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# An Analysis Of Figurative Language In Margaret Atwood's "A Sad Child"

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bahasa figuratif dalam puisi "A Sad Child" karya Margaret Atwood dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dan analisis isi. Data utama berupa teks puisi, sedangkan kategori analisis mengacu pada teori Perrine. Skripsi mengidentifikasi metafora (dua contoh), personifikasi (satu), simbolisme (tiga), ironi (dua), citraan (tiga), dan alegori (satu). Penafsiran tersebut menggambarkan kesedihan, rasa tidak aman, dan ketegangan antara nasihat sosial dan pengalaman emosional. Artikel ini meninjau kembali klasifikasi temuan secara kritis: beberapa kategori dapat tumpang tindih dan memerlukan justifikasi tekstual yang lebih kuat. Temuan dipahami sebagai interpretasi terhadap satu puisi, bukan generalisasi atas seluruh karya Atwood.
Kata kunci: bahasa figuratif; Margaret Atwood; A Sad Child; analisis isi; puisi

Abstract

This qualitative content analysis examines figurative language in Margaret Atwood's poem "A Sad Child," using Perrine's framework to organize textual interpretation. The source thesis identified two metaphors, one personification, three symbolic expressions, two instances of irony, three examples of imagery, and one allegorical reading. The analysis associated these expressions with sadness, insecurity, emotional isolation, and the tension between conventional advice and lived experience. This article preserves the thesis findings while distinguishing reported categories from interpretive claims: some expressions can support more than one reading, and the classification of a single image as allegory requires caution.

The findings concern one selected poem and do not establish the prevalence of figurative devices across Atwood's poetry.

Keywords: figurative language; Margaret Atwood; A Sad Child; content analysis; poetry

## INTRODUCTION

Poetry compresses emotional experience through patterned language, images, rhythm, and the strategic departure from literal expression. Figurative language therefore matters not only as a list of rhetorical labels but also as a means by which readers connect verbal choices with themes and implied attitudes (Perrine, 1969; Abrams & Harpham, 2012). A poem may invite several defensible interpretations, provided that each is supported by features of the text (Culler, 1975; Eagleton, 2007).

In literary analysis, metaphor transfers conceptual associations across domains, whereas simile explicitly signals comparison. Personification attributes human qualities to nonhuman entities, and symbolism allows a concrete object or scene to carry meanings beyond its immediate reference (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Alm-Arvius, 2003). Irony depends on a tension between surface wording and implied judgment; imagery evokes sensory or bodily experience (Booth, 1974; Abrams & Harpham, 2012). These categories may overlap in a single poetic expression.

Margaret Atwood's "A Sad Child" presents sadness through shifts in address, seemingly practical advice, memories of childhood exclusion, and unsettling images of vulnerability. The poem is a useful case for examining how figurative language communicates emotional states without reducing those states to a single explanation. The present analysis draws on the thesis by Ni Kadek Weny Prayani (2025), which examined this poem using qualitative content analysis and Perrine's categories.

Literary reading also requires attention to the relation between textual evidence and interpretation. Reader-response approaches recognize the reader's active role, while close reading asks the analyst to justify interpretations through specific words and formal relations (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978; Brooks, 1947). In

qualitative research, transparent categorization and explicit analytical decisions help make such interpretations open to scrutiny (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

For an English-education context, reading a poem can create opportunities to connect linguistic form with interpretation. Work by Sandiarsa, Tantra, and Ratminingsih (2014) on reading strategies and text types offers a locally relevant reminder that text characteristics influence reading tasks, although their study did not investigate Atwood or figurative language. The present study accordingly asks which figures of speech were identified in “A Sad Child” and how they were interpreted in relation to the poem’s representation of sadness. In a related English-education context, Imran and Sandiarsa S. (2018) examined a collaborative consultation strategy for narrative-text reading, while Hidayatullah (2016) explored questioning in expository-text comprehension. Haerazi and Irawan (2020) also investigated reading instruction through ECOLA. These studies concern comprehension pedagogy rather than the figurative devices in Atwood’s poem; they nevertheless help explain why explicit interpretation and discussion may be useful in literature classes.

## METHOD

Research design. The original study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach and used content analysis to identify and interpret figurative expressions in a single literary text. This article reports the categories and examples documented in the thesis; it does not introduce new participants, surveys, or experimental measures (Merriam, 1998; Krippendorff, 2018).

Data source and unit of analysis. The primary text was Margaret Atwood’s poem “A Sad Child.” The thesis consulted secondary literature on figures of speech and poetry. Words, phrases, and brief passages were treated as potential units for classification; the poem as a whole provided interpretive context.

Analytical procedure. The researcher read the poem repeatedly, marked expressions considered nonliteral or evocative, assigned category codes based on Perrine (1969), and interpreted their possible contributions to the theme. The thesis

used codes for allegory, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, metonymy, paradox, personification, symbol, and simile. Its findings also reported imagery as an additional descriptive category. Because coding rules and independent agreement checks were not fully documented, the resulting categories are best treated as reasoned interpretations rather than objectively settled counts (Neuendorf, 2017).

Scope and ethics. The research analyzed a published literary text and did not involve human participants. The analysis avoids reproducing the full copyrighted poem and uses only short textual excerpts needed for critical commentary. No human-subject consent or confidential interview data were involved.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Figurative-language categories reported in the source thesis.

| Category | Reported examples | Interpretive function |
|---|---|---|
| Metaphor | 2 | Sadness represented as pervasive or difficult to escape |
| Personification | 1 | Sadness treated as something requiring care |
| Symbolism | 3 | Doll, fog, and party imagery associated with vulnerability or contrast |
| Irony | 2 | Conventional reassurance contrasted with distress |
| Imagery | 3 | Sensory details foreground embodied emotion |
| Allegory | 1 | Party scene interpreted as a broader emotional contrast |

Metaphor and emotional persistence. The thesis interpreted “your sadness, your shadow” as a metaphor linking sadness with an inescapable companion. The association is persuasive because a shadow accompanies a person and varies with surrounding light. Conceptual metaphor theory helps explain why such familiar spatial experience can organize an abstract feeling (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The thesis also treated the poem’s opening sequence of possible explanations for sadness as metaphorical; however, these statements could alternatively be read as competing literal or quasi-medical explanations. That distinction should remain visible in the interpretation.

Personification and symbolic imagery. The phrase “hug your sadness like an eyeless doll” was classified as personification in the thesis, with sadness treated as an object of care. It also contains an explicit simile (“like”) and a symbolic image, demonstrating why a single phrase need not fit one exclusive label (Perrine, 1969; Alm-Arvius, 2003). The eyeless doll can suggest helplessness or impaired recognition, while the fog image suggests uncertainty. Such readings are interpretive possibilities, not fixed dictionary meanings.

Irony and the limits of easy consolation. The thesis highlighted advice to “buy a hat” and similar distractions as ironic because material remedies appear disproportionate to emotional pain. This is a stronger claim when the lines are considered in their larger sequence, where the poem juxtaposes brisk instructions with unresolved memories. Booth (1974) explains that irony depends on readers recognizing a discrepancy between literal expression and implied perspective. The final turn toward shared vulnerability may likewise be read as a complication of individual exceptionalism rather than simply a contradiction.

Imagery, memory, and bodily detail. The thesis identified sensory details such as “palms sticky with cake” and “flushed with the sun.” These images anchor emotional recollection in concrete bodily sensations and establish a contrast between an apparently festive setting and the speaker’s experience of exclusion. Close reading attends to such local contrasts as a basis for broader interpretation (Brooks, 1947; Eagleton, 2007). The interpretation of the party scene as a sustained

allegory, however, requires stronger evidence of a systematic second level of meaning than the thesis provides.

Themes and interpretive boundaries. Taken together, the thesis's examples suggest a poem concerned with sadness, vulnerability, exclusion, and the difficulty of receiving adequate consolation. Reader-response theory helps explain why readers may connect these expressions to different emotional histories (Rosenblatt, 1978; Iser, 1978). Nevertheless, the analytical task is to connect each interpretation back to identifiable textual details rather than assume that every evocative expression has one predetermined meaning.

Implications for EFL literary reading. A classroom discussion can distinguish identification ("What figure might this be?") from interpretation ("What does it contribute in context?"). Students can compare alternative readings and defend them with brief textual evidence. Local work on reading competence by Sandiarsa et al. (2014) offers a relevant pedagogical comparison concerning the importance of text type, but cannot be cited as direct evidence for the present poem analysis. Similarly, the literature on figurative meaning emphasizes conceptual and rhetorical reasoning rather than memorizing isolated labels (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Abrams & Harpham, 2012). Local English-education research offers additional pedagogical parallels. Sandiarsa S. and Suhaili (2019) compared Buzz Group and Critical Debate approaches to speaking achievement, providing a discussion-oriented context rather than direct evidence about poetry analysis. Hanan et al. (2020) investigated guided reading and critical-thinking skills, while Firman et al. (2021) addressed difficulties in reading English texts. Taken together with Imran and Sandiarsa S. (2018), these studies suggest classroom directions for supporting close reading, although the present textual analysis did not test instructional outcomes.

Limitations. The thesis analyzed only one poem and did not report intercoder agreement or a fully specified decision rule for overlapping figures. Its results section also employed imagery alongside categories that the theoretical review described differently. These constraints do not invalidate close reading, but they mean the

numerical frequencies should not be presented as exhaustive or independently verified measurements (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

Analytical distinction between categorization and explanation. The counts in Table 1 answer a descriptive question about how the source researcher organized the poem. They do not by themselves answer why a particular image matters. A stronger interpretation connects diction, placement, shifts in address, and the larger emotional movement of the poem. For example, the doll image can be discussed as comparison, an object associated with childhood, and a sign of impaired vision. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but each requires an explicit explanation of the language that makes it plausible (Culler, 1975; Perrine, 1969).

Attention to speaker and addressee also helps prevent overly literal interpretation. The poem alternates between the voice that offers explanations or remedies and the experience of sadness that resists easy resolution. The tone of apparent reassurance may become uncomfortable when set beside memories of exclusion. The thesis emphasized the theme of diminished confidence, and this interpretation is consistent with the movement from general advice toward the emotionally specific childhood scene. Still, the poem does not authorize a clinical diagnosis of its speaker or an inference about the poet's own mental state (Booth, 1974; Eagleton, 2007).

The final images of bodily danger enlarge the scale of vulnerability beyond the earlier domestic and social details. The contrast between ordinary childhood objects and more disturbing imagery may intensify the reader's sense that sadness cannot be neatly resolved through distraction. The thesis reads this as an expression of shared emotional difficulty. A close-reading approach would describe the shift in imagery before claiming that it demonstrates a particular moral lesson, since the final movement can also be experienced as unsettling or ambiguous (Brooks, 1947; Rosenblatt, 1978).

The study has methodological value as an introductory exercise in qualitative literary analysis. Repeated reading, marking phrases, developing codes, and explaining interpretive decisions are recognizable stages of textual inquiry. Future

reports could improve trustworthiness by presenting a coding table with category definitions, short excerpts, alternative readings, and reasons for accepting or rejecting a classification. Such documentation would make the interpretation more transparent without pretending that literary meaning is reducible to mechanical agreement (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The source thesis identified metaphor, personification, symbolism, irony, imagery, and allegory in Margaret Atwood's "A Sad Child." These categories were used to interpret sadness, uncertainty, childhood exclusion, and the inadequacy of superficial reassurance. A close reading indicates that some examples overlap across categories, especially simile, symbolism, and personification, and that the allegorical classification remains tentative. The study is therefore best understood as a context-sensitive interpretation of one poem rather than a definitive inventory of Atwood's poetic devices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Future analyses should define coding criteria explicitly, distinguish figurative devices from sensory imagery, allow justified overlapping codes, and document independent review of disputed classifications. English-literature instructors may use the poem to teach evidence-based interpretation while acknowledging multiple plausible readings.

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