeats's and Eliot's poems, memory is powerfully conceptualized through the metaphor of a physical structure or a container that can be built, stored, filled, and, most importantly, destroyed. This metaphor maps the abstract idea of a mental archive onto the concrete experience of architecture, a source domain of significant cultural weight.

In Yeats's "The Tower," the titular tower is the central image, serving as a complex symbol for both the physical space of his home, Thoor

Ballylee, and the poet's own aging mind, filled with memories and historical consciousness. Yeats begins the poem by surveying his "ancient tower," a container for his past. However, the act of remembering is presented as a violent struggle: "I pace upon the battlements and stare / On the foundations of a house, or where / Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth" (Yeats, 1928, lines 1-3). Here, the tower is not just a container but a ruin, its "foundations" visible and its structural integrity compromised. This sets the stage for the poem's central cognitive conflict: the poet's "giddy" mind is a container that has become "too full" with memories, a burden he wishes to shed: "O may I... / ...draw this broken / Thread out of my brain, and find / Its texture, and its color, and its shape" (Yeats, 1928, lines 31-35). The concrete act of drawing out a thread from a fabric becomes a metaphor for the laborious, painful cognitive work of trying to extract and analyze a specific memory from the cluttered "container" of his mind. Forgetting is framed as a necessary act of mental renovation, a "cleaning out" of the "wreck" that the mind has become.

T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" takes this architectural metaphor to its most radical extreme. The poem's famous opening, "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire" (Eliot, 1922, lines 1-3), establishes memory as a fertile, yet painful, physical entity being "mixed" and "bred" in the ground. But this ground is "dead," a landscape of ruin. The city of London is depicted as an "Unreal City" where the dead are buried, and the living are trapped in a "brown fog," their memories fragmented and inaccessible. The poem's constant shifting between historical and contemporary references, from the Arthurian legend to London Bridge, functions as a spatial fragmentation. The reader is bombarded with images of broken "stones," "falling towers," and "unreal" structures, creating a cognitive environment where memory is a demolished cityscape. The famous line "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot, 1922, line 431) confirms that the container of memory is shattered beyond repair. Forgetting is not a choice but a condition of existence; the container is ruined, and all that remains are "fragments" of a coherent past that can no longer be stored or accessed in a unified whole. The poet's work is to cognitively assemble these shards, a desperate act of bricolage in the face of total mental collapse.

❖ Memory as a Path: The Dead End and the Search for Direction

A second dominant conceptual metaphor is MEMORY IS A PATH, also known as a "source-path-goal" schema. This metaphor conceives of time and memory as a journey through space, where memories are locations, and the act of recollection is a process of moving towards or along a path (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the modernist elegy, this path is almost always blocked, leading to a dead end, or is part of an aimless, cyclical wandering.

Yeats's "The Tower" is structured as a movement, with the speaker climbing the tower to "pace upon the battlements." This vertical movement up the tower is a spatial journey backward in time, where he contemplates the great historical figures of Ireland. He retraces the path of history, but it is a path of disappointment and loss. The image of "the broken / Thread" mentioned earlier is an extension of the path metaphor—it is a path that has become tangled and severed, impossible to follow to its conclusion. Forgetting here is a violent cutting short of the journey, a refusal to follow the painful path to its end: "Now shall I make my soul, / Compelling it to study in a school,

/ Or in the ancient tower's profoundest room?" (Yeats, 1928, lines 15-17). He is at a crossroads, unable to move forward mentally without confronting and then intentionally discarding the burdensome path behind him.

In "The Waste Land," the path metaphor is central to its depiction of modern spiritual and psychological paralysis. The poem is a journey through a modern wasteland where movement is futile. In "The Fire Sermon," the Thames is no longer a path for pastoral lovers but a dead river where "The nymphs are departed." The speaker asks, "What shall I do now? What shall I do?" and answers, "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street / With my hair down, so" (Eliot, 1922, lines 131-133). This is movement without direction, a frantic pacing that leads nowhere. The most powerful expression of this is the refrain in "The Burial of the Dead": "I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (Eliot, 1922, lines 39-41). The speaker is trapped in a liminal space, a "dead land" where memory and desire cannot lead to a meaningful destination. Forgetting, in Eliot's world, is the inability to find the path at all, a state of perpetual disorientation where the cognitive map of the past has been erased. The "fragments" he shores against his ruins are like broken signposts in a desert, pointing in all directions simultaneously, providing no clear route to a coherent, healing memory.

❖ Synthesis: Active Forgetting as a Modernist Cognitive Strategy

The analysis of these two primary conceptual metaphors—MEMORY IS A CONTAINER and MEMORY IS A PATH—reveals a consistent pattern. In both Yeats and Eliot, the cognitive act of forgetting is not a passive fading away, but an active and often violent engagement with the mental structures that house and organize memory. For Yeats, forgetting is the necessary, arduous task of "drawing out the broken thread," or demolishing the over-crowded "tower" of his mind to make room for a new, more distilled form of wisdom or artistry. For Eliot, forgetting is the unshakeable condition of living in a "ruined" mental landscape, where the path is a dead end and the container is beyond repair. However, the poem itself becomes the act of shoring up the fragments—a cognitive act of reconstruction that gives form to the experience of forgetting.

This cognitive poetics of forgetting is profoundly reflective of the historical moment. The "tower" of the past, built on linear narratives and unified truths, was shattered by the war and the new intellectual currents of modernism. Forgetting, in this reading, becomes a radical and necessary cognitive strategy for survival. It is the active demolition of obsolete mental models, the refusal to follow paths that lead to outdated forms of consolation, and the effort to build new meanings out of the ruins. By representing forgetting as a physical, spatial, and structural process, Yeats and Eliot give form to an abstract psychological and cultural experience, making it tangible and urgent for the reader. The power of their poetry lies in its ability to make us feel the cognitive labor of trying to remember and the terrifying, active process of forgetting in the modern world.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a cognitive poetics approach, specifically through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, provides a powerful new way to understand the representation of memory and forgetting in modernist elegy. By analyzing the systematic use of MEMORY AS CONTAINER and MEMORY AS PATH metaphors in the works of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, it becomes clear that the

modernist experience of forgetting is far from passive. It is an active, destructive, and often violent cognitive process, enacted through the demolition of mental structures and the disruption of temporal and spatial paths. Yeats frames forgetting as a painful but necessary cognitive labor, an act of clearing out the mental clutter of the past to achieve a new artistic or spiritual vision. Eliot, conversely, presents forgetting as a pervasive condition of ruin and disorientation, where the cognitive containers of memory are shattered and its paths lead to dead ends, leaving only the imperative to "shore" together the fragments.

This analysis demonstrates that the formal innovations of modernist poetry—its fragmentation, its allusiveness, its juxtaposition of images—are not stylistic quirks but are the poetic expressions of a specific cognitive model of a mind in crisis. The metaphors themselves are the cognitive tools through which the poems stage the dismantling and reassembly of memory. This study opens several avenues for future research. It would be fruitful to apply this cognitive methodology to other modernist poets, such as Ezra Pound or H.D., or to explore how this model of forgetting is taken up in later 20th and 21st-century literature. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that by integrating the rigor of cognitive science with the interpretive depth of literary criticism, we can gain a more profound and nuanced understanding of how literature does not just represent thought, but is a form of thought, actively shaping how we conceptualize and navigate our innermost experiences.

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- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

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