Print ISSN: 2791-2248
Online ISSN: 2791-2256
مَجلّةُ تَسْنِيمِ الدَوليّة
للعُلومِ الإنسانيّةِ والاجتمَاعيّةِ والقانونيّةِ

العدد الثامن عشر – آب / ايلول – SeptAugust / / 2026

Ethical Reasoning through Conceptual Metaphor in Narrative Discourse

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Abstract. This article investigates how conceptual metaphor makes ethical judgments available and how narrative discourse tests their adequacy. P. D. James's *The Children of Men* remains the central text, read comparatively with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Hugh Howey's *Wool*, and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*. A qualitative, scene-based method connects figurative expressions with source-domain inferences, narrative perspective, and consequences across each novel. James's metaphors of decay and burden naturalize political resignation, while the movement from guardianship to command exposes the instability of protective authority. McCarthy's recurring fire associates survival with moral continuity but requires correction through the child's responses to strangers. Howey combines constriction and coffin imagery with deceptive visual experience, questioning whether apparent knowledge can justify collective obedience. Lynch's metaphors of drowning and consumption communicate political vulnerability while risking the naturalization of organized violence. The comparison shows that ethical reasoning involves more than selecting an appropriate metaphor: it requires examining its distribution of agency, its exclusions, and its revision through narrative progression. The novels offer different means of challenging metaphorical inference, including internal contradiction,

dialogue, material verification, and changes of scale. Their ethical achievement lies in making partial descriptions answerable to the lives they organize.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, ethical reasoning, narrative ethics, dystopian fiction, P. D. James, comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Ethical reasoning depends partly on how a situation becomes intelligible before a decision is made. Describing another person as a burden makes the costs of assistance conspicuous; describing that person as someone entrusted to one's care foregrounds obligation. Neither description supplies a complete argument, yet each directs attention and makes particular responses easier to justify. Narrative discourse is especially significant because it can establish a metaphor, attach it to a persuasive perspective, and subsequently expose the consequences of reasoning through it. A novel can therefore examine a moral vocabulary while also employing that vocabulary to solicit readers' judgments.

The Children of Men provides the central case. James's imagined crisis of universal infertility generates questions about the treatment of older people, migrant labor, prisoners, and political opponents. Theo Faron's movement from detached observation toward involvement connects public rationalizations with private habits of judgment. Decay, burden, enclosure, and guardianship repeatedly organize his understanding of an apparently exhausted society. These domains do not merely describe its condition: they offer reasons to accept withdrawal, exclude others, postpone reform, or entrust power to a protector (James, 1992).

Three comparative novels clarify what is distinctive about this process. The Road examines the transmission of ethical identity after social collapse; Wool makes the organization of perception central to political obedience; Prophet Song follows a family whose ordinary means of judgment become inadequate under authoritarian violence (Howey, 2012; Lynch, 2023; McCarthy, 2006/2022). Their crises differ, and they should not be reduced to one account of dystopia. Their shared analytical value lies in the sustained interaction between physical source domains and disputed responsibilities.

The article asks how metaphor supplies premises for ethical reasoning, how narrative form modifies those premises, and where each novel's figurative organization limits its ethical vision. It argues that metaphor becomes ethically

consequential through a sequence: a description foregrounds selected relations, those relations invite an inference, and subsequent encounters either confirm or challenge that inference. The comparison consequently addresses the adequacy of the narratives themselves, including their concentration on privileged witnesses, familial loyalty, technical expertise, and emotionally compelling victims.

2. Conceptual Metaphor and Narrative Ethics

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain conceptual metaphor as understanding one domain through another. Such understanding is selective: a source domain makes some aspects of a target readily perceptible while leaving others less visible. When responsibility is understood through physical carrying, effort and endurance become salient. The metaphor can dignify commitment, but it can also make dependent people appear removable. An ethical interpretation must therefore identify the inference being encouraged rather than assume that a source domain possesses an unchanging moral meaning.

Semino's (2008) discourse approach directs attention to recurrence, local context, and relations among expressions. Kövecses (2015) further emphasizes that bodily experience operates alongside situational, cultural, and discourse contexts. These approaches help explain why a fire can signify ethical continuity in one narrative without making every literal flame an instance of the same conceptual mapping. Semino et al. (2018) distinguish levels of analysis, including linguistic metaphors, scenarios, and broader conceptual structures, while connecting framing with agency, evaluation, and emotion. This distinction is valuable when a novel combines a metaphorical expression with literal objects and extended plot patterns.

Claims about reasoning also require evidential caution. Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) found that different metaphorical descriptions of crime influenced participants' proposed responses. However, Steen et al. (2014) reported no corresponding framing effect in their follow-up experiments. This disagreement does not prevent literary analysis, but it prevents treating an interpretive possibility as a demonstrated psychological outcome. Gibbs's (2017) examination of debates about conceptual metaphor likewise supports distinguishing evidence in language from claims about cognitive processing. The present study identifies invitations to judgment within texts; it does not establish how every reader actually responds.

Narrative ethics supplies the complementary question of how those invitations are arranged. Phelan (2014) distinguishes ethical issues concerning

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the events represented, the telling, production, and reception of narrative. The present analysis concentrates on the relation between represented conduct and its telling. A character can sincerely justify harmful action, while restricted focalization makes that justification emotionally persuasive. Later consequences may require readers to reconsider their initial alignment. Booth's (1989) account of ethical engagement with fiction also directs attention beyond explicit moral propositions toward the kinds of judgment cultivated through sustained literary company.

Combining these approaches avoids two reductions. Ethical reasoning cannot be inferred from metaphor labels alone, because perspective and sequence affect their force. Conversely, judging characters' actions without considering figurative language overlooks how some courses of action acquire apparent necessity. The relevant unit is a situated inference: who describes a problem, what comparison organizes it, whose interests become visible, and what subsequent experience reveals about that description.

3. Method and Comparative Scope

The study uses qualitative close reading of ethically consequential scenes distributed across the four narratives. James receives the fullest treatment because The Children of Men is the primary novel underlying the research. The comparative readings follow selected recurring patterns from their establishment through later complications and endings. The analysis does not claim exhaustive lexical coverage or statistical frequency. It investigates how identifiable expressions and related narrative structures organize judgments about vulnerability, authority, survival, and assistance.

The procedure is informed by MIP, which examines contextual word meanings against more basic meanings and asks whether comparison explains their relationship (Pragglejaz Group, 2007, pp. 2–3). MIPVU provides further methodological distinctions for systematic linguistic identification (Steen et al., 2010). Here, explicit comparisons and metaphorically used words provide the strongest linguistic evidence. Literal islands, walls, fires, and sea crossings are analyzed separately as settings or events that can reinforce, complicate, or contradict figurative associations. A symbol such as James's ring is not automatically treated as a lexical metaphor.

For each pattern, the reading identifies a physical source domain, a possible ethical inference, its narrative attribution, and a contrary case. The comparison then asks whether correction comes through another voice, embodied consequences, practical verification, or altered narrative scale. This method

preserves differences between the novels while making their accounts of ethical judgment comparable.

4. *The Children of Men*: From Naturalized Decline to Accountable Care

James's decay imagery makes historical exhaustion appear continuous with organic deterioration. Theo's early anticipation of abandoned buildings and neglected gardens gives extinction an imaginable physical form. Those objects can deteriorate literally, but the move from material neglect to political resignation requires additional reasoning. A wall's eventual collapse does not establish that the treatment of living people has ceased to matter. The narrative places readers near a consciousness for which the disappearance of posterity threatens the grounds of present obligation (James, 1992).

The damaged seaside chalets, compared to the teeth of a decaying jaw, give that tendency a more explicit figurative shape. A settlement becomes a deteriorating body near the scene of the Quietus. This proximity matters because the state's management of older people can appear to belong to the same irreversible process. Yet Theo's encounter with coercion interrupts the analogy. Bodily aging, communal neglect, and organized death are causally distinct. The setting invites an inference of decline; the event requires an assessment of agents who choose what happens to vulnerable people. The ethical correction emerges from their juxtaposition rather than from an abstract rejection of all decay imagery (James, 1992).

The later recollection of England as overripe fruit available for Xan's taking sharpens the political implications. Ripeness makes acquisition look timely; rottenness suggests that ordinary renewal has already become impossible. England occupies the passive position of something to be picked, whereas Xan appears as the person capable of acting. The narration acknowledges the comparison's conventionality while accepting its apparent accuracy. That combination shows how familiar language can support a persuasive historical explanation without adequately distributing responsibility. Institutions and citizens disappear behind a picture of inevitable availability. The metaphor explains Xan's opportunity more readily than it explains his entitlement (James, 1992).

Burden imagery operates more intimately. Theo's response to the Five Fishes' reform demands represents the public as already carrying sorrow and regret. Asking for resistance then resembles adding an intolerable load. The implied argument appears compassionate: exhausted people should not be

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required to sustain heroic effort. Its missing premise concerns those who bear the consequences of political inaction. Sojourners and prisoners remain exposed while the emotional costs to comparatively protected citizens determine what can reasonably be asked. The metaphor does not simply deny suffering; it ranks suffering through its choice of bearer (James, 1992).

Theo's disposal of the manifesto completes the movement from description to decision. The text does not leave the burden frame as an isolated reflection; it shows an action that follows from treating dissent as an additional imposition. His brief attraction to the group's commitment preserves an alternative judgment inside the scene. The reasoning is unstable because he can recognize the moral seriousness of resistance even while dismissing its practical worth. Through narrative ethics, this becomes a problem of alignment: readers have access to his fatigue and intelligence but also to the inadequacy of the conclusion those qualities support (Phelan, 2014).

The political boundaries of the novel extend the same unequal distribution of responsibility. The Isle of Man is a literal site of incarceration, and its separation should not itself be classified as a metaphorical word. Nevertheless, the Council's discussion treats removal as if it settled continuing responsibility for prisoners' safety. Similarly, representations of migrant arrivals as a collective threat support restrictions on Sojourners, although Theo challenges the supposed necessity of exclusion. The issue is not whether boundaries can ever protect; it is whether placing people outside a protected space permits the state to disregard obligations created by its own policies (James, 1992).

Guardianship appears to answer these failures because it makes responsibility personal. Xan's title situates government within a vocabulary of custody and protection, yet the population's position as a charge can also justify command. Theo's growing care for Julian and the child seems to offer an alternative grounded in attention rather than administration. Bray's (2022) reading of the novel as a Christian dystopia establishes the relevance of religious hope to this development. However, hope does not remove the political ambiguity of a protector empowered to decide for others.

The final ring scene subjects that ambiguity to a decisive test. After Xan's death, Theo takes the emblem of office and experiences the attraction of authority. Julian's objection interrupts the apparent continuity between his recent acts of care and his suitability to rule. The ring is a material symbol, while Theo's anticipation of shaping the future reveals the inferential danger: because he has protected particular people, he may regard broader power as a

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natural extension of protection. The ending places care and command together without making them ethically equivalent (James, 1992).

James's narrative achievement lies in exposing rationalizations through a protagonist who can both perceive and reproduce them. Its limitation is the concentration of political renewal around an educated insider and an exceptional birth. Prisoners, migrants, and older people are morally consequential, yet their experiences are often mediated through Theo's discoveries. The child's promise may also imply that renewed obligation depends on recovering a biological future, although the injustices preceding the birth already demand opposition. A critical reading should therefore retain the novel's challenge to resignation while questioning the exceptional conditions through which it makes commitment narratively effective.

5. *The Road*: Fire, Moral Identity, and the Stranger

In The Road, repeated references to carrying fire connect survival with something that can be preserved and transmitted. Fire is also literally necessary, so its moral extension draws force from embodied dependence on warmth and light. The father's use of the expression presents their journey as more than continued biological existence. They possess an obligation to sustain a form of humanity within a world where human bodies can become food. The physical experience of keeping a flame alive offers a model of vigilance, continuity, and threatened value (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

The metaphor's openness is both a strength and a problem. It allows an ethical commitment to persist when institutions and shared explanations have collapsed, but it does not specify the treatment owed to every stranger. The father can understand preservation primarily through the protection of his son. The boy repeatedly interprets their ethical identity as a reason to help other people. Alkaç (2019) identifies the difference between their understandings of goodness and fire, supporting a reading in which the repeated expression becomes a site of disagreement rather than a settled moral doctrine.

This disagreement emerges through the narrative's division of access. The father's memories, calculations, and dread make refusal intelligible, while the boy's questions reopen judgments that necessity appears to have settled. Their exchanges do not eliminate the danger of strangers. Instead, they challenge the inference that vulnerability always licenses withdrawal. The same source domain can authorize defensive preservation or generous transmission: a flame may be guarded from everyone, or another person may be allowed to share its

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warmth. Ethical reasoning turns on how the metaphor's relational possibilities are enacted.

The encounter with the thief exposes the difference between identity and conduct. After recovering their possessions, the father strips the man of his clothing. The punishment exceeds the recovery of what was stolen and leaves another vulnerable body exposed. The boy's distress makes that exposure visible as an ethical fact. When father and son return, the man is gone; leaving the clothes cannot guarantee that the harm has been repaired. The sequence resists an easy account in which remorse restores innocence. It tests the claim to moral continuity against an action whose consequences cannot be fully retrieved (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

The episode also complicates the division between good survivors and threatening outsiders. The thief has endangered the pair, but the father's response shows that possessing a moral vocabulary does not secure proportionate judgment. Through Phelan's (2014) distinction between conduct and telling, the reader can understand the protective motive while finding the action inadequate. Fire remains ethically useful only if its bearers accept correction. Otherwise, it becomes a sign of group membership that protects self-understanding more effectively than it protects life.

After the father's death, the boy must assess a stranger without the authority that previously interpreted danger for him. His questions connect the fire to concrete practices, including the treatment of children and the refusal of cannibalism. Trust remains uncertain, but the metaphor is brought into relation with evidence about another person's conduct. The ending therefore develops ethical continuity through a risky relationship. What is transmitted is not an infallible rule; it is a vocabulary that must keep being interpreted under conditions of incomplete knowledge (McCarthy, 2006/2022).

McCarthy's narrative nevertheless restricts the social breadth of this ethics. Many strangers appear briefly as possible threats, while the father and son receive sustained interior and emotional attention. Familial intimacy can make their survival seem the privileged measure of value. The boy's interventions resist this narrowing, but they cannot provide full accounts of those left behind. The final recollection of trout also unsettles any wholly human triumph: the lost world exceeds the preservation of one moral lineage. The fire sustains hope without demonstrating that human ethical continuity repairs ecological destruction.

6. *Wool*: Constriction, Vision, and the Verification of Protection

Wool locates ethical judgment within an environment that controls what residents can know. The silo is literally enclosed, but Holston's sense that his life, skin, and surroundings have become too tight extends physical constriction into an account of intolerable existence. Restricted movement becomes a way of understanding diminished possibility. His desire to leave consequently appears as a response to pressure, although the available exit is itself institutionally managed. Howey refuses a straightforward equation between crossing a boundary and achieving freedom (Howey, 2012).

Coffin imagery associated with the cleaning suit strengthens that complication. Equipment ostensibly enabling exposure to the outside is imagined through an object of final enclosure. Protection and burial occupy the same material form. The source domain does not simply announce death; it exposes a contradiction within the institution's account of care. A system can claim to prepare a person for danger while supplying conditions that ensure the person cannot survive it. Here the figurative comparison becomes answerable to the technical construction of the suit.

The visual deception surrounding cleaning develops a related problem at the level of evidence. Holston sees an apparently green world through his visor and believes the people inside need access to its truth. His cleaning follows from a benevolent inference based on manipulated perception. The image on the silo's screen, by contrast, represents the barren exterior more accurately than his immediate experience does. This reversal makes the familiar association between seeing and knowing ethically unreliable. The scene is a literal technological deception, not sufficient evidence by itself for a lexical metaphor; its analytical importance lies in how it tests the authority commonly attached to direct vision (Howey, 2012).

The residents' interpretation of cleaning then depends on an action whose motive they cannot adequately reconstruct. The ritual turns the condemned person's apparent compliance into evidence that the established order remains intelligible. Narrative sequence initially exposes readers to this arrangement through limited knowledge, then revises it as information accumulates. Ethical judgment must therefore address more than whether a cleaner cooperates. It must consider who controls the sensory and material conditions under which cooperation becomes reasonable.

Juliette's survival changes the basis of judgment. The substitution of effective sealing tape, her recognition of the deceptive display, and her refusal to perform the expected cleaning connect understanding with intervention by other workers. Her discovery is not simply a superior individual act of seeing.

It depends on material assistance, accumulated suspicion, and an opportunity to compare expectations with what actually happens. The narrative shifts ethical authority from institutional explanation toward practices that can be checked and revised (Howey, 2012).

This development revises the meaning of enclosure across the novel. Walls can sustain life in a dangerous environment, but the need for shelter does not justify every restriction imposed within it. The relevant distinction concerns the organization of protection: whether residents can question information, examine equipment, and participate in decisions that determine their exposure to harm. The coffin association reveals false protection; successful collaboration shows that protection need not be abandoned altogether. The novel's reasoning proceeds by separating a material necessity from the governing structure that claims exclusive authority over it.

Howey's emphasis on technical verification is powerful but limited. Discovering a false display or faulty seal can disprove a specific official claim; it cannot by itself decide how a community should distribute power afterward. The narrative risks making the skilled exceptional discoverer the principal source of liberation. Other residents may seem most important as those awaiting accurate information. Its strongest corrective is the dependence of Juliette's achievements on labor and cooperation. Read critically, Wool supports an ethics of shared scrutiny more convincingly than an assumption that factual revelation automatically produces just government.

7. *Prophet Song*: Engulfment, Consumption, and Unequal Catastrophe

Prophet Song describes authoritarian transformation through a dense interaction of domestic experience and bodily threat. Political uncertainty becomes muddy or unstable perception; fear and grief acquire the qualities of drowning; the state can appear as a consuming creature. These expressions translate changes in law, coercion, and public truth into experiences that seem to overwhelm the body. Their force derives from a mismatch between ordinary habits of judgment and an environment that no longer honors the procedures those habits presuppose (Lynch, 2023).

Images of people sinking and struggling for breath make the loss of reliable action physically imaginable. Eilish's effort to obtain information about her husband occurs within a world where asking, waiting, and appealing no longer produce predictable responses. The source domain of submersion foregrounds the difficulty of gaining orientation or maintaining agency. From this

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perspective, delayed action need not signify indifference or simple ignorance. It can represent a person attempting to judge while the conditions of judgment are being systematically dismantled.

Consumption gives the threat a different structure. When the state is imagined as an ogre capable of taking and devouring a father, institutional power becomes an agent with appetite. Unlike diffuse water, the consuming figure directs attention toward a threatening actor. It also draws on a vocabulary accessible within family life. The conjunction of these domains matters: engulfment communicates the victim's experience, while consumption can restore a sense that someone or something is doing the harm. Neither should erase the specific decisions through which detention and violence occur (Lynch, 2023).

The account of reality through ownership and credit further complicates the political field. Control extends to what can be accepted as true, not merely to bodies and streets. Such figurative reasoning exposes the danger of assuming that reliable evidence will circulate freely and correct a false account. In Wool, technical verification creates openings against manipulated perception; in Prophet Song, the ability to make verification publicly effective is itself threatened. Knowing that a wrong has occurred does not ensure access to an institution capable of acknowledging or remedying it.

Lynch's close attention to Eilish intensifies these pressures. Long, densely connected passages and the incorporation of speech into the flow of narration make explanation, recollection, and immediate fear difficult to separate. This arrangement offers sustained proximity to compromised agency, but proximity also carries an ethical risk. Readers may experience the accumulation of threat as total and inevitable. If the aquatic imagery is accepted as a complete explanation, political violence can resemble a natural force against which action is intrinsically futile. The narrative's representations of identifiable authorities, obstructed procedures, and organized brutality must therefore remain part of the interpretation (Lynch, 2023).

Late in the novel, the recognition that catastrophe can end one community's world while others continue their ordinary lives revises the scale of engulfment. Apocalypse is no longer a synchronized universal event. The contrast introduces the responsibility of distant spectators for whom another family's destruction can become passing information. This movement matters because it exceeds empathy for a particular household. It asks how the ordinary continuity enjoyed elsewhere is related to the refusal or inability to respond.

The final movement toward the sea gives material danger renewed prominence. The water is literal, and escape does not convert it into a simple emblem of freedom. Earlier drowning imagery now meets a hazardous route through which survival may nevertheless become possible. The ending refuses both secure rescue and the inference that danger makes movement meaningless. Lynch's achievement is to make constrained judgment emotionally and politically intelligible. Its limitation is the possibility that concentrated familial identification leaves less room for collective forms of resistance and for lives outside the central household. The change of scale toward spectatorship partially challenges that restriction without resolving it.

Conclusion

Conceptual metaphor contributes to ethical reasoning by selecting relations through which obligations and dangers become understandable. Narrative discourse adds the capacity to test those selections against other perspectives, material consequences, and later events. In The Children of Men, the central case, decay and burden make resignation plausible, while the unresolved relation between care and command prevents an uncomplicated endorsement of renewal. The Road tests moral continuity through responses to strangers; Wool makes protective authority answerable to shared verification; Prophet Song reveals both the experiential force and the political risks of overwhelming catastrophe imagery. Together, the novels suggest that responsible judgment requires metaphors capable of correction. Their ethical value depends on whether the people excluded by an initially persuasive description can return to challenge it.

Finally, all four narratives create unequal access to suffering. Theo's educated detachment, the father and son's intimacy, Juliette's practical competence, and Eilish's familial vulnerability provide compelling centers of attention. Each center enables understanding while limiting it. Metaphor criticism should consequently question not only harmful comparisons spoken by authorities but also the narratives' own ways of making some lives more available to judgment than others. The proposed analysis remains interpretive and selective; broader annotation and reader-response research would be needed to test prevalence and reception. Its contribution is to show where a text provides grounds for revising the inferences it first makes persuasive.

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