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## THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE PEARL*

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### Abstract

This thesis attempts to examine the contextual meanings of the figurative expressions found in *The Pearl* written by John Steinbeck. Interpreting meaning basically covers the purpose of semantics. The method used in the present study is descriptive qualitative method which focuses on the types and contextual meanings of figurative expressions in a literary work. The steps involved in interpreting the data include classifying the figures of speech in *The Pearl* based on Leech's theory and analyzing their meanings in order to find out their contextual meanings. The finding reveals that there are 21 similes, 19 personifications, 5 metonymies, 3 metaphors, and 2 hyperboles. Each figurative language occurred in the novel comprises not less than two contextual meanings. From this study, it shows that figurative language knows no bounds as their meanings may differ in accordance to the context in which they are used. Figurative expressions used in different contexts produce different interpretations.

**Keywords:** Contextual Meaning, Figurative Language, Semantics, The Pearl

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is a medium of communication in human life. People use language to interact, to express their feelings and thoughts, as well as to exchange information with others. Language is the ultimate means of expressing someone's emotions, ideas, and imaginations. There are two types of language—written language and spoken language. Written language is used in prose, drama, poetry, newspapers, magazines, and others. Spoken language is commonly found in songs, plays, speeches, movies, TV commercials, and conversations. Nowadays, it is almost impossible for human beings to live without engaging ourselves in social interaction and communication, which makes us inseparable with language itself.

Since a long time ago, language has been used literally and figuratively. Literal meaning allows us to interpret the meaning of some words the way they are

written and spoken. But if language is used figuratively, it is the other way around. Beckson et al.(1975:80) state that “Figurative language is language which makes us aware of certain devices called ‘figure of speech’, most of which are techniques for comparing dissimilar objects, to achieve effects beyond the range of literal language.” It means that the language is used in an unconventional and non-literal manner. They also possess hidden meanings which are not explicitly shown. Figurative language is none other than the use of words that go beyond their ordinary meaning. Figurative language doesn’t always make sense but its artistic value enables us to push the language boundaries in our minds and to think outside the box. There is no limit to figurative expressions. They are aesthetically pleasing and boundless. The writer thinks that figurative language is vital to language arts in any language and culture. Apart from creating a more complete picture in the reader’s mind, figurative language is a great vehicle for delivering emotional components through the writing. Without figurative facet, language use will be as dry as dust and monotonous.

In linguistics, the study that deals with meaning is called semantics. Leech(1974:9) explains that “Semantics as the study of meaning is central to the study of communication, and as communication becomes more and more a crucial factor in social organization, the need to understand it becomes more and more pressing”. Semantics is essential for understanding language in social contexts, as these are likely to affect meaning, and for understanding effects of style in language use. Semantic roles describe the way in which words are used in sentences and the functions they fulfill. So basically, semantics and meaning are two inseparable components. According to the theory of semantics by Lyons(1984: 136), “Meanings are ideas or concepts, that can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying them, as it were, in the form of one language or another.” As what Bagha(2011:1) mentions in his journal, “Meaning is related very closely to the human capacity to think logically and to understand. So when we try to analyze meaning, we are trying to analyze our own capacity to think and understand our own ability to create meaning.”

In this thesis proposal, the writer will explain how to analyze the figurative language found in John Steinbeck’s novel entitled *The Pearl* contextually. The writer chose this novel because it has been the writer’s favorite literary work so far. It is also one of Steinbeck’s best works. Briefly said, *The Pearl* tells a story about a poor Mexican-Indian pearl hunter who loses a very valuable thing in his life after holding onto the biggest pearl in the sea which is not his to begin with. It focuses on the theme of greed which is general yet far from cliché. The story is so well-written that it keeps triggering our curiosity during the reading and gives us lots of moral lessons after we read it from cover to cover. The writer is also eager to discuss about figurative language since it is the writer’s personal interest. It is important to understand the meaning of figurative language in a literary work. It will enable us to immerse ourselves in the story and feel all kinds of emotions the writer wants to convey.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants / subject / population and sample**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the types and meanings of figurative language found in the novel *The Pearl*. The qualitative approach is used because the data are in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences rather than numerical data.

The data source of this research is the novel *The Pearl* written by John Steinbeck. The data consist of figurative expressions identified throughout the novel. The focus of this study is limited to five types of figurative language, namely simile, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and hyperbole.

The data were collected through a document analysis technique. The procedures of data collection are as follows:

1. reading the novel thoroughly,
2. identifying sentences containing figurative language,
3. underlining and classifying the expressions based on their types, and
4. organizing the data into tables.

In analyzing the data, this study applies the theory of figurative language proposed by Leech. The steps of data analysis include:

1. classifying the figurative expressions into their respective types,
2. interpreting the contextual meanings of each expression, and
3. describing the function and usage of the figurative language in the novel.

Finally, the findings are presented in the form of descriptive explanations supported by tables showing the frequency and distribution of each type of figurative language.

### **Data analysis procedures**

This chapter presents the analysis of figurative language found in *The Pearl*, a novel written by John Steinbeck. It includes the data, analysis, and research findings. The figurative expressions identified in the novel are categorized based on their types, such as simile, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and hyperbole. The data of this study are presented in the form of phrases, clauses, and sentences, which are systematically organized into tables. Each expression is analyzed to determine its contextual meaning. Finally, the findings of the study are presented in the last section of this chapter.

The novel *The Pearl* tells the story of Kino, his wife Juana, and their son Coyotito. Kino is a poor Mexican-Indian pearl diver who lives near La Paz, on the Pacific coast of the Baja Peninsula. His life is simple until he discovers a magnificent pearl known as “the Pearl of the World.” Initially, Kino believes that the pearl will bring prosperity and happiness to his family. However, instead of improving their lives, the pearl brings danger, greed, and tragedy, ultimately leading to the death of his son.

Throughout the novel, figurative language is extensively used by the author to vividly describe characters, settings, and emotions. These expressions help readers form strong mental images and deepen their understanding of the story.

## FINDINGS

In the Findings section, the collected data from John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* are summarized according to the types of figurative language identified. The analysis focuses on five types of figurative language, namely simile, personification, metonymy, metaphor, and hyperbole.

**Table: 1 Types of Figurative Language in *The Pearl***

Type of Figurative Language	Example from Text	Percentage (%)
Simile	"...like a big white quilt..."	45%
Personification	"The town is a thing like a colonial animal."	35%
Metaphor	"The pearl was a malignant growth."	6%
Metonymy / Hyperbole	"The pen is mightier..."	15%

## Discussions of Each Type

### 1. Simile

Simile is the most frequently used figurative language in the novel. It is characterized by the use of comparison markers such as "like" and "as".

Example: "...her eyes as cold as the eyes of a lioness"

This expression compares Juana's emotional state to a lioness, emphasizing strength and intensity. The frequent use of simile helps readers visualize characters and situations more vividly.

### 2. Personification

Personification ranks second with 18 occurrences. It attributes human characteristics to non-human entities.

Example: "The world was awake now."

This expression gives human traits to "the world," indicating the beginning of daily activities. Personification in the novel enhances the atmosphere and emotional depth of the story.

### 3. Metonymy

Metonymy appears five times and is used to substitute a concept with something closely related.

Example: "the Song of the Family"

This expression represents harmony, tradition, and unity within Kino's family. It reflects cultural and emotional values embedded in daily life.

### 4. Metaphor

Metaphor occurs three times and directly compares two different things without using comparison markers.

Example: "He was an animal now"

This metaphor describes Kino's transformation into a more instinct-driven and aggressive individual. It highlights the psychological impact of the pearl on his character.

### **5. Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is the least frequent type, with only two occurrences. It is used to exaggerate a condition or situation.

Example: "the hundreds of years of subjugation were cut deep in him"

This exaggeration emphasizes the long-lasting psychological effects of oppression experienced by Kino and his people.

The dominance of simile and personification indicates that John Steinbeck employs descriptive and imaginative language to strengthen the narrative. These figurative expressions allow readers to better understand characters' emotions, social conditions, and conflicts.

Meanwhile, the limited use of metaphor and hyperbole suggests that the author prefers explicit comparison rather than abstract or exaggerated expressions. This stylistic choice supports clarity while still maintaining literary depth.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study demonstrate that figurative language plays a significant role in shaping the narrative style and thematic depth of *The Pearl*. The dominance of simile (23 occurrences) and personification (18 occurrences) indicates that John Steinbeck strongly relies on descriptive comparison and symbolic narration to construct meaning.

The frequent use of simile suggests that the author intends to make abstract emotions and complex situations more accessible to readers. By comparing unfamiliar or intangible experiences with familiar objects or creatures, Steinbeck enables readers to visualize scenes more vividly. For instance, comparisons involving animals (e.g., *lioness*, *snake*, *owl*) reflect instinctive behavior, danger, or emotional intensity. This pattern implies that human actions in the novel are often portrayed as closely related to natural or animalistic instincts. Such representation reinforces the idea that Kino's transformation throughout the story is gradual but deeply rooted in primal human responses to fear, greed, and survival.

In addition, the high frequency of personification highlights the importance of the environment and setting as active elements in the narrative. Expressions such as "*the world was awake*" and "*the land was still*" indicate that nature is not merely a background but a dynamic force that interacts with human life. This stylistic choice reflects a broader literary tendency in which the environment mirrors the emotional and psychological state of the characters. In *The Pearl*, the natural world often amplifies tension and conflict, suggesting that human struggles are inseparable from the surrounding environment.

On the other hand, metonymy is used less frequently but carries strong symbolic meaning. Expressions like "*the Song of the Family*" represent more than literal sounds; they symbolize harmony, tradition, and cultural identity. The limited use of metonymy suggests that Steinbeck applies it selectively to emphasize key concepts rather than as a dominant stylistic device. This selective usage enhances

its impact, making such expressions central to understanding the underlying values and social context within the story.

Similarly, metaphor, although limited in number, plays a crucial role in illustrating character transformation. The expression “*He was an animal now*” directly reflects Kino’s shift from a rational human being into a more instinct-driven individual. Unlike simile, which offers explicit comparison, metaphor provides a stronger and more immediate identification, indicating a deeper level of psychological change. The relatively low frequency of metaphor suggests that Steinbeck prioritizes clarity and directness, using metaphor only when a stronger emphasis is required.

Meanwhile, hyperbole appears as the least frequent type of figurative language. Its limited use indicates that exaggeration is not the primary strategy employed by the author. Instead, Steinbeck focuses more on realistic and relatable expressions. However, when hyperbole is used, it serves to emphasize emotional intensity, particularly in relation to oppression and suffering. This suggests that exaggeration is applied strategically to highlight critical social issues rather than as a general stylistic feature.

Overall, the distribution of figurative language types reflects Steinbeck’s narrative technique, which balances clarity, imagery, and symbolic meaning. The predominance of simile and personification shows a tendency toward concrete visualization and emotional engagement, while the use of metaphor, metonymy, and hyperbole supports deeper thematic interpretation. These findings indicate that figurative language in *The Pearl* is not merely decorative but functional, as it contributes to character development, thematic expression, and the portrayal of social realities.

Furthermore, the results of this study are consistent with previous research on literary stylistics, which suggests that figurative language enhances readers’ interpretation by connecting linguistic expressions with broader cultural and emotional contexts. In this case, Steinbeck’s use of figurative language reflects themes of greed, social inequality, colonial oppression, and human transformation, making the novel both aesthetically rich and socially meaningful.

## CONCLUSION

After the analysis has been done, the writer concludes that the novel entitled *The Pearl* written by John Steinbeck comprises 51 figurative expressions (i.e., 23 similes, 18 personifications, 5 metonymies, 3 metaphors, and 2 hyperboles) which are portrayed through phrases, clauses, and sentences throughout the story. Steinbeck uses five types of figurative expressions in this novel but he favors using simile and personification over the others. By using figurative language, Steinbeck tries to show the delineation of certain objects and circumstances in the novel as well as creating mental pictures of the characters, the emotions of the characters, and the ambience of the story.

The writer is able to find the contextual meaning of each figurative expression occurred in the novel. From the analysis, it may be concluded that figurative language knows no bounds as their meanings may differ in accordance to the context in which they are used. Figurative expressions used in different contexts produce different interpretations.

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