

Metaphors of Love in The Tortured Poets Department Album By Taylor Swift

Putu Dabrina Cintania Jaya^{1*}, Putu Lirishati Soethama², Putu Weddha Savitri³
¹⁻³ Universitas Udayana, Indonesia
Email : dabrinacintania@gmail.com *

Abstract. This study explores how love metaphors are expressed in three selected songs: *Guilty as Sin*, *The Alchemy*, and *But Daddy I Love Him*, from Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album. Language plays a crucial role in conveying abstract emotions like love, and metaphor is a powerful tool for articulating complex feelings in song lyrics. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research analyzes the lyrics through Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, categorizing metaphors into structural, ontological, and orientational types. Data were collected by closely reading the lyrics and noting metaphorical expressions, which were then interpreted within their emotional and thematic contexts. The findings reveal that ontological and structural metaphors dominate, portraying love as poetic storytelling and an evolving emotional journey, while no orientational metaphors were identified. This study highlights how Taylor Swift employs metaphorical language to capture the multifaceted nature of love, heartbreak, and personal transformation, demonstrating the significant role of metaphor in shaping emotional meaning in contemporary popular music.

Kata kunci: conceptual metaphor, metaphors of love, song lyrics analysis, *The Tortured Poets Department*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in expressing human experiences, especially abstract emotions such as love, longing, and heartbreak. Leech (1981), in his book *The Study of Meaning*, identifies seven distinct types of meaning used in linguistic analysis, especially denotative and connotative meaning. In semantics, the meaning of linguistic expressions can be explored through their literal (denotative) and implied (connotative) dimensions. Literary and musical texts often rely on connotative meanings and figurative language to convey deeper emotional truths, with metaphor standing out as one of the most powerful tools in this regard. Metaphors not only add aesthetic value to artistic works but also serve as cognitive instruments that help individuals conceptualize and articulate complex feelings. One domain where metaphor is frequently and effectively employed is in song lyrics. Songs, as a form of artistic expression, often draw on metaphorical language to narrate personal and emotional stories in ways that resonate with a broad audience. Songwriters commonly use metaphors to symbolize emotions, relationships, and life experiences, making their lyrical narratives both imaginative and relatable. This metaphorical framing of abstract ideas, particularly love, allows listeners to engage with the content on a conceptual and emotional level. To analyze how love is conceptualized in these songs, this study applies Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory from *Metaphors We Live By*. This study aims to identify the conceptual

mappings represented by metaphors of love in the song lyrics of Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album and to analyze the interpretations reflected by those metaphors of love in the song lyrics.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) define metaphor as a linguistic expression that allows one concept to be understood in terms of another, primarily serving as a tool for comprehension. Metaphors help people grasp abstract or complex ideas, such as emotions, beauty, experiences, ethical values, and spirituality, by connecting them to more concrete and familiar concepts. Although the terms being compared are different, metaphors suggest that they share a similar value or function. As a form of figurative language, metaphors convey meanings that differ from their literal interpretations, which can sometimes seem illogical, particularly when describing emotions like love. Metaphors of love often associate the feeling with relatable images or experiences to illustrate its depth and variety. Love is commonly represented as a journey, a flame, or a blooming flower, each reflecting different emotional layers. For instance, the expression *Love is a battlefield* suggests that love can be intense, filled with conflict, and requires strength and resilience, much like a real battle.

In analyzing metaphors of love, mapping theory is needed to group concepts to analyze the interpretation of love in song lyrics. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), conceptual metaphors are cognitive tools that allow individuals to understand abstract concepts by linking them to more familiar experiences. These metaphors are not merely figures of speech but reflect how we think, reason, and structure our perception of the world. Conceptual metaphors are commonly classified into three types: structural, ontological, and orientational. Structural metaphors enable abstract ideas to be framed using well-defined concepts; for example, *Life is a Journey* or *Argument is War* shape how we understand life events or conflicts through concrete experiences such as travel or battle. Ontological metaphors, on the other hand, help us conceptualize intangible ideas like emotions or thoughts, by treating them as physical objects or substances. Expressions such as “bottling up emotions” or “an idea came to mind” illustrate how we personify or contain abstract experiences. Orientational metaphors are grounded in physical orientation, using spatial terms like up, down, in, or out to represent emotional states, such as “feeling down” to signify sadness or “rising above it” to indicate emotional strength. Central to these metaphor types is the concept of conceptual mapping, where elements from a concrete source domain (like travel, warfare, or containment) are projected onto a more abstract target domain (such as love, time, or emotion). This process not only aids in interpreting abstract ideas but also influences how we communicate them in everyday language and creative works. In the context of song lyrics, for instance, describing

love as a journey allows listeners to relate to emotional relationships through familiar experiences like paths, destinations, or obstacles. Thus, conceptual metaphors and their mappings play a crucial role in shaping both thought and language, offering deeper insight into how people process and express emotional experiences.

Although prior studies have explored metaphors of love in various musical and cultural contexts, there remains limited analysis of how music constructs emotional meaning through metaphor. The studies by Al-Khaza'leh and Alzubi (2022), Ardiantari (2023), Sari (2020), and Fitrawati et al. (2024) collectively highlight how metaphors serve as a vital linguistic tool for expressing the abstract and deeply emotional concept of love. Al-Khaza'leh and Alzubi identified 19 metaphorical themes in English and Arabic love songs, emphasizing the dominance of structural metaphors, such as journey, magic, and unity, also noting cultural variations in the use of orientational metaphors. Ardiantari adds that songwriters often rely on figurative language to subtly convey complex feelings, encouraging personal interpretation by listeners. Sari emphasizes that metaphors are deeply embedded in everyday language and thought, shaping how people conceptualize universal yet subjective experiences like love. Building on this, Fitrawati et al. (2024) examined metaphors of love in Wave to Earth's songs, illustrating how metaphors express not only affection and happiness but also the essential role of love and relationships in providing meaning and emotional life support. Together, these studies underscore the cultural, emotional, and cognitive significance of metaphors of love in music and communication. However, these studies have made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of how metaphors in music express the idea of love, more research is still needed, especially when it comes to applying conceptual metaphor theory to the analysis of modern Western pop music. Fewer studies examine how contemporary artists create metaphors of love in a particular cultural setting, while the majority of studies focus on cross-cultural comparisons or general metaphor use. Furthermore, how structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors work together to influence the emotional terrain of love in contemporary poetry has received little consideration. To close that gap, this study applies Lakoff and Johnson conceptual metaphor theory to analyze metaphors of love in Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album. It focuses on how metaphorical language in modern pop music reveals deeper meanings about relationships and love.

Taylor Swift, a renowned contemporary pop artist, is particularly noted for her metaphor-rich lyricism and emotionally nuanced songwriting. Her 2024 album *The Tortured Poets Department* delves into themes of emotional vulnerability, romantic conflict, and personal transformation. The album features 16 tracks and spans a total duration of 65 minutes

and 8 seconds, blending genres such as folk-pop, synth-pop, and chamber pop. Swift co-wrote and co-produced the album with long-time collaborators Aaron Dessner and Jack Antonoff. According to Genius.com, Taylor described this album as centering on themes of love, heartbreak, and introspection. The lyrical content portrays love as a layered and transformative experience, characterized by longing, nostalgia, and emotional growth. The album also includes collaborations with notable artists like Post Malone and Florence and the Machine, a London-based indie rock band. Visually, *The Tortured Poets Department* adopts a gothic, dark academia style, as reflected in the black-and-white album cover featuring Swift in a black leisure outfit. Media outlets have described the album's aesthetic as melancholic and intellectual, aligning with the album's emotional and literary themes. Within this album, this study limits its analysis to metaphors of love found in three selected songs from Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album, using Lakoff and Johnson conceptual metaphor theory (2003) as the analytical framework. These songs encapsulate love not as a simple emotional state but as a layered and evolving experience shaped by desire, defiance, and transformation.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach to explore how love metaphors are expressed in three selected songs, *Guilty as Sin*, *The Alchemy*, and *But Daddy I Love Him*, from Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* album. The data were gathered through close reading of the song lyrics, followed by note-taking to identify words and phrases that suggest metaphorical meanings related to love. These expressions were then sorted and categorized based on Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphor theory, which includes structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. To interpret the meaning behind each metaphor, dictionary references were used to understand the literal meanings of the words, which were then connected to the emotional and thematic context of the lyrics. The analysis is presented through structured tables and narrative explanations, combining formal categorization with informal interpretation to understand better how Taylor Swift uses metaphor to convey complex emotions and experiences related to love.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Using Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor, the identified metaphors are classified into structural, ontological, and orientational types. The following table highlights key lyrics containing metaphors of love along with their conceptual mappings. There

are 3 songs selected from the album. Every song does contain metaphors of romance, but in this chapter, only 8 examples of metaphors will be discussed and analyzed more deeply.

Table 1. Identification of the lyrics

Song Lyrics	Song Title	Conceptual Mapping	Type of Metaphor
But he's the one I want	But Daddy I Love Him	LOVE IS A GOAL	Ontological Metaphor
Just screeching tires and true love	But Daddy I Love Him	LOVE IS A JOURNEY	Structural Metaphor
What if he's written 'mine' on my upper thigh, only in my mind?	Guilty As Sin	LOVE IS A GOAL	Structural Metaphor
What if the way you hold me is actually what's holy?	Guilty As Sin	LOVE AS RELIGION	Structural Metaphor
The sign on your heart said it's still reserved for me.	The Alchemy	LOVE IS A PLACE	Structural Metaphor
Where's the trophy? He just comes running over to me.	The Alchemy	LOVE IS COMPETITION	Structural Metaphor

[Data 1] *but he's the one I want* (But Daddy, I Love Him, Chorus, Line 7)

The sixth track on Taylor's album draws inspiration from the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, where a mermaid falls in love with a human. In the song, Taylor responds to her critics, including fans, the media, and public figures, who scrutinize her romantic choices. She challenges their moral superiority and affirms her right to make personal decisions without outside judgment. Her frustration with unsolicited opinions is evident in lines such as, "God save the judgmental people who say they want what's best for me." The structural metaphor LOVE IS A GOAL is clearly reflected in the lyric, "But he's the one I want." In this metaphorical framework, the concrete concept of pursuing or achieving something (the source domain) helps us understand romantic longing (the target domain). The phrase "the one I want" conveys intention, preference, and determination, portraying love as the pursuit of a desired outcome. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain, structural metaphors allow us to comprehend abstract emotions like love through familiar actions and experiences. In this context, wanting someone suggests that love functions as an objective to strive toward or a prize to attain. The

use of the article “the” in “the one” highlights uniqueness and irreplaceability, signaling that this person holds particular significance among many options. The male figure in the lyrics is portrayed as the chosen goal of the female speaker, symbolizing yearning and the desire to attain him. Thus, the lyrics present love not as something passive, but as a conscious and purposeful emotional state. They express longing and commitment, emphasizing that love involves intentional choice and emotional investment. This interpretation supports the idea that romantic desire, in this metaphor, is perceived as a meaningful goal to be reached or acquired.

[Data 2] *Just screeching tires and true love* (But Daddy I Love Him, Pre-Chorus line 5)

The lyric “Just screeching tires and true love” comes from “*But Daddy I Love Him*,” the sixth track on *The Tortured Poets Department*. The song tells the story of a defiant love that exists in tension with parental disapproval and societal expectations. In this lyric, Taylor Swift juxtaposes two seemingly unrelated images: the violent sound of “screeching tires” and the profound, emotionally charged concept of “true love.” This pairing creates a powerful structural metaphor, in which love is a journey, but the journey is dangerous. Here, the source domain is the concrete image of a sudden, high-speed escape, “screeching tires” typically symbolize a dramatic departure, often in panic, rebellion, or urgency. The target domain is the abstract concept of romantic love, especially the kind that defies control and convention. By placing these images side by side, Taylor metaphorically frames love as something fast, risky, and uncontrollable, an act that disrupts stability and creates chaos. This metaphor reflects how passionate relationships, especially those formed in opposition to authority, are often infused with thrill, danger, and intensity. In this case, love is not a calm and rational feeling. It is a wild, reckless journey that requires escape and risk. The metaphor suggests that love is worth defying norms and enduring chaos, highlighting the emotional intensity, danger, and defiance associated with youthful or forbidden love. The lyric encapsulates the complexity of love that feels both thrilling and perilous, reaffirming Swift’s recurring theme of romantic autonomy.

[Data 3] *What if he's written 'mine' on my upper thigh, only in my mind?* (Guilty As Sin, Chorus line 1)

The lyrics come from “Guilty As Sin,” the ninth track on *The Tortured Poets Department*. The song narrates a connection between two people that never truly existed, yet it evokes a powerful emotional reality. Although the relationship is fictional, it unfolds as a fantasy weighed down by guilt, driven by recurring thoughts and the imagined possibility of what could have been. A striking lyric, “*What if he's written 'mine' on my upper thigh, only in my mind?*” uses the metaphor of a possessive word being inscribed on the body to express emotional ownership. While the act never occurs, the mental image carries a symbolic claim

over the speaker. The pronoun “*mine*,” as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, signifies possession or belonging to the speaker. This metaphor draws from the concrete domain of ownership (source domain) to make sense of the abstract experience of romantic desire (target domain). Within the imagined relationship, this symbolic act of writing on the speaker’s thigh conveys intimacy, exposure, and a deep emotional vulnerability. The specific location “*upper thigh*”, adds a layer of physical and emotional closeness. However, the phrase “*only in my mind*” sharply contrasts the illusion of being claimed, highlighting that the sense of belonging exists solely in the speaker’s imagination. This contradiction leads to cognitive dissonance: the speaker fantasizes about being possessed, but understands it’s a projection with no real-world basis. The metaphor, then, aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s theory that we comprehend emotional experiences through structural metaphors. Here, love is conceptualized as possession, but the ownership is unilateral and imagined. It reveals how inner fantasies can give shape to feelings of connection, even when those connections are entirely internalized and not externally validated. This metaphor underscores the emotional complexity of unreciprocated longing and how people may mentally construct emotional bonds to feel a sense of belonging.

[Data 4] *What if the way you hold me is actually what’s holy?* (Guilty As Sin, Bridge, Line 2)

Taylor Swift uses the structural metaphor LOVE IS RELIGION in the lyric “*What if the way you hold me is actually what’s holy?*” by projecting aspects of physical closeness onto a religious aspect. Being held, a bodily manifestation of affection, is viewed as “holy,” implying that physical intimacy and love are more than just feelings. They are considered sacred experiences. By suggesting that the emotional satisfaction and spiritual uplift one seeks in religion may also be found in the arms of a beloved, this metaphor raises romantic love to the level of heavenly adoration. Taylor’s choice of this metaphor reflects how profoundly love may influence one’s sense of significance and sanctity, capturing the almost reverent intensity of romantic devotion. Thus, the metaphor aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s theory that we comprehend emotional experiences through structural metaphors. Here, love is conceptualized as something related to holiness and religion.

[Data 5] *The sign on your heart said it’s still reserved for me.* (The Alchemy, Chorus, line 5-6)

“The sign on your heart said it’s still reserved for me” comes from “*The Alchemy*,” the thirteenth track on *The Tortured Poets Department*. This song captures the euphoria of reunion and redemption in love, presenting a narrative where past wounds are transformed into renewed connection. The metaphor in this lyric imagines the heart as a physical space, one that can display signs, be reserved, and occupied, drawing from the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A

PLACE. The source domain is a reserved space, like a seat at a restaurant or a booked hotel room, an ordinary scene where availability and exclusivity are clearly marked. The target domain is emotional intimacy, specifically the enduring availability of someone's love. By saying there is a "sign" on the heart, Taylor likens the lover's emotional state to a public declaration, which is a message that can be read, interpreted, and responded to. This metaphor suggests that the lover's heart has not moved on; it remains intentionally unoccupied, waiting for the speaker. The phrase "still reserved" introduces a layer of temporal persistence. Here, the heart becomes a territory that can be claimed, reserved, or protected. The lyrics show that the lover's feelings are not hidden but displayed, like a symbolic gesture of devotion. Ultimately, this metaphor conveys a feeling of emotional security and hope. The speaker believes they still hold a unique, irreplaceable place in the other person's heart. It reflects the kind of love that persists even through separation, holding space until it is once again fulfilled. The image is simple but profound, reinforcing the album's themes of love that endures beyond time, trials, or transformation.

[Data 6] *Where's the trophy? He just comes running over to me.* (The Alchemy, Bridge, line 4)

The lyrics imply a sense of rivalry, but they also suggest something deeper. In this metaphor, the abstract idea of love (target domain) is understood through the more tangible concept of competition (source domain). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a *trophy* is typically a gold or silver cup awarded to someone who wins a contest or race. As an adjective, *trophy* can also symbolize prestige, accomplishment, or elevated status. The line "*Where's the trophy?*" implies a desire for recognition or validation, suggesting that the speaker feels emotionally unrewarded despite their efforts. This may point to a deeper emotional disconnect, where love begins to feel transactional, measured in terms of success or achievement. The metaphor is further reinforced by the lyric "*He just comes running over to me,*" which frames the speaker as the prize or end goal. The act of running implies urgency and strong desire, as though the speaker has earned or chosen it. In this way, the speaker becomes the reward in a metaphorical competition for love. This supports the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS COMPETITION, which draws parallels between the emotional pursuit of love and the structure of a contest. These lyrics convey the idea that love can involve striving to win someone's affection. The phrase "*He just comes running over to me*" positions the speaker as the objective, indicating that she is not only desired but prioritized. The subject "He" is portrayed not merely as someone trying to win love, but as someone who sees the speaker as his main focus. This

suggests that success in love is achieved when someone chooses us as their priority, not just as a goal to conquer.

4. CONCLUSION

The Tortured Poets Department, Taylor Swift's eleventh studio album, presents themes of romance intertwined with loss, emotional turmoil, and self-discovery. From the analysis of three songs within the album, two types of conceptual metaphors were identified as categorized by Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphor theory. The result found 1 ontological metaphor and five structural metaphors in a selection of lyrics from Taylor Swift's album The Tortured Poets Department. Ontological metaphors, which portray love, as abstract ideas, as a physical object, or substance. Structural metaphors, on the other hand, present how love is explained by use of another concept. Among these, structural metaphors emerged as the most prevalent. This finding suggests that Taylor Swift frequently conceptualizes love through tangible, concrete imagery, reflecting the human tendency to structure abstract emotions like love in terms of physical objects or entities in her latest album. Unfortunately, there are no orientational metaphors found in the song lyrics of this album. Mostly, this album uses ontological and structural approaches to comprehend love. Overall, this research highlights how Taylor's lyrical expressions summarize complex emotional experiences, demonstrating the crucial role of metaphor in constructing, conveying, and understanding love within contemporary popular music.

REFERENCES

- Al-Khaza'leh, B. A. (2022). The Metaphorical Conceptualization of Love in English and Arabic Songs: A Contrastive Study. *Academy Publication*, 1189-1199.
- Ardiantari, I. A. (2024). DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON JIWA YANG BERSEDIH SONG LYRICS . *Lire Journal*, 90-100.
- Capital FM*. (2024, April 28). Retrieved from www.capitalfm.com: <https://www.capitalfm.com/news/music/taylor-swift-guilty-as-sin-lyrics-meaning/>
- Class, M. (2021, September 30). *Master Class Articles*. Retrieved from www.masterclass.com: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-metaphor>
- Fitrawati, N. I. (2024). Metaphor of Love and Relationship in Wave To Earth's Song Lyrics. *Seshiski Journal*, 90-100.
- Genius*. (n.d.). Retrieved from www.genius.com: <https://genius.com/albums/Taylor-swift/The-tortured-poets-department>

- Gibbs, R. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind*. Santa Cruz: Cambridge University Press.
- Hassan, H. K. (2023). Semantic Theories, Levels of Meaning, and Types of Meaning. *University of Thi-Qar, College of Education for Humanities*, 2-11.
- Ketaren, S. V. (2021). METAPHORICAL EXPRESSION USED IN POETRY IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOK ENTITLED "PATHWAY TO ENGLISH". *Professional Journal of English Education*, 469-478.
- Lakoff, G. &. (2003). *Metaphor We Live By*. University Of Chicago Press.
- Maulana, N. &. (2025). The Analysis of the Metaphor in Selective Song Lyrics. *English Eduaction, Linguistics, and Literature*, 4 (1), 34-43.
- Nugraheny, A. (2023). Conceptual Metaphor In Sza's Song Lyrics: A Study Of Semantics. *Mahadaya*, 257-268.
- Pradana, I. G. (2024). *Metaphors in the Song Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Reputation Album (undergraduated thesis)*. Denpasar: Universitas Udayana.
- Riemer, N. (2010). *Introducing Semantics*. United States of America: Cambridge University Press.
- Saragih, D. (2021). An Analysis of Metaphor in Batak Toba Song Lyrics (Mother Love's Theme). *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)*, 2013-2021.
- Sari, D. R. (2020). CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR OF LOVE IN MINANG SONG COMPOSED BY SYAHRUL TARUN YUSUF. *Lingua Didaktika: Jurnal Bahasa dan Pembelajaran Bahasa*, 13(2), 205-214.
- Suartika, I. G. (2021). Metaphorical Expressions Found in Coldplay's Song Lyrics: A Semantic Analysis. 1-61