

Simile As A Means Of Shaping The Concept Of The Narcissistic Parent In Will I Ever Be Good Enough?

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Received: 30 September 2025; **Accepted:** 23 October 2025; **Published:** 28 November 2025

Abstract: This paper investigates the stylistic and conceptual functions of simile in Karyl McBride's *Will I Ever Be Good Enough? Healing the Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers* (2008), a seminal work in contemporary American popular psychology. By combining the insights of linguistic stylistics and conceptual metaphor theory, the study explores how figurative comparisons shape readers' understanding of the narcissistic parent and the child's emotional reality. Through a close reading of McBride's text, three major categories of similes are identified: those depicting emotional coldness, those representing manipulation and control, and those revealing identity loss in the child. Each category constructs distinct yet interrelated aspects of the narcissistic dynamic. The analysis demonstrates that McBride's similes perform not only aesthetic or rhetorical functions but also cognitive, pedagogical, and therapeutic roles. They render abstract psychological phenomena concrete and relatable, transforming scientific concepts into images accessible to a broad audience. The article argues that figurative language, especially simile, is a crucial linguistic mechanism in the translation of clinical psychology into emotionally resonant discourse.

Keywords: Simile, narcissistic parent, stylistics, conceptual metaphor, figurative language, psychological discourse, Karyl McBride.

Introduction: In modern psychological literature, the notion of narcissism has evolved from a merely psychoanalytic concept into a cultural keyword that describes widespread social and family phenomena. The term has entered not only diagnostic books but also everyday life speech signifying self-absorption, self-obsession, emotional manipulation and abuse, and lack of empathy. In this context, Karyl McBride's book *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* (2008) has a unique position. Written for a general readership and broad audience, it blends therapeutic insight with literary expressiveness, giving opportunity to show their voice and the traumatic experience of the daughters raised by cold narcissistic mothers.

While psychological studies of narcissism focus primarily on behavioral symptoms as well as the causes and effects, a linguistic-stylistic approach reveals how language shapes the perception of difficult narcissistic relationships. Figurative language, simile in particular, functions as a bridge between the psychological concept and the reader's lived experience. McBride's text is rich in such comparisons, which provides a vivid

picture of the emotional mechanisms of narcissistic parenting style.

The present article analyzes how similes in McBride's work contribute to shaping the conceptual image of the narcissistic parent. The study also explores the broader cognitive and therapeutic implications of these stylistic devices, emphasizing that McBride's language does not only describe but it also performs an act of emotional translation and interpretation, turning psychological theory into narrative understanding.

METHODS

The research material comprises selected chapters and illustrative passages from *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* (2008). The book's dual nature, scientific and at the same time personal, makes it particularly suitable for stylistic analysis. Examples of simile were identified and researched through close reading, focusing on expressions containing comparative markers such as *like* and *as*.

A qualitative stylistic method was used combining:

1. Textual identification of similes related to narcissistic

behavior, parent-child relations and emotional conditions;

2. Semantic classification of similes by thematic field and conceptual function;

3. Interpretative analysis within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and cognitive stylistics (Semino, 2008).

This approach assists a proper understanding of simile as a cognitive model rather than a merely decorative device. The analysis also considers the interaction between stylistic form and psychological content, examining how figurative language contributes to therapeutic implication.

RESULTS

1. Similes of emotional coldness, ignorance and conditional love

A central element in McBride's portrayal of the narcissistic parent is the absence of authentic sincere warmth and attachment. The narcissistic mother's love is presented as conditional and externally motivated. McBride describes such affection as "like a light that flickers on only when someone is watching." This simile conveys emotional artificiality and instable attitude. The narcissistic mother's feelings depend on social validation and appreciation aiming to impress people around her.

Other examples compare maternal attention to "a mirror that reflects only when you stand in the right light." The image of selective reflection shows the child's difficult position when he or she is valued only when enhancing the parent's ego. These similes function cognitively to transform psychological distancing into visual imagery, enabling readers to "see" the dynamics of emotional neglect.

2. Similes of Manipulating and Dominating

Another cluster of similes depicts the narcissistic parent as one with a manipulative and controlling nature. The mother's behavior is compared to "a spider weaving a web around her daughter" or "a puppeteer pulling invisible strings." Both comparisons convey confinement and loss of autonomy, highlighting the subtle psychological characteristic of narcissistic families.

The predatory imagery of the spider simile introduces a moral dimension: narcissistic control becomes not merely emotional but parasitic. Similarly, the puppeteer comparison exposes the imbalance of power and the absence of genuine affection. These similes transform abstract dependency into tangible, real physical sensations of tension.

3. Similes of self-reflection and loss of identity

and individuality

Perhaps the most powerful images in McBride's book relate to the daughter's identity formation. The narcissistic parent is often described as using the child "like a mirror to admire herself." Through this simile, McBride depicts the central psychological mechanism of narcissism - projection. The child's individuality dissolves and disappears, existing only to validate the parent's self-image and self-satisfaction.

Another metaphor compares the child to "a shadow following someone else's light." This image captures both emotional invisibility and psychological dependence. Such similes not only signal the child's loss of identity but also awaken empathy in the reader, who can visualize and empathize the emotional damage done by narcissistic parenting.

Collectively, these three groups of similes construct a form conceptual field in which the narcissistic parent appears as cold, manipulative, and self-centered, while the child is depicted as dependent, unnoticed, and silenced.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that McBride's similes perform multifunctional roles on linguistic, cognitive, and therapeutic levels.

On the linguistic level, the similes transform the broad terminology of psychology into vivid imagery. Words like narcissistic supply, emotional unavailability, or projection, which might appear abstract in clinical literature, become accessible when translated into visual comparisons. The imagery of mirrors, strings, webs, and shadows bridges professional and popular discourse, allowing a non-specialist audience to perceive complex ideas.

On the cognitive level, similes act as conceptual frames. Following Lakoff and Johnson's view that metaphor and simile structure human understanding and picture of the world, McBride's comparisons create cognitive models for narcissism. Emotional coldness and detachment are conceptualized as light and darkness; control is conceptualized as physical confinement and imprisonment; and loss of identity is conceptualized as reflection or shadow. Each comparison evokes sensory associations that transform psychological theory in human traumatic experience.

On the therapeutic level, similes lead to emotional recognition. Many readers of McBride's work relate personally to the described experiences. The vivid comparisons let them to identify and name their pain, an essential step in healing process. When a daughter realizes that she has been "like a mirror reflecting someone else's image," she can begin to separate her

own identity from her parent's expectations. Thus, the stylistic device serves a psychological function, guiding self-understanding through language.

Moreover, the similes contribute to the ethical dimension of McBride's narrative. By framing narcissism through metaphors and similes of predation, manipulation, and detachment, the author implicitly moralizes the discourse, calling the narcissistic parent as an agent of harm and the child as a victim deserving empathy. This moral framing aligns with the didactic aim of American self-help literature, which aims both to enlighten and to bring therapeutic comfort to readers.

Finally, McBride's style exemplifies the broader linguistic trend in American popular psychology, the fusion of scientific terminology with narrative empathy of the readers. Her similes create a conversational and authoritative tone and living atmosphere, bridging the gap between academic psychology and real emotional experience. This way, they reflect a distinctly American communicative ideal: knowledge that is instructive, informational, healing and therapeutic.

CONCLUSION

Simile in Karyl McBride's *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* Functions as a powerful means of shaping the conceptual image of the narcissistic parent. By transforming abstract psychological constructs and terms into concrete, emotionally colored comparisons, McBride makes narcissism understandable at both intellectual and emotional levels. Her similes of coldness, detachment, manipulation and reflection work together to present the narcissistic parent as a figure of control and emotional emptiness, while portraying the child as a silenced mirror or marionette, deprived of authentic self.

Beyond its aesthetic function, the simile operates as a cognitive and therapeutic instrument. It enables readers to clearly visualize their experiences, articulate suppressed feelings and emotions, and begin a process of healing through understanding and realization of what is really happening around them. McBride's language demonstrates that stylistic choices in psychological discourse are not merely illustrational, they shape conceptual knowledge and emotional truth about the phenomenon.

Finally, the study confirms that simile, as used in *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?*, is a stylistic linguistic bridge between psychology and empathy. By means of figurative comparison, McBride translates clinical psychology into actual human narrative, turning personal pain into shared realia and offering a new vision of how language itself can help understand, realize and eventually heal.

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