



An Analysis of Figurative Language in the Poem *Mirror* by Sylvia Plath

Awaliyah Silvia Rahma^{1*}, Otong Setiawan Djauharie², Andang Saehu³

^{1,3} English Literature Department, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, Indonesia

¹State Islamic of Sunan Gunung Djati, Indonesia, Bandung

²State Islamic of Sunan Gunung Djati, Indonesia, Bandung

³State Islamic of Sunan Gunung Djati, Indonesia, Bandung

awaliyahsilviar@gmail.com^{1*}, otongsetiawandjuharie@uinsgd.ac.id²

Address :Jl. AH Nasution No. 105 Cipadung, Cibiru, Kota Bandung, Jawa barat, Indonesia

Corresponding author: awaliyahsilviar@gmail.com

Abstract: This research explores how figurative language shapes the depth of emotion and psychology in the poem *Mirror* by Sylvia Plath. Through a qualitative method with a literature study approach, this research aims to identify the types of figures of speech used and explain how these elements convey the lyricist's inner conflicts related to identity, aging, and self-perception. The analysis shows that Plath consciously uses personification, metaphor, simile, and symbolism to build a reflective and emotionally charged atmosphere. The mirror in this poem is not just an inanimate object, but is present as a conscious observer who speaks, judges, and becomes a silent witness to the aging process and identity crisis of the female character. Through metaphorical and symbolic imagery, the mirror transforms into an inner lake-space that reflects the search for self. The poem closes with an evocative simile, describing the deep fear of realizing one's fading youth. This study shows that Plath's use of similes is not only to embellish the poem, but as an important channel to express fears and emotional vulnerabilities that are often difficult to verbalize. The findings are expected to enrich literary discussions on how poetic language can reveal the complexity of human experience with clarity and intensity.

Keywords: figurative language, metaphor, poetry analysis, personification.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana bahasa figuratif membentuk kedalaman emosi dan psikologi dalam puisi *Mirror* karya Sylvia Plath. Melalui metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka, penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis majas yang digunakan serta menjelaskan bagaimana unsur-unsur tersebut menyampaikan konflik batin tokoh lirik terkait identitas, penuaan, dan persepsi diri. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Plath secara sadar menggunakan personifikasi, metafora, simile, dan simbolisme untuk membangun suasana yang reflektif dan sarat emosi. Cermin dalam puisi ini bukan sekadar benda mati, melainkan hadir sebagai pengamat sadar yang berbicara, menilai, dan menjadi saksi diam terhadap proses penuaan dan krisis identitas tokoh perempuan. Melalui gambaran metaforis dan simbolik, cermin menjelma menjadi danau—ruang dalam yang mencerminkan pencarian jati diri. Puisi ditutup dengan simile yang menggugah, menggambarkan ketakutan mendalam saat menyadari masa muda yang kian memudar. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan majas oleh Plath bukan hanya untuk memperindah puisi, melainkan sebagai saluran penting untuk mengungkapkan ketakutan dan kerentanan emosional yang sering kali sulit terucap. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat memperkaya diskusi sastra mengenai bagaimana bahasa puitis mampu mengungkap kompleksitas pengalaman manusia dengan kejernihan dan intensitas.

Kata kunci: analisis puisi, majas, metafora *Mirror*, personifikasi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Poetry has long been celebrated as a form of literary art that gives voice to the deepest human emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Unlike prose, which tends to be more straightforward, poetry often relies on compact, symbolic, and richly imaginative language to

convey meaning. One of the most important tools poets use to achieve this is figurative language, a technique that allows writers to express abstract concepts in vivid, relatable terms. As Kovecses (2019) points out, figurative language creates a bridge between the intangible world of ideas and the concrete world of human experience, enabling poets to evoke powerful imagery and stir emotional responses in their readers.

Among the many figures of speech employed in poetry, metaphor, simile, personification, and symbolism are particularly essential. These devices help poets depict complex emotional states, inner conflicts, and philosophical reflections that might otherwise be difficult to articulate through literal language alone. Kennedy and Gioia (2016) emphasize that figurative language does not merely beautify poetry, it deepens meaning and invites interpretation, making the poetic experience both personal and universal. Sylvia Plath, a renowned American poet, is often associated with the confessional poetry movement of the mid-20th century. Her work is widely praised for its emotional intensity, psychological complexity, and raw honesty.

Through her poetry, Plath explored deeply personal and often painful themes such as mental illness, femininity, alienation, and identity. One of her most notable poems, *Mirror* (1961), stands out not only for its unique narrative perspective, a mirror that speaks but also for the way it uses figurative language to confront issues of aging, self-perception, and existential dread (Plath, 1981). The poem's power lies in its ability to voice the internal struggles of a woman coming to terms with her changing reflection, serving as a metaphor for the loss of identity and the passage of time.

In recent years, several scholars have examined the stylistic and psychological aspects of Plath's poetry. Rybicka (2020), for instance, explored spatial metaphors in Plath's body of work, illustrating how physical space becomes a projection of the speaker's emotional world. Likewise, Rahmawati and Wahyuni (2020) analyzed the poem *Daddy*, focusing on how figurative language communicates unresolved trauma and emotional complexity. While these studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of Plath's use of figurative language, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature regarding a focused stylistic analysis of *Mirror*. Most existing analyses treat the poem as part of a broader thematic study, without isolating and interpreting the specific figurative elements that construct its meaning.

This study attempts to fill that scholarly gap by offering an in-depth stylistic analysis of the figurative language in *Mirror*. It aims to identify the types of figurative language used in

the poem and explore how these devices function in developing the poem's emotional tone, symbolic layers, and thematic depth. This analysis is grounded in a qualitative research methodology, specifically through library research. Data is collected and analyzed through close reading of the primary text and review of secondary sources including books, journal articles, and literary critiques.

Unlike empirical studies that depend on field research, this study relies entirely on textual analysis, making it particularly suitable for examining poetic language. Through this method, the study hopes to provide nuanced insights into how Plath's stylistic choices in *Mirror* not only reflect her personal struggles but also contribute to the larger tradition of confessional poetry. The central research question guiding this study is: *What types of figurative language are found in Sylvia Plath's poem Mirror, and how do these stylistic elements contribute to the poem's overall meaning?* In line with this question, the objective of this study is to conduct a detailed examination of Plath's use of figurative language in *Mirror*, focusing on how these devices enhance the poem's emotional resonance, symbolism, and thematic coherence. The findings are expected to enrich literary discourse surrounding Plath's poetic style and offer readers a deeper appreciation of the artistic and psychological complexity embedded in her work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Figurative language is a critical component in literature, particularly in poetry, where language is often used not merely to inform but to evoke emotion, imagery, and deeper meanings. It refers to the use of words or expressions that differ from their literal interpretation in order to create imaginative effects or convey abstract ideas more powerfully (Kennedy & Gioia, 2016). Figurative language includes a variety of devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, irony, and symbolism. These elements allow poets to compress complex emotions into concise expressions, enriching the aesthetic and interpretive value of the text.

As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain in *Metaphors We Live By*, figurative language especially metaphor is not just a poetic device but a fundamental part of human cognition. The way we conceptualize time, emotion, and experience is deeply influenced by metaphorical thinking. This suggests that figurative language is not only artistic but also cognitive, shaping how we think and communicate. Kovecses (2019) supports this view by arguing that figurative

expressions help bridge abstract concepts and tangible experiences, making literature a powerful medium to explore the human condition.

In the context of poetry, figurative language serves multiple functions. It beautifies the language, deepens the emotional resonance, and also invites various interpretations. Readers engage not only with the literal content but with the layered meanings embedded within metaphors and symbols. In Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*, figurative language is used not for ornamentation but to expose the speaker's psychological reality and social commentary.

Stylistics is a field of study that combines linguistics and literary criticism to analyze the style and language used in literary texts. According to Leech and Short (2007), stylistics is "the linguistic study of style," which involves examining how authors use language to create meaning, mood, and aesthetic effect. Stylistic analysis focuses on various elements such as word choice (diction), sentence structure (syntax), rhythm, sound patterns, and figurative expressions. These components are essential in poetry, where every word carries weight and contributes to the overall artistic purpose.

Widdowson (2013) emphasizes that stylistics provides a systematic framework for analyzing how texts work at the linguistic level. It moves beyond subjective interpretation by focusing on how specific language features influence meaning. For instance, the use of enjambment, alliteration, or personification in a poem can significantly alter its tone or thematic direction. This approach is especially relevant to Plath's work, where language is tightly controlled to express emotional turmoil and existential concerns.

In this study, stylistic analysis is employed as a method to identify and interpret the figurative language in Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*. By examining how the poem's language is structured, this research aims to uncover the deeper meanings conveyed through its stylistic choices. This method does not rely on reader surveys or external data but uses close reading and textual analysis to derive interpretations grounded in the text itself.

Sylvia Plath is recognized as a key figure in the confessional poetry movement, a genre that emerged in the mid-20th century as poets began to write about intensely personal and often painful experiences. Confessional poetry is characterized by its focus on self-exploration, emotional vulnerability, and candid depictions of mental health, family dynamics, and identity

crises (Gill, 2021). This genre marked a departure from more traditional, impersonal poetic forms by bringing the poet's inner life into the foreground.

Plath's work, including *Mirror*, exemplifies this style through her exploration of themes such as self-perception, aging, alienation, and the search for identity. In *Mirror*, the reflective object serves as both narrator and metaphor for brutal self-awareness. The personification of the mirror allows Plath to address the complex relationship between external appearance and internal identity. As Axelrod (2018) argues, Plath uses literary devices such as metaphor and personification not merely for poetic effect but as tools for psychological confrontation and self-expression.

Moreover, Plath's confessional style often blurs the line between personal narrative and universal theme. While the emotions in her poems are rooted in personal experience, the way she constructs her language enables readers to connect those experiences to broader societal pressures, especially concerning women's roles and beauty standards. Thus, the figurative language in *Mirror* becomes a lens through which the poet critiques cultural expectations and articulates her internal struggles.

By combining stylistic analysis with an understanding of Plath's confessional background, this research situates the poem *Mirror* within a broader literary and psychological framework. The figurative language used in the poem serves as both an artistic and therapeutic vehicle, revealing the speaker's emotional complexity while also engaging with universal human concerns.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, which is suitable for analyzing literary works through close reading and textual interpretation. The focus of the research is Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*, which is explored in terms of its use of figurative language. Instead of collecting field data through surveys or questionnaires, this research relies on textual sources, both primary and secondary to examine how language is used artistically within the poem. The primary data source is the poem itself, taken from *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (Plath, 1981). In addition to this, several books and scholarly articles are used as secondary sources to support the analysis and interpretation, especially those discussing figurative language, stylistics, and confessional poetry.

The research process began with a close reading of the poem to understand its overall message and tone. Each line was carefully examined to identify figurative language devices such as metaphor, personification, simile, symbolism, and other stylistic elements. These expressions were then categorized based on established theories from literary scholars like Kennedy and Gioia (2016) and Kovecses (2019), who explain how figurative language helps convey deeper meanings and emotions in poetry.

After identifying and classifying the figurative language found in the poem, the researcher interpreted the function and contribution of these devices to the poem's themes, particularly those related to self-perception, aging, and identity. The analysis is presented descriptively, supported by relevant theories and previous studies to strengthen the findings and highlight the originality of the research. By using this method, the study aims to offer a deeper understanding of how figurative language shapes the emotional and symbolic dimensions of *Mirror*, making it not just a reflection of a physical image, but also of inner truths and struggles.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research analyzed the use of figurative language in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*. The findings reveal that Plath uses various types of figurative language to enhance the emotional impact of the poem and to portray complex psychological states. The most prominent figures of speech found in the poem include personification, metaphor, simile, and symbolism. Each type contributes to the poem's exploration of identity, self-perception, and the passage of time.

1. Personification

Personification is the dominant device in *Mirror*, especially in the opening line:

"I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions."

Here, the mirror is given human traits—it speaks, thinks, and reacts. This personification creates an unsettling intimacy between the object and the speaker. The mirror becomes a character with its own consciousness, intensifying the poem's confessional tone. According to Gill (2021), this aligns with the psychological themes in Plath's work, where inanimate objects often reflect the speaker's emotional struggles.

2. Metaphor

Metaphor is used subtly but effectively. In the second stanza, the mirror claims:

"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, searching my reaches for what she really is."

This metaphor extends the mirror's identity and emphasizes the depth of self-exploration. The comparison between the mirror and a lake suggests that what is reflected is not merely surface-level, but layered and potentially disturbing. Kovecses (2019) emphasizes that metaphors like this help the reader understand abstract concepts such as identity and truth by linking them to familiar images.

3. Symbolism

The mirror itself is a symbol of objective truth. It reflects reality without distortion, which becomes painful for the speaker as time passes and her appearance changes. The lake also functions symbolically—it implies emotional depth, uncertainty, and introspection. These symbols reinforce the themes of aging and the search for self.

4. Simile

Simile is used less frequently, but it appears in the line:

"In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."

The simile "like a terrible fish" evokes a haunting image. It conveys horror and despair at the inevitable process of aging. The use of "drowned" suggests that youth has been lost, replaced by a grotesque awareness of time's effect on the body. Kennedy and Gioia (2016) note that such vivid comparisons intensify the emotional atmosphere and highlight the speaker's inner conflict.

No.	Type of Figurative Language	Example from the Poem	Interpretation / Function	Reference
1	Personification	"I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions."	The mirror is personified—it speaks, thinks, and observes—creating a psychological presence that reflects the speaker's inner turmoil and emotional state.	Gill (2021)
2	Metaphor	"Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, searching my reaches for what she really is."	The mirror becomes a lake, symbolizing introspection and emotional depth. The metaphor shows the complexity of identity and the difficult search for self-understanding.	Kovecses (2019)
3	Symbolism	The mirror and lake throughout the poem	The mirror symbolizes truth and objectivity, while the lake suggests hidden emotions, uncertainty, and the fear of confronting reality, especially regarding aging.	Kennedy & Gioia (2016)
4	Simile	"...like a terrible fish."	The simile evokes horror and despair toward aging. The comparison of the woman's reflection to a "terrible fish"	Kennedy & Gioia (2016)

			expresses deep discomfort and loss of youthful identity.	
--	--	--	--	--

These devices work together to construct a powerful poetic experience. Rather than simply describing a mirror, Plath transforms it into a vessel of truth, memory, and fear. The figurative language enriches the psychological depth of the poem, showing how the speaker grapples with identity and mortality. Compared to previous studies, such as those by Axelrod (2018) and Gill (2021), this research confirms that Plath's use of language is inseparable from her thematic intentions, and that *Mirror* stands as a profound meditation on self and time through stylistic brilliance.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has closely examined the use of figurative language in Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*, revealing the depth and nuance embedded within its poetic structure. Through a qualitative, text-based approach, the research has uncovered how devices such as personification, metaphor, symbolism, and simile are intricately woven into the poem not simply as artistic flourishes, but as fundamental components that shape its emotional and psychological impact. These stylistic choices are deeply intertwined with the poem's central concerns: the fragile nature of identity, the relentless passage of time, and the silent pain of confronting one's reflection as it changes with age. Plath's use of personification breathes life into the inanimate mirror, granting it a calm, unfeeling voice that serves as both observer and judge. The mirror becomes a symbol of truth that cannot be softened or distorted, amplifying the internal conflict of the woman who gazes into it daily. The transformation of the mirror into a lake invites readers into a deeper symbolic space one that suggests introspection, emotional immersion, and the hidden layers of self-perception. The final simile, likening the woman's aging reflection to a "terrible fish," is both startling and poignant, capturing the raw fear of losing youth and grappling with an unfamiliar self.

In reflecting on these findings, it becomes clear that Plath's figurative language is not ornamental; it is the very mechanism through which the poem's psychological tension is conveyed. Her stylistic precision allows readers to not only witness but *feel* the dissonance between outer appearance and inner truth. By giving voice to the quiet struggles so many face with identity and self-image, *Mirror* becomes a universal meditation on human vulnerability. Ultimately, this analysis reaffirms the powerful role of figurative language in poetry, not just as a means of embellishment, but as a vital tool for exploring the most intimate corners of

human experience. Plath's *Mirror* reminds us that poetry, at its best, does not offer answers, but rather reflects the truths we may fear to face, encouraging reflection, empathy, and a deeper understanding of ourselves.

REFERENCES

- Anjani, S. P., & Darmawan, R.** (2022). The figurative language: Metaphor and personification in the poetry of William Shakespeare and William Blake. *Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies*, 3(2), 45–59.
- Anggiamurni, A. N.** (2020). An analysis of figurative language in poetry by Maya Angelou. *PANYONARA: Journal of English Education*, 2(2), 45–57.
- Astuti, A. Y., & Junanda, M. G.** (2022). An analysis of figurative language in William Shakespeare's selected poems. *Jurnal Ilmiah Langue and Parole*, 6(1), 76–80.
- Aulia, Z. N., Rozak, R. R., & Tirtanawati, M. R.** (2022). An analysis of figurative language in Hotel Books' spoken word poetry. *Prosiding Nasional Pendidikan: LPPM IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro*, 8(1), 50–62.
- Firdelina, S., & Marlina, L.** (2024). An analysis of figurative language on digital children's poems with friendship theme available at Weareteacher.com website. *English Language and Literature*, 13(4), 1–15.
- Gill, J.** (2021). *The Cambridge introduction to Sylvia Plath* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Jas, P., Candra, K. D. P., & Utami, N. M. V.** (2022). Comparative figurative language found in Maya Angelou poems. *ELYSIAN Journal: English Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies*, 3(1), 21–35.
- Kennedy, X. J., & Gioia, D.** (2016). *Literature: An introduction to fiction, poetry, drama, and writing* (13th ed.). Pearson.
- Kövecses, Z.** (2019). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M.** (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lestari, A., & Wulandari, N.** (2021). Figurative language analysis in Sylvia Plath's poems. *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, 5(2), 123–132.
- Maisarah, S., Aziz, Z. A., & Nasir, C.** (2023). An analysis of figurative language in Toeti Heraty's poems. *Research in English and Education Journal*.
- Pattimura, M. L., & Que, S. R.** (2023). An analysis of figurative language in poems by Laksmi Pamuntjak. *MATAI: International Journal of Language Education*, 3(1), 33–48.

- Plath, S.** (1981). *The collected poems*. Harper & Row.
- Putri, N. A., & Marlina, L.** (2023). Figurative language on digital children's literature in website poems of Poets.Org with nature and environment theme. *English Language and Literature*, 12(4), 112–127.
- Rahmawati, D., & Putri, S. M.** (2020). A stylistic analysis of personification in selected poems by Sylvia Plath. *Edukasi: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Sastra*, 8(1), 55–65.
- Sari, R. P., & Hasanah, U.** (2022). The use of figurative language in confessional poetry: A study on Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*. *Journal of Literary Criticism*, 10(1), 70–81.
- Wahyuni, D., & Prasetyo, A.** (2019). The reflection of self-identity in Sylvia Plath's poem *Mirror*. *Linguistica: Journal of Literature and Linguistics*, 6(2), 44–52.
- Yulianti, F.** (2020). An analysis of metaphor and simile in Sylvia Plath's poems. *Poetika: Jurnal Sastra dan Bahasa*, 8(1), 99–108.