



# **An Analysis of Figurative Language in William Shakespeare's Sonnets**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the use of figurative language in William Shakespeare's sonnets through an analysis. In this study, there is a comprehensive analysis of six selected sonnets, namely: Sonnet 127, Sonnet 130, Sonnet 131, Sonnet 132, Sonnet 133, and Sonnet 139. The purpose of this study is to explore how figurative language is used in William Shakespeare's sonnets by using Perrine's theory and to reveal the techniques used by Shakespeare to enrich his poems. The research method used was descriptive qualitative, identifying and categorizing 53 examples of figurative language in the selected sonnets. The technique of data collection is by reading the sonnets thoroughly, noting in detail the figurative language present and connecting with the theory. Ten of Perrine's twelve theories were found, namely simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, hyperbole, irony, paradox, and apostrophe. The findings of this study show the dominant use of metaphor and personification, complemented using synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, and other devices. The way Shakespeare uses figurative language makes his poems seem more vivid and evokes deep emotions, especially for the readers. Shakespeare's poetry and figurative language have an enduring power in literature and offer valuable insights to be analyzed more deeply.

**Keywords:** Figurative Languages, Poem, Shakespeare, Sonnets

## Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English playwright, poet and actor, renowned as the greatest writer in English literature. His works include famous plays such as "Hamlet", "Macbeth", "Romeo and Juliet", "Othello", and "King Lear" featuring poetic language, complex characters, and a deep exploration of human emotions. Shakespeare's legacy is still studied globally. Even more than 400 years after his death, he continues to be one of the most prominent figures. His plays and poetry continue to inspire artists around the world (Ackroyd, 2010). As stated by Robert Frost (1991: 56), poetry has a powerful impact on the world, affecting our physical and emotional experiences, and this makes poetry defined as an extraordinary creation in the world of literature.

Literary works such as poetry, novels, short stories, advertisements, and song lyrics can be used as a form of communication to convey implied messages by using figurative language that involves the use of words to convey a deeper meaning beyond the literal words. Corbin (2006:195) defines figurative language as the creation of imaginative connections between ideas and emotions, showing unexpected similarities between unrelated things. Tjahjono (2004: 54) highlights the important role of figurative language in poetry writing, where the right choice of words is essential to express and stimulate the reader's imagination. Many poems rely on figurative language to convey hidden meanings, therefore adding to the complexity of the language to be digested.

Poetry can be defined as a work created by a poet that conveys deep meaning, often through figurative language. Poetry communicates more expressively than ordinary language, requiring the reader to interpret and explore its meaning (Roberts, 1981; Perrine, 1992). In other words, Poetry has a distinctive structure if compared to other genres such as prose and drama, because poetry is a type of literary work that is able to reflect social problems that occur in society by using unique and aesthetic language (Wahyu and Saddhono 2020). According to (Hasanah et al. 2019), poetry is an empty object, which does not contain and is lifeless but can live if the reader gives a meaning interpretation to the poem. Forms of poetry often used by poets around the world include:

(1) Free Verse Poems, which are poems that do not have a certain metrical pattern, thus providing freedom of expression (Siswantoro, 2002). (2) Blank Verse Poems, which are poems composed in unrhymed iambic pentameter, reflecting the natural rhythm of speech. (3) Narrative Poems: poetry that tells a story, including ballads and epics. (4) Sonnet, a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter with a specific rhyme scheme (Abrams, 1981). (5) Lyric Poems, usually short, non-narrative poems that express personal emotions. (6) Prose Poems: these poems use poetic devices such as internal rhyme, repetition, and brevity. (7) Haiku Poems is a Japanese poetic form with three unrhymed lines that follow a 5-7-5 syllable pattern, describing moments in nature (Abrams, 1981).

Figurative language that is not easily understood can be attractive to readers. Recent research has shown that figurative language is used to form imaginative

connections between ideas and emotions, as well as reveal unexpected similarities between things that previously seemed unrelated. However, although figurative language is an important element in literary works, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding of how it is used. In Shakespeare's poetry figurative language can affect the reader's understanding and appreciation of the work.

Amalia, Fitriasia, and Silviyanti (2021) said that figurative language involves words and expressions that differ in meaning from their literal interpretation, thus greatly influencing human beliefs and perceptions. Figurative language also creates imaginative relationships and conveys meaning beyond literal meaning, which is often used in literary works such as poetry, novels, short stories, advertisements, and song lyrics to increase depth and aesthetic appeal (Purba et al., 2021; Taufik & Cahyati, 2022). Figurative language can be analyzed using Perrine's theory. The theory mentions 12 forms of figurative language such as: (1) simile, (2) metaphor, (3) personification, (4) synecdoche, (5) metonymy, (6) symbol, (7) allegory, (8) hyperbole, (9) understatement, (10) irony, (11) paradox, and (12) apostrophe.

Simile is a comparison between two objects using "like," "as," or "than" (Fajrin & Parmawati, 2021). Metaphor is direct comparison without using "like" or "as" (Fahas et al., 2021). Personification means attributing human qualities to non-human entities through the words of phrases (Fadilla et al., 2023). Synecdoche simplifies complex concepts by using a part to represent the whole (Wayan Swarniti, 2022). Metonymy is replacing the name of one thing with another closely associated with it (Milana & Ardi, 2020).

Symbol: using words or phrases to signify broader meanings beyond their literal sense (Abrams, 2009). Allegory is a narrative with hidden or symbolic meaning (Bouti et al., 2023). Hyperbole is an exaggeration to emphasize something or describe a situation in a way that is not meant to be taken literally (Tjahjono, 2010). Understatement, expressing less than what is meant (Perrine, 1992). Irony: using words that mean the opposite of their literal meaning (Keraf, 2004). Paradox, presenting contradictory ideas that reveal a deeper truth (Anggiamurni, 2020). Apostrophe is a literary device where someone or something is usually unseen or not spoken to (Kennedy, 1991).

Previous studies on figurative language include the following: (1) Research conducted by Anggiamurni (2020) focused on analyzing figurative language in Maya Angelou's poetry using qualitative content analysis; (2) Research conducted by Sandy, Natsir, and Asanti (2021) focused on investigating figurative language in Hardy's poetry, identifying nine types based on Perrine's theory. (3) Research conducted by Ruslida, Sembiring, and Damayanti (2019) compared figurative language in Shakespeare and Wordsworth's poetry, finding different patterns. This study analyzes the use of figurative language in William Shakespeare's sonnets using Perrine's theory. The author selected six sonnets consisting of Sonnet 127, Sonnet 130, Sonnet 131, Sonnet 132, Sonnet 133, and Sonnet 139. The writing techniques used in these sonnets will be recorded.

The purpose of this study is to explore how figurative language is used in the

six sonnets by William Shakespeare using Perrine's theory to reveal the techniques used by Shakespeare to enrich his poetry. This will add layers of meaning, emotion, and imagery to William Shakespeare's sonnets. Thus, readers will easily grasp the meaning behind the content of the sonnets.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research method that applies a qualitative research design that emphasizes words rather than numerical data to explore the meaning of figurative language in William Shakespeare's sonnets. Qualitative research uses an inductive approach to establish relationships between theory and research (Bryman, 2004). Perrine's theory is used in this study, which identifies 12 types of figurative language. The primary data sources for this study are William Shakespeare's sonnets, which feature various forms of figurative language in the form of words, phrases, or sentences. Six sonnets were selected: Sonnet 127, Sonnet 130, Sonnet 131, Sonnet 132, Sonnet 133, and Sonnet 139. These sonnets are renowned for their bold redefining of beauty, criticism of social prejudices, and honest approach, sometimes with satirical language toward love. These sonnets carry anti-racist and anti-sexist messages and pose an eternal challenge to conventional idealism.

The data collection technique began with careful reading of the sonnets, repetition, and detailed note-taking. Parts containing figurative language were identified and analyzed. Additionally, literature research is conducted to gather all necessary data and supplementary information. In analyzing the data, the classification and interpretation of the figurative language used in William Shakespeare's sonnets are performed to reveal their meaning, supported by Perrine's theoretical framework in this analysis.

## **Results**

After identifying and categorizing each item of data found in William Shakespeare's selected sonnets, a total of 53 items of data were collected. In this study, only ten types of figurative language usage were identified in the selected sonnets: simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, symbol, hyperbole, irony, paradox, and apostrophe.

Figurative Language Type, Frequency and Examples:

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|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Simile</b>   | <b>Data/S-30/16</b><br>Sonnet 130<br>quatrain 1 line 1.                                                                      | <i><b>My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.</b></i> | It demonstrated by the word 'like'. In this data, the poet uses the simile to reach a deeper meaning as he intends to highlight an unconventional beauty that contradicts existing standards, which is having eyes as bright as the sun. The sentence means that the color of her eyes is black or dark.                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Metaphor</b> | <b>Data/S-27/5</b><br>17 times in the six sonnets under study, one of which is a line from Sonnet 127 in quatrain 1, line 4. | <i><b>And beauty slandered with a bastard shame</b></i>   | The poet characterizes blackness in quatrain 1 as an unconventional beauty standard that was once disregarded but is now recognized as beautiful. An illegitimate child who is often treated negatively by society is called "a bastard". In this context, a bastard shame implies that black is not the true child of beauty and brings shame into the beauty's name. However, the poet argues that blackness is a new concept of beauty |
|                 |                                                                                                                              |                                                           | that tarnishes the older definition, which is being blonde, and light skinned.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

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|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Personification</b> | <b>Data/S-133/37</b><br>Found in thirteen data points. it only occurs in five sonnets Sonnet 127, Sonnet 131, Sonnet 132, Sonnet 133, and Sonnet 139. One of the data points is taken from Sonnet 133, specifically the first quatrain of the first and second lines. | <i>Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan for that deep wound it gives my friend and me!</i> | The ability to do things that only humans can do is given to the word heart. The ability of the heart to groan is mentioned in the first sentence. The mistress's heart is then described as having the power to deeply wound the poet and his friend in the second sentence. However, neither should be taken literally, because they convey the emotions of the characters involved in the poem. |
| <b>Synecdoche</b>      | <b>Data/S-127/15</b><br>Sonnet 127 contains two instances of synecdoche, one of which occurs in the second line of the couplet section.                                                                                                                               | <i>That every tongue says beauty should look so.</i>                                                  | The phrase 'every tongue' employed the synecdoche of pars pro toto, which is the use of a part of an object to represent the whole of the object. In the data, the tongue is used to represent the whole person. Therefore, rather than saying that every tongue says, it is possible to understand that everyone says.                                                                            |

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| <b>Metonymy</b> | <b>Data/S-131/28</b> Two instances of metonymy have been identified in two sonnets, including Sonnet 131 and Sonnet 132. The following is one excerpt from Sonnet 131 in line four of the third quatrain. | <i>Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.</i> | The phrase my judgment's place is a metonymy for the mind, which is something that is directly related to it. Humans can think, judge things, and perform other mental functions in their minds. Because one of the purposes of the mind is to make judgments, the poet                                                                                                                                               |
|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                     | substitutes judgment's place for the mind.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Symbol</b>   | <b>Data/S-127/8</b> In Sonnets 127 and 132, are found in this study. Sonnet 127's third line in the second quatrain is one of the data points that is found.                                              | <i>Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower</i>     | In quatrain 2, the poet describes how the concept of beauty becomes unnatural as humans begin to use cosmetics. The phrase "holy bower" refers to a sacred place of worship, representing the idea that beauty is honored and praised. In this context, 'no holy bower' means that beauty has lost its shine, and it is no longer honored and praised because people can conceal their lack of beauty with cosmetics. |

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|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Hyperbole</b> | <b>Data/S-133/38</b> Five data points on the use of hyperbole from Sonnets 131, 133, and 139.               | <i>Is't not enough to torture me alone,<br/>But slave to slavery my sweet'st friend must be?</i> | The mistress' actions are described as torture and slavery in both lines by the poet. In the previous sequence of The Dark Lady Sonnet, the mistress is portrayed as cold and only looking pityingly towards the poet. This frustrated the poet and left a wound in his heart. In Sonnet 133, the poet's friend appears to have feelings for the mistress, and he could have been treated similarly by her. The use of the terms torture and slave to slavery is hyperbole because they are exaggerated and do not reflect the reality. |
| <b>Irony</b>     | <b>Data/S-131/26</b> Irony appears three times in three Sonnets: Sonnet 131, Sonnet 133, and Sonnet 139 The | <i>To say they err I dare not be so bold,<br/>Although I swear it to myself alone.</i>           | The two lines above contain situational irony, which is defined as a difference between what is expected and what actually happens. In the                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

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|                       | <p><b>data presented below is from Sonnet 131, specifically lines 3 and 4 of the second quatrain.</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                  | <p>previous sentence before this data, there is a narrative about the mistress, who receives criticism that her face isn't beautiful enough to attract men. The poet then expresses his disagreement with the topic, though he is afraid to say so outright. He can only convince himself, however, that what they are saying is untrue and that the mistress is attractive and capable of winning his heart.</p>                                                                                                                         |
| <p><b>Paradox</b></p> | <p><b>Data/S-127/12 The use of paradox is identified in 4 out of 6 sonnets that became the object of research, including Sonnet 127, Sonnet 130, Sonnet 132, and Sonnet 139. It is an example of Shakespeare's use of paradox in Sonnet 127, specifically the third quatrain and third line.</b></p> | <p><b><i>At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,</i></b></p> | <p>The data comprises two seemingly contradictory ideas: not born fair and no beauty lack. To fully comprehend the deeper meaning, the previous quatrain's statements regarding the irony in humans' usage of cosmetics must be understood first. As a result, the concept of beauty has become less natural and has shifted away from its original concept. In the data, it can be interpreted that people who are born with a lack of natural beauty apply cosmetics to improve their appearances until they become no beauty lack.</p> |

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| <b>Apostrophe</b> | <b>Data/S-139/49</b><br><b>Only one</b><br><b>apostrophe is found,</b><br><b>which is in Sonnet</b><br><b>139, line two</b><br><b>of the second</b><br><b>quatrain.</b> | <i><b>Dear heart,</b></i><br><i><b>forbear</b></i><br><i><b>to</b></i><br><i><b>glance thine</b></i><br><i><b>eye aside:</b></i> | The poet addresses the mistress' heart directly, using the phrase "dear heart" as if it were a live object capable of responding to his words. The use of the apostrophe |
|                   |                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                  | in the above sentence underlines the poet's genuine desire to the mistress not to see or fall in love with any other man.                                                |

Once the data has been identified, categorized, and analyzed, it is shown that, with 17 data points, metaphor is the most frequently used figurative language, followed by personification with 13 data points. The paradox and the hyperbole rank third in terms of commonly used figurative language, with five data points each. Subsequently, the symbol at position four has a total of four data points. The irony is ranked fifth with three data points found. The next two categories, metonymy and synecdoche, both have two data, come in sixth place. The two least common figurative language words are apostrophe and simile, each with one data point.

The six sonnets studied from The Dark Lady series demonstrate that metaphor and personification have the greatest impact in Shakespeare's sonnets. The poet employs a direct metaphor comparison to describe the mistress' characteristics, allowing readers to vividly imagine the sonnet's atmosphere, which improves their emotions. In addition, the poet uses personification to add depth to the poem. Thus, the use of figurative language in Shakespeare's sonnets not only demonstrates his beauty and writing skill, but it also piques the reader's interest in the themes of his sonnets, which depict pure love regardless of the mistress' flaws, a love that endures despite being deeply hurt by the mistress. Identifying the various types of figurative language used by Shakespeare in the selected sonnets reveals how complex his language style is and how it influences the overall beauty and theme of his poems.

## Conclusion

This research was based on an in-depth analysis of William Shakespeare's sonnets using Perrine's theory of figurative language. From the analysis, it is found that Shakespeare uses various literary devices such as similes, metaphors, hyperbole, irony, and others. The dominant use of figurative language is metaphor and personification. In addition, through the elaboration and analysis of data in the previous section, it can be seen how Shakespeare often uses words with opposite meanings to make readers think more deeply.

Shakespeare's use of figurative language makes his poems seem more alive and evokes deep emotions, especially for the readers. By using techniques such as hyperbole and irony, he invites readers to think more deeply. The results of this research are not only useful for literary analysis but also provide a better understanding of figurative language, especially in the context of Shakespeare's works. Therefore, it is recommended that educators integrate the study of figurative language into the literature curriculum, and researchers continue this research to expand our understanding of Shakespeare's works and literature.

Thus, in conclusion, the results from this research not only provide benefits for literary analysis but also provide insights for educators and researchers. Understanding figurative language will develop an appreciation for Shakespeare's works and enhance the understanding of literature as a whole. This research highlights that Shakespeare's poetry and figurative language have an enduring power in literature. For further exploration, the researcher could compare Shakespeare's figurative language across different works or analyzing its impact on modern readers.

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