

# *The Metaphor of Liberty and Chaos in Chaplin's The Immigrant*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the dual themes of chaos and liberty in the immigrant experience by analyzing Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) and its use of metaphor. Through the persona of the "Little Tramp," Chaplin employs metaphor to highlight the disparity between the harsh realities faced by immigrants upon arrival in America and the romanticized American Dream. The Tramp, a metaphor for the immigrant, traverses a world of exploitation, poverty, and uncertainty while exhibiting the fortitude and tenacity needed to thrive in a foreign country. The paper explores Chaplin's use of visual metaphors to illustrate the confusing and chaotic circumstances that many immigrants face, such as the Tramp's awkward interactions with his surroundings. The struggles of the people are contrasted with the metaphor of liberty. The Tramp's hardships are contrasted with the metaphor of liberty, highlighting the contrast between the difficulties of assimilation and the promise of freedom. Through an analysis of these metaphors, the paper makes the case that Chaplin both celebrates the immigrants' self-made efforts to achieve the American Dream and criticizes the socioeconomic circumstances of the era. This paper examines how Chaplin's use of metaphor enhances the film's emotional and thematic impact by providing a complex depiction of immigration that goes beyond its humorous surface.

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Film Studies, Chaplin

## 1. Introduction

Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) is set on the historical backdrop of the early 20th century when there was an enormous number of immigrants to the United States. At this time, the lures of freedom, opportunity, and prosperity drew millions of people from Europe and other parts of the world to America in search of a better life. However, poverty, exploitation, and cultural displacement were among the harsh realities that many immigrants had to deal with when they arrived. Despite the idealistic portrayal of the "land of the free," immigrants frequently struggled to make ends meet in a hostile society. The contradictions are captured in Chaplin's film, providing a moving and humorous depiction of the experience of immigrants.

The film combines the themes of freedom and disorder, using metaphorical imagery to critique the American immigration system. Chaplin carefully employs these metaphors to highlight the contradiction between freedom and the chaotic, frequently dehumanizing experiences that immigrants had to face on their way to immigration. Chaplin highlights the stubbornness and determination of people attempting to start over and begin a new life.

Metaphor is a tool that is widely employed to convey and express concepts in a clear and understandable manner. The term "metaphor" was first used by Aristotle in the 4th century BC to describe a rhetorical device that poets used to embellish their language [1]. Metaphor is regarded as "the most fundamental structure of language and cognition," as Goatly explains, reflecting the complex ways in which individuals perceive the world [2]. Metaphor is not only a rhetorical device in literature, speech, and movies; it is essential to the interpretation and transmission of meanings. According to Whittock, "Theories of metaphor are closely related to the theories of imagination" [3]. Charlie Chaplin expertly frames the story and organizes the meaning of *The Immigrant* (1917) through the use of metaphor. This article examines Chaplin's *The Immigrant*'s use of metaphor to show how it serves as a tool for depth and complexity creation as well as a way to shadow the immigrant experience.

## 2. Case Study

### 2.1. The Meaning and Use of Metaphors

According to Goatly, claims that by connecting ideas and experiences with well-known representations, metaphor is an essential tool for effectively communicating meaning [2]. This makes it possible to comprehend difficult or abstract concepts using more relatable or approachable imagery. Semino expands on this notion by arguing that metaphor is essential to textual interpretation and not just a stylistic device. It is a cognitive process that makes complex, abstract ideas concrete or recognizable to both artists and viewers [4].

Metaphors have a similar function in movies, enabling audiences to understand difficult concepts through associations between images and stories. According to Cienki, "metaphor can be represented: metaphorical expressions can also be realized in a non-verbal modality" [5].

In movies like *The Immigrant*, metaphors serve as more than just decorative elements; they are essential in influencing the viewer's perception.

Chaplin's use of metaphor in *The Immigrant* is a prime illustration of how filmmakers work with these devices to convey ideas and criticisms in addition to a narrative. The film's metaphor aids in narrative organization and structures the audience's comprehension of the immigrant experience.

### 2.2. Case Description

One of the most remarkable and eye-catching scenes in Charlie Chaplin's 1917 film *The Immigrant* is the opening scene, in which the Tramp leans his body over the boat's railing. The Tramp's body heaves in discomfort as he tries to keep his balance, which the viewer may initially take to be seasickness. Given the turbulent circumstances immigrants frequently faced during their ocean voyage to America, the shot's framing—the tramp leaning over the railing—visually conveys the idea of nausea and vomiting, a common reaction to which many viewers can readily relate.

But as the scene goes on and the Tramp turns his body around, it becomes clear that he is trying to land a fish with a fishhook rather than throwing up. The audience's perception of the visual information presented changes as a result of this unexpected turn in the scene, which challenges their initial interpretation.

This scene is not the only one that makes use of visual ambiguity and surprise. The audience may later deduce that the Tramp is crying or sobbing, perhaps in desperation over his predicament, when he makes a movement with his shoulder. But the next cut shows that he is mixing a drink. Once more, the image changes, and new information subverts and corrects the audience's initial interpretation.

This method demonstrates Chaplin's skill at visual storytelling by presenting a simple image or action in one light at first, then correcting it with a reveal. The audience is given one interpretation of the first image, which is then challenged by a subsequent shot that offers fresh context through a brief

narrative twist. This humorous manipulation of perception highlights Chaplin's markable visual ambiguity and highlights the influence of film on the interpretations of actions and images.

### 2.3. Case Analysis

A crucial component of Chaplin's cinematic language, switch images work especially well in *The Immigrant* because they serve as a narrative device and a source of humor. The ability of the viewer to interpret the imagery and follow the shots' changing meaning is what these switch images rely on. According to Noël Carroll, Switch images pertain to events rather than objects, and their dual aspects are generally perceived sequentially rather than simultaneously [6]. Accordingly, the purpose of switch images is to present one interpretation and then another that either clarifies or adds to it, rather than presenting two opposing interpretations of the same object at once. These pictures in Chaplin's movie build on one another in a logical way to give the audience a more complex understanding of the character and the circumstances.

Because it emphasizes the connection between the audience's expectations and the director's subversion of them, this sequential interpretation is a crucial component of Chaplin's technique. The first interpretation is presented at the start of *The Immigrant* in a way that seems reasonable and intuitive—the Tramp seems ill, and viewers have seen enough movies to understand the physical posture and body language that is linked to seasickness. Audiences can readily identify with this image, but Chaplin quickly breaks down that notion by revealing the Tramp's actual activity—fishing. Because of how unexpected the revelation is, this switch not only makes the audience laugh but also makes a statement about perception in general. By forcing viewers to reevaluate their perception of the image after the fact, the movie highlights the tension that what is seen is not always what is meant.

This technique for generating two interpretations is a brilliant use of literalism and metaphor. In the first instance, the metaphorical interpretation—the Tramp as seasick—relies on the audience's familiarity with the experience of vomiting, a condition that is relatable and common. The way the metaphor functions is by linking the Tramp's image to something the audience has either personally experienced or can readily envision. By offering a fresh, realistic explanation for the same visual information, the second, literal interpretation—in which the Tramp is fishing—subverts this. Acting, gesturing, and speaking within a film all become elements of a movement composition, a movement image [7]. The two interpretations coexist without directly contradicting one another, enabling both to be valid readings of the image while offering distinct viewpoints on the Tramp's behavior.

More broadly, Chaplin's portrayal of the immigrant experience in *The Immigrant* is a commentary on the switch image technique. Seasickness's original meaning could be seen as a metaphor for the physical and emotional confusion that many immigrants experienced when they first arrived in a new nation, the feeling that they were out of place and overwhelmed by unfamiliar circumstances. On the other hand, the Tramp's actual fishing activity can be interpreted as a symbol of the immigrant's resourcefulness, adaptability, and capacity to find food even in trying situations. Many immigrants must adjust to the obstacles they encounter and find ways to live and prosper despite them, much like the Tramp can transform his perceived weakness—seasickness—into an opportunity—to catch a fish.

Furthermore, the Tramp's actions are interpreted both literally and metaphorically, reflecting the movie's overarching themes. Contradictions abound in the immigrant's experience in America. The American Dream—freedom, opportunity, and a better life—is appealing on the one hand. However, poverty, exploitation, and marginalization are common aspects of the harsh reality of life for many immigrants. The conflicting forces at work in the immigrant experience can be reflected in The Tramp's shifts between interpretations.

The immigrant's hopes for a better life are frequently dashed by the realities and hardships of adjusting to a new and unfamiliar world, much like the Tramp's body language first conveys seasickness before revealing a different, more grounded action.

In conclusion, Chaplin's skill at using visual storytelling to produce humor, enhance character development, and communicate thematic complexity is exemplified by the use of switch images in *The Immigrant*. The method makes the audience rethink their interpretations by highlighting the ambiguity of visual representation. In addition to providing entertainment, Chaplin enhances the audience's comprehension of the Tramp's personality and the experience of immigrants by presenting an image that is initially interpreted in one way and then overturned with new information. The scene where the Tramp is fishing at the boat railing instead of throwing up is an example of how Chaplin's use of visual language encourages viewers to participate in a dynamic process of interpretation, producing humorous and inspiring moments that stay with viewers long after the scene concludes.

### 3. Metaphorical Analysis in the Film

#### 3.1. Using Metaphor in Storytelling

The structure of Chaplin's *The Immigrant* relies heavily on metaphor. Chaplin's use of metaphor is essential to comprehending the hardships of the character he plays, the "Little Tramp." There are several ways to interpret The Tramp's journey in the movie metaphorically, including his journey to America and his experiences with exploitation, poverty, and abuse. Chaplin contrasts the promises of freedom and liberty in the movie with the chaotic reality that newcomers must deal with. The viewer is encouraged to examine the differences between the real experiences of immigrants and the romanticized American Dream by using this metaphorical framework.

An important metaphor is the "immigrant journey." The Tramp's journey to America is portrayed in the movie as both a real and symbolic one. The Tramp experiences several personal changes that reflect the common experience of immigrants looking for a fresh start, even as he physically journeys to a new country. The journey metaphorically symbolizes the desire for a better life, but as the Tramp encounters numerous difficulties, it becomes evident that immigration is a reality full of unexpected difficulties.

Another essential component of Chaplin's criticism is the metaphor of the "land of liberty." On the one hand, America is presented as a promised land where everyone can find freedom and opportunity. However, the disorderly circumstances the Tramp experiences highlight the pervasive oppression and hardship that immigrants frequently experience. Thus, the "land of liberty" is metaphorically divided; while it appears to be a place of freedom and hope, it is a harsh reality of marginalization in society and economy.

In *The Immigrant*, metaphor serves primarily to elucidate and explain the experience of immigrants. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is crucial for understanding difficult, abstract ideas that are difficult to grasp on their own [8]. In this sense, *The Immigrant's* metaphor acts as a link between the audience's comprehension of immigration and more well-known concepts and experiences. For example, physical comedy is used to depict the Tramp's struggles, but the scenes are given depth and significance by the underlying metaphor of survival and adversity in a foreign land.

Chaplin specifically draws attention to the discrepancy between the expectations immigrants have and the reality they face by using the Tramp's persona as a metaphor for the immigrant. The Tramp symbolizes the immigrant's journey from hope to disillusionment and is a figure of vulnerability and resiliency. The arrival of immigrants in America is also portrayed in the movie using the metaphor of the "sea journey." The sea is frequently seen as a symbol of transformation, symbolizes a transition from one set of social conditions to another as well as a literal crossing from one world to another. A visual metaphor for the dislocation and confusion that many immigrants experience upon first arriving in a new nation is provided by The Tramp's confusion and awkwardness upon arriving in America.

Furthermore, the scenes of exploitation and poverty that follow his arrival in America capture the disappointment that frequently follows pursuing the American Dream. The Tramp's chaotic urban

life—his difficulties finding employment, his run-ins with the law, and his experiences with various forms of social exclusion—serves as a metaphor for the structural barriers that immigrants must overcome to improve their lot in life.

Beyond the Tramp's own experience, the metaphor becomes a more general critique of the social systems that marginalize immigrant groups.

### 3.2. The Function of Chaos and Liberty as Metaphors

The contrast between liberty and chaos serves as a major metaphor in *The Immigrant*, supporting a large portion of the story and social criticism of the movie. Chaplin draws a contrast between the chaotic and frequently hostile conditions immigrants face once they arrive and the ideal of liberty, represented by the promise of America. The Tramp's interactions with the outside world are a clear example of the metaphor of chaos; he is continually frustrated by misfortune, exploitation, and misunderstanding as he tries to find his way around the city, find employment, and integrate into a new society.

The chaos in the movie is a reflection of the larger social and economic structure that immigrants must negotiate, not just the result of the Tramp's own mistakes. In one famous scene, for instance, the Tramp is reduced to a string of slapstick routines, including fighting over food, falling into a tangle of crates, and unintentionally creating an obstacle. Even though these chaotic moments are funny, they also serve as a metaphor for the hostile and erratic forces that immigrants have to deal with. The Tramp's powerlessness in these circumstances is similar to what many immigrants go through when they are left to rely on a system that is uncaring or exploitative. On the other hand, the Tramp's idealized view of America upon his arrival serves as a metaphor for liberty. He is excited to start over and take advantage of the changes that have been given to him. But as the movie goes on, the chaos and exploitation he encounters gradually shatter this ideal. *The Immigrant's* portrayal of the American Dream turns it into a metaphor for the promises of opportunity and freedom that are frequently out of reach for underprivileged populations. Chaplin's use of this contrast highlights the contradiction between the ideals that America claims to support and the realities faced by many immigrants.

### 3.3. Metaphor's Ideological Consequences

In *The Immigrant*, metaphor is also used to express ideological ideas regarding labor, social structures, and the experience of immigrants. Chaplin criticizes the social structures that uphold marginalization and inequality by placing the Tramp's journey and hardships within symbolic frameworks. Immigrants' chaotic circumstances upon arrival in America are portrayed as the consequence of systemic failures in the socio-economic and political domains, rather than merely personal misfortune. The film's metaphorical structure challenges the audience to think about immigration's wider effects, especially about social exclusion and labor abuse.

By highlighting the contrast between the romanticized view of America and the harsh reality that many immigrants encounter, the movie also challenges the idea of the American Dream. Chaplin demonstrates through Tramp's character that although America may appear to offer freedom and opportunity, these ideals are frequently betrayed by the exploitation of immigrant labor and the social barriers that impede real social mobility. As the Tramp's experience exposes the inconsistencies in the American system, the metaphor of liberty is thus demonstrated to be lacking.

Charlie Chaplin's use of metaphor in *The Immigrant* is essential to the plot's development and to expressing deeper meanings regarding the experience of immigrants in early 20th-century America. Chaplin exposes the difficulties faced by immigrants pursuing the American Dream and challenges the romanticized view of America by contrasting liberty and chaos. In addition to providing insight into the complexities of the immigrant experience, the film's metaphorical structure conveys



ideological messages about labor exploitation, social inequality, and the shortcomings of the American system. Chaplin's skillful use of metaphor heightens the film's emotional impact while offering a moving commentary on the experience of immigrants that still has an impact on viewers today.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chaplin skillfully uses the rhetorical device of metaphor in *The Immigrant* to depict the chaotic living conditions that immigrants encounter in addition to their intense desire for freedom and a better life in America. The "Little Tramp" character serves as a metaphor for the immigrant, highlighting the sharp contrast between the harsh realities that immigrants frequently face and the romanticized American Dream. The difficulties the Tramp encounters upon arrival—poverty, exploitation, and the fight for survival—highlight the chaos and instability that many immigrants face while pursuing a better life, even though their journey to America may initially represent hope and the promise of a new beginning. Chaplin illustrates that the immigrant experience is anything but playful with visual metaphors, such as the Tramp's awkward attempts to get around in a strange country and his frequent interactions in chaotic situations. These metaphors suggest that immigrants are a resilient and determined group of people who are prepared to put in a lot of effort and make sacrifices in their pursuit of a better future, even though they may not enjoy a life of freedom. The contrast between the chaos immigrants encounter and the metaphor of liberty highlights their continued pursuit of the American Dream despite challenging and frequently overwhelming circumstances.

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