

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN “*THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSE*” SHORT STORY BY OSCAR WILDE

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Abstract

This study investigates students' ability to identify and interpret figurative language in the old literature short story “*The Nightingale and the Rose*” by Oscar Wilde. Figurative language such as metaphor, simile, symbolism, personification, and hyperbole plays an essential role in conveying deeper meanings within literary works. However, students often face challenges in understanding these elements due to complex language structures and cultural contexts. This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive approach, combining qualitative interpretation of students' analyses with quantitative coding to calculate the frequency of figurative language types. The participants were 17 sixth-semester English Department students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh. Data were collected through guided literary analysis tasks. The findings revealed that students showed varied comprehension levels: metaphor (58.83%) and simile (52.94%) were the most accurately identified, while symbolism (23.52%) remained the most difficult. The study suggests that guided reading and literary discussion significantly enhance students' interpretative skills. Effective teaching strategies are needed to help learners appreciate figurative language in old literature.

Keywords: *Figurative Language, Short Story, Student Comprehension, Old Literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in expressing ideas, emotions, and values through literary works. Fiction, particularly short stories, often employs figurative language to create deeper meanings and stimulate readers' interpretation. It means the idea of fiction relates to the human experience in daily life. Many utterances and the expressions in fiction contain figurative language. Figurative language not only enriches the text but also enhances the aesthetic value of a story. It helps people explain abstract concepts through concrete experiences and also strengthens the emotional power of language. According to Keraf (2009), figurative language is a way of expressing thought through distinctive linguistic forms that reflect the writer's personality and cultural background.

Similarly, Kövecses (2010) states that, figurative language is a fundamental component of human communication, allowing writers to communicate meanings beyond the literal.

Short stories are a kind of fiction that people use to read. For some people, reading a short story is more pleasant than the other fictions. The reason is a short story usually deals with a few characters and often concentrates on the creation of the mood rather than the plot. Short stories tend to be concise and focus on emotional resonance rather than complex plots. Mixon (2006) asserts that stories—whether fairy tales, legends, or real-life narratives—help readers understand cultural values. In the study of literature, old short stories remain relevant as they provide timeless themes and universal values. Among classical works, Oscar Wilde's “*The*

Nightingale and the Rose” remains a compelling example that employs multiple figurative devices to explore themes of love, sacrifice, and irony.

For students of literature, the ability to identify and analyze figurative language in short stories is an essential skill to comprehend the author’s message and evaluate the literary quality of the work. College or university students learn some short stories through Introduction to Literature and Prose courses. STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh is a college of education, in English department has Introduction to Literature as a subject. Based on STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh curriculum, Introduction to Literature purposed to introduce literary works. It is taught in the first semester. And Prose is purposed to make students able to comprehend the elements in the stories taught in the sixth semester.

Previous studies (Sembiring et al, 2020) have found students’ ability in identifying kinds of figurative language and their meanings in lyrics of Mariah Carey selected song. The subject of the research was 11th grade students of SMA Swasta GKPI Padang Bulan, consisting of twenty-eight students. The result of the research shown that the dominant type of figurative language found was metaphor. Then, Iswahyuni et al, (2024) did a study about figurative language in a short story “*An Angel in Disguise*”. The study found that in the short story personification, metaphor, simile, and hyperbole were used. However, the most dominant used was hyperbole. Furthermore, Mentari (2023) analyzed figurative language in “*The Happy Prince*” by Oscar Wilde. It was found that twenty-five data contained figurative language. They were similes appear ten times (40%), metaphor only appear one time (4%), symbolism

appear two times (20%), synecdoche one times (4%), personification appears nine times (36%), while hyperbole appear two times (8%). The result from the study was similes the most dominate figurative language used.

Several previous studies above have examined figurative language in songs, poems, and modern literary works. However, limited research has focused on how EFL students identify and interpret figurative language in classical short stories such as Oscar Wilde’s *The Nightingale and the Rose*. This gap is significant because old literature often contains complex symbolism and moral themes that require higher-order interpretive skills. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore students’ comprehension of figurative language in Wilde’s story, providing insight into both linguistic and cognitive aspects of literary understanding in the EFL context.

2. Literature Review

Figurative language, often referred to as figures of speech, is a stylistic device used to give particular emphasis or depth to an idea, emotion, or concept. According to Perrine and R.A.R.P (1992), figurative language involves a deliberate deviation from the ordinary use of language to achieve specific effects of meaning and feeling. Abrams and Harpham (2012) similarly define it as the expressive use of language that departs from the literal in order to achieve rhetorical or aesthetic effects. In the Indonesian context, Keraf (2009) describes figurative language (*majas*) as a linguistic expression that conveys meaning implicitly through comparison, exaggeration, or symbolism, allowing language to become more imaginative and persuasive.

In the same line as Perrine, furthermore Kövecses (2010) points out

that figurative language is a fundamental aspect of human communication. It helps people explain abstract concepts through concrete experiences and also strengthens the emotional power of language. It concludes the author communicate with readers through figurative language, readers received the emotional message from the author.

Abrams & Harpham (2009) defined figurative language as a deviation from the standard, literal use of language in order to achieve rhetorical effect. Types include: metaphor & simile, allegory & symbol, metonymy & synecdoche, irony & paradox, personification & apostrophe. Keraf (2009) categorizes them into simile (explicit comparison using comparative words), metaphor (implicit comparison without comparative words), personification (attributing human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract ideas), hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis), irony (subtle contradiction or hidden meaning), and symbolism (use of objects/signs to represent another meaning). Furthermore, Gibbs (2017) Suggests that figurative language (metaphor, irony, metonymy, hyperbole) is grounded in embodied experience.

The nineteenth century witnessed the flourishing of figurative language as a key narrative strategy in short fiction. Abrams & Harpham (2009) defines the short story as a brief prose narrative focusing on a single event or character, often associated with the literary traditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Old literature short stories are often characterized by moral lessons, symbolic elements, and strong narrative closure. Victorian and late nineteenth-century writers frequently employed symbolism, irony, and allegory to critique prevailing moral and social

conventions (Hunter, 2007; Baldick, 2015). Through these techniques, authors subtly questioned industrial progress, class inequality, and restrictive moral codes. Figurative language thus became a powerful means to veil social criticism under the aesthetic surface of literature.

In many short stories of this period, such as those of Oscar Wilde, figurative expression is intertwined with moral reflection and aesthetic vision. Wilde's works exemplify what Baldick (2015) calls the "symbolic closure" of Victorian narratives—the use of recurrent images and symbols to reveal moral paradoxes and human limitations. Therefore, understanding figurative language in nineteenth-century fiction involves recognizing how literary forms served both as artistic experimentation and as moral commentary.

As Baldick mention above, Oscar Wilde, as highlighted by Ellmann (1988), was a key literary figure of the late Victorian era who explored themes of beauty, love, and morality. His works often reveal social criticism through irony and symbolism. *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888), a story from Wilde's collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, presents the theme of self-sacrifice through vivid figurative language. The Nightingale's act of creating a red rose from her own blood serves as a metaphor for the cost of true love, while the girl's rejection of the rose symbolizes materialism and the superficiality of human desire. These figurative and symbolic elements make the story an effective text for studying how students identify and interpret figurative language.

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854. He was an Irish playwright, poet, and novelist, widely recognized as one of the most influential writers of the late Victorian era. Some unknown sources

said both of his parents were poets and novelists. According to Ellmann (1988), Wilde's life and works cannot be separated, as his flamboyant persona shaped the reception of his literature. Powell (1990) emphasizes Wilde's role in revitalizing the English stage through his social comedies, while Raby (1997) highlights Wilde's engagement with aestheticism and decadence. Bristow (2009) underlines Wilde's modern cultural significance, showing how he became an enduring icon of literary and queer studies. In detail it was said, despite his literary success, Wilde's career was marred by his trial and imprisonment for "gross indecency" in 1895, after which he lived in exile in France until his death in 1900.

While Wilde's use of figurative language has been extensively analyzed in terms of symbolism and aesthetic philosophy, little research has examined how learners—particularly in EFL contexts—interpret such complex literary devices. In Indonesian tertiary settings, students often struggle with figurative interpretation due to limited exposure to symbolic and metaphorical readings. As a result, their understanding tends to remain at the literal level, overlooking the deeper moral and thematic implications.

This study thus addresses a pedagogical gap by exploring how students identify, interpret, and evaluate figurative language in Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose*. By linking theoretical perspectives on figurative expression with students' interpretive competence, the research contributes to both literary and educational discourse, offering insights into how literary interpretation can enhance analytical and critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' ability to identify and interpret figurative language. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), the mixed-methods design enables researchers to combine numerical trends with in-depth interpretations, resulting in a richer and more reliable set of findings. The combination of both methods was considered suitable for this study, as the analysis involved not only the frequency of figurative language types but also the quality of students' interpretative responses. The participants were seventeen sixth-semester students of the English Department at STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh. They were purposively selected since they had completed prerequisite courses such as *Introduction to Literature* and *Prose*, ensuring that they were familiar with literary concepts and figurative language. This specific group was chosen to represent the population of intermediate EFL learners who are expected to comprehend figurative meaning in literary texts. The data were collected from students' written responses to an old short story written by Oscar Wilde, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, which was obtained from a reliable online source. Each participant received a printed copy of the story along with a guided analysis worksheet designed by the researcher. The worksheet contained three main tasks: (1) To identify phrases or sentences that contain figurative language, (2) To classify each instance according to the type of figurative language (e.g., metaphor, personification, hyperbole, simile, and symbolism), and (3) To

interpret the meaning of the figurative expressions in their own words.

Students completed the worksheet individually during a scheduled class meeting. The responses were then collected, verified, and coded for analysis. Researcher field notes were also used to record observations regarding students' engagement and difficulties during the activity. Data analysis was conducted in two complementary stages—quantitative and qualitative—to ensure methodological balance and validity. (1) Quantitative Analysis: Each type of figurative language identified by students was counted to determine its frequency and percentage of occurrence. This step allowed the researcher to identify the most and least frequently recognized types of figurative language among students. The quantitative data were presented in tables and figures for clarity and comparison. (2) Qualitative Analysis: The qualitative stage focused on the interpretative quality of students' responses. Students' explanations were thematically analyzed to reveal how they understood figurative meanings in context. This analysis involved reading all responses repeatedly, coding interpretative patterns, and categorizing them based on accuracy and depth of understanding. Representative excerpts were included to illustrate students' interpretative tendencies and challenges.

After both analyses were completed, the quantitative and qualitative results were integrated to provide a more holistic interpretation. The quantitative results indicated which types of figurative language students most frequently identified, while the qualitative findings illuminated how well they could interpret the figurative meaning behind those expressions. The integration of both datasets strengthened the validity of the conclusions and provided pedagogical insights into students' literary comprehension in the EFL context.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Nightingale and the Rose* was conducted through students' identification and interpretation of figurative language in the text. Seventeen sixth-semester students of the English Department at STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh participated in the study. Each student was asked to identify figurative expressions, classify their types, and provide written interpretations of their meanings.

Quantitatively, five types of figurative language were found: personification (12 instances), metaphor (8), simile (6), symbolism (6), and hyperbole (5). In detail, the table is shown below;

Table 4.1 Types of Figurative Language

Type	Example (Quote)	Interpretation
Personification (appears twelve times)	“The Rose-tree cried to the Nightingale.”	The rose tree is given human qualities of speaking, showing the emotional depth of nature.
	“The Moon shone in her azure throne.”	The moon is personified as a queen, emphasizing its majesty.
	“Death gives him one final kiss.”	Death is personified as a lover, portraying it as intimate yet tragic.
	“The Nightingale sang with	The bird is given human-like

	her breast against the thorn.”	emotions of sacrifice and devotion.
	“The cold Moon listened.”	The moon is described as capable of listening, highlighting the solemnity.
	“The Rose-tree trembled.”	The tree shows human-like fear, deepening the atmosphere.
	“The student threw himself on the grass and cried.”	The student acts dramatically, as if the grass understands him.
	“Love is wiser than Philosophy.”	Abstract concepts are treated like human rivals.
	“The White Rose said, ‘Only a Red Rose can save you.’”	The rose is given voice, making nature part of the story’s drama.
	“The Thorn pressed into her heart.”	The thorn behaves actively, intensifying the sacrifice.
	“The Shadows of the Night crept.”	Shadows are personified as moving deliberately, building imagery.
Metaphor (appears eight times)	“The Dawn looked pitifully at her.”	Dawn is personified, showing sympathy to the Nightingale.
	“Love is wiser than Philosophy.”	Love is compared to wisdom itself, elevating its value.
	“Love is more powerful than Wealth.”	Love is metaphorically greater than riches.
	“She pressed her breast against the thorn.”	The act symbolizes sacrifice, not literal.
	“The Rose is the emblem of true love.”	Rose is directly equated with love.
	“The Nightingale is the artist of love.”	Represents the role of art in love.
	“The heart of the student is like a mirror.”	His emotions reflect reality, fragile and changing.
	“The blood of the Nightingale became the life of the Rose.”	Her sacrifice becomes the flower’s essence.
Simile (appears six times)	“The Rose is the price of love.”	Love is metaphorically something that requires cost.
	“His heart is like a mirror.”	Comparison to a mirror shows fragility and reflection.
	“Her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.”	It shows purity and beauty of the Nightingale’s song.
	“Her song was like the sound of water from a flute.”	Evokes delicacy and harmony.
	“The student’s eyes filled with tears, like violets laden with dew.”	It shows innocence and fragility of his sadness.
	“Her song was like the laughter of children.”	Suggests innocence and joy.
	“The flame of the lamp flickered like a restless soul.”	Compare light to spirit, emphasizing unease.

Symbolism (appears six times)	The Red Rose	Symbol of true love and sacrifice.
	The Nightingale	Symbol of pure devotion and selfless art.
	The Thorn	Symbol of pain and sacrifice necessary for love.
	The Moon	Symbol of fate and destiny.
	The student	Symbol of youthful passion and naïve idealism.
	The Girl	Symbol of materialism and rejection of true love.
	The Rose-tree	Symbol of nature's witness to love and sacrifice.
	The Dawn	Symbol of new beginning after sacrifice.
	The Shadow of Night	Symbol of death and inevitability.
	The Red Color	Symbol of blood, passion, and sacrifice.
Hyperbole (appears five times)	"Love is wiser than all the philosophers, and mightier than all the kings."	Exaggeration elevates love's supremacy.
	"The whole night she sang."	Overstatement to show devotion.
	"Her voice was sweeter than flute, harp, or violin."	Exaggeration of beauty of the song.
	"He flung himself down on the grass and wept."	Dramatization of sadness.
	"The student said, 'Without her, I shall die.'"	Exaggeration of despair in unrequited love.

From the table above, it concluded that personification played a dominant role because it transformed nature into an active participant in the story. The rose-tree that "cried to the Nightingale," the moon that "listened," and the dawn that "looked pitifully" were all given human attributes, which made the natural world not just a background but a witness and judge of human emotions. This personification emphasized that love was not merely a private sentiment. It created an atmosphere where nature itself becomes a moral stage for the Nightingale's sacrifice.

Metaphors in the story deepen this moral weight by equating love with higher values. Wilde writes that "Love is wiser than Philosophy" and "more

powerful than Wealth," setting love as an ultimate truth beyond intellectual or material pursuits. The rose, born from the Nightingale's blood, is not merely a flower but a metaphor for the cost of genuine love. These metaphors suggested that love cannot exist without sacrifice, and that true devotion always demands something from the lover.

Similes, on the other hand, gave the story its sensory beauty. When the Nightingale's song was described as "like water bubbling from a silver jar" or "like the laughter of children," the comparisons invite the reader to imagine purity, innocence, and joy. These similes made the abstract experience of love tangible, as if one could hear and feel it directly. It

softened the tragic tone of the tale, offering glimpses of beauty even in moments of despair.

Symbolism carried the heaviest interpretive burden in Wilde's tale. The red rose itself was an unmistakable emblem of love, but because it was produced through the Nightingale's suffering, it also represented the price of passion. The Nightingale symbolized the selfless artist who gave everything for beauty and truth, while the Student represented youthful idealism that was, tragically, shallow and untested. The girl, who rejected the rose, embodied materialism and the indifference of society to true sacrifice. These symbols combined to form a critique of a world where authentic love and art were undervalued, and where selfless devotion was easily dismissed.

Finally, hyperbole underscored the intensity of emotions in the story. When the Student proclaimed that he would "die without her," or when Wilde declared that "Love is mightier than all the kings," the exaggeration conveys the overwhelming, almost desperate nature of passion. While as readers might see the Student's reaction as immature, the hyperbole makes his despair vivid. These exaggerations also highlighted the contrast between the grandeur of the Nightingale's sacrifice and the triviality of the Student's love, which collapses the moment it was rejected.

Taken together, these figurative language; personification, metaphor, simile, symbolism, and hyperbole, interweaved to create a narrative that is both lyrical and tragic. They turned the story into more than a simple moral fable; they made it a meditation on the cost of love, the value of art, and the indifference of society to sacrifice. It concluded that Wilde, through these devices, wanted to reveal the paradox of love: it is both the most exalted of

human experiences and the most easily dismissed.

After the short story was interpreted, the students' sheet was analyzed. It found that five students found the personification appeared twelve times in the short story. Then, metaphor was analyzed eight times appearance by ten students, and for simile nine students answered there were six times appearance in the short story. Symbolism was found ten times in the short story by only two students. Meanwhile, five students found there were five appearances of hyperbole in the short story.

From the data above, the percentage was calculated. It shown the students ability in finding and interpreting figurative language in "*The Nightingale and the Rose*" short story by Oscar Wilde as follow; personification 29, 41%, metaphor 58,83%, as for simile 52,94%, then symbolism 23,52%, and the last was hyperbole 29,41%. In detail, in shown on the chart below.

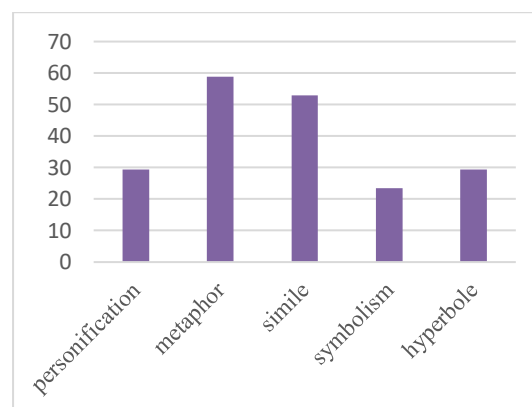


Figure 4.1 Figurative Language

This finding is consistent with earlier studies (Hunter, 2010; Rabey, 2014), which suggest that nineteenth-century symbolism often requires cultural and contextual knowledge that EFL learners may lack.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that students' comprehension is shaped by both linguistic and cognitive factors. The figurative language that were more explicit—such as personification and simile—were more easily recognized, whereas abstract symbols required inferential reasoning. This supports the idea that explicit instruction and guided interpretation can scaffold learners' ability to connect literary devices with thematic meaning.

Overall, these results indicate that while the students demonstrated a developing awareness of figurative language, they still require pedagogical support to deepen their symbolic and thematic interpretation skills. Integrating literary discussions and scaffolded questioning may thus be an effective strategy to bridge the interpretive gap between literal recognition and symbolic understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the ability of sixth-semester English Department students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Sungai Penuh to identify and interpret figurative language in Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose*. The findings revealed five types of figurative language—personification, metaphor, simile, symbolism, and hyperbole—with personification emerging as the most frequent and accurately interpreted category. Although students performed well in recognizing metaphor and simile, their interpretations of symbolism remained limited, suggesting the need for deeper cultural and contextual engagement when reading classic literary texts. The results suggest that guided reading activities and literary discussions can significantly enhance students' interpretive competence. By

encouraging students to analyze figurative language both quantitatively and qualitatively, teachers can foster critical thinking, emotional sensitivity, and aesthetic appreciation. From a pedagogical perspective, this study highlights the importance of integrating figurative language analysis into literature instruction in EFL settings. It provides empirical evidence that explicit engagement with figurative language can help students bridge the gap between literal comprehension and symbolic interpretation. For future research, mixed-methods approaches such as interviews, think-aloud protocols, or classroom observations are recommended to explore in greater depth how students process symbolic meanings in foreign-language literature. Expanding the participant pool and including texts from different literary periods would also strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

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