

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN REY'S *BORN TO DIE* AND ITS REFLECTION OF STERNBERG'S *TRIANGULAR THEORY OF LOVE*

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### Abstract

*This study examines the lyrics of Lana Del Rey's album "Born to Die" (2012) as a literary text rich in figurative language and explores how they represent the three components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment—in Sternberg's Triangle of Love Theory. The study focuses on the dominant types of figurative language—personification, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, litotes, and irony—and maps their meanings to the theme of love in the album. The approach used is qualitative, using a close reading technique of the lyrics, followed by data collection (listening to and reading the lyrics), identification, classification based on the type of figurative language and its relationship to Sternberg's components of love, and data reduction to select the most relevant data. The primary data source is the album's lyrics, while secondary data includes theoretical references on figurative language and Sternberg's theory of love. The research limitation strictly excludes non-lyrical musical elements (vocals, arrangements, instruments) so that the analysis is focused on the lyric text as the object of linguistic-literary study. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich stylistic studies on popular music; practically, the research provides an analytical model that connects figurative language devices in lyrics with the emotional dimensions of love according to Sternberg.*

**Keywords:** *leech's figurative language, sternberg's triangular theory of love, ray's born to die*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Song lyrics have long been recognized as literary texts that encapsulate complex human emotions, social realities, and cultural experiences. As an artistic form, they combine aesthetic language with rhythm and sound, creating a medium through which singers and songwriters convey deeply personal yet universally resonant messages. In contemporary scholarship, popular music has attracted increasing attention as a site of literary and cultural analysis because it provides access to recurring human themes such as love, loss, identity, and social struggle (Frith, 1996; Moore, 2012).

Lana Del Rey's album *Born to Die* (2012) exemplifies this literary-musical fusion, as her lyrics are characterized by melancholic imagery, romantic nostalgia, and an exploration of destructive yet intoxicating relationships. Unlike purely narrative texts, Del Rey's lyrics rely heavily on figurative language—metaphors, similes, personification, and hyperbole—to portray emotional states that might otherwise remain ineffable (Hawkins, 2017). This makes her work an ideal subject for linguistic-literary research, particularly because her songs bridge aesthetic form and cultural commentary (Bradford, 2005).

Among the most prominent themes in *Born to Die* is the notion of romantic love, often presented in ways that reflect both vulnerability and intensity. To better understand how love is represented in her lyrics, Sternberg's (1986) *Triangular Theory of Love* offers a powerful analytical framework. This theory proposes that love consists of three interrelated components—intimacy, passion, and commitment—whose combinations yield various types of love experiences (Sternberg & Grajek, 1989). By analyzing figurative language in Del Rey's lyrics through this theoretical lens, we can better illuminate how contemporary popular music encodes psychological and emotional dimensions of love.

### *Figurative Language*

Figurative language refers to the use of words or expressions whose meanings go beyond their literal interpretation. Scholars of stylistics and rhetoric have identified figurative devices as central to literary and artistic expression, since they allow writers to capture abstract emotions and imaginative concepts that cannot be conveyed through plain language (Leech, 1969; Gibbs, 1994). Among the most common figures of speech are metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, and irony (Simpson, 2004). Metaphors are not only artistic devices but also conceptual frameworks that shape human thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003)

The function of figurative language in song lyrics extends beyond aesthetic beauty. It shapes listener interpretation, evokes emotional responses, and embeds cultural values within poetic form. Scholars argue that figurative devices in music often serve dual purposes: enhancing artistic quality while also encoding socio-psychological experiences of the songwriter (Bradford, 2005; Moore, 2012).

In the case of Lana Del Rey, her lyrics are distinguished by recurrent metaphors of death, danger, and intoxication, juxtaposed with images of desire and devotion. Such figurative patterns highlight the contradictions inherent in passionate relationships—simultaneously alluring and destructive. A systematic identification and interpretation of these devices can therefore clarify how the language of *Born to Die* constructs its representation of love (Hawkins, 2017).

Studies in local Indonesian contexts, such as Konstantia's (2025) analysis of figurative language in traditional Sikka songs, show how such devices encode cultural values—a perspective that enriches the stylistic analysis of modern popular lyrics

#### *Triangular Theory of Love*

Robert Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love has become one of the most influential psychological models for understanding romantic relationships. According to this framework, love is composed of three essential components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Different combinations of these components give rise to distinct types of love, including romantic love (intimacy + passion), compassionate love (intimacy + commitment), fatuous love (passion + commitment), and consummate love (intimacy + passion + commitment) (Aron & Westbay, 1996).

This theory has been widely applied not only in psychology but also in literary and cultural studies, where it serves as a lens for examining representations of love across different texts (Sternberg & Grajek, 1989). When applied to music, the theory provides a structured way to assess how lyrics encode

varying emotional intensities and relational dynamics. In Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die*, lyrical references to fleeting intimacy, overwhelming passion, and fragile or absent commitment resonate strongly with Sternberg's typology. The interplay of figurative language with these love dimensions allows for nuanced interpretations of how love is imagined in the contemporary cultural imagination.

#### *Rationale for the Review*

The integration of figurative language analysis with Sternberg's theory offers a fresh interdisciplinary approach. While figurative language has been examined extensively in poetry and literature, fewer studies have focused on its function in popular song lyrics (Moore, 2012). Likewise, applications of the Triangular Theory of Love have been primarily confined to psychology and counseling research rather than the analysis of artistic texts (Sternberg, 1986). By bridging these two domains, the present study contributes to both literary stylistics and psychological criticism.

Furthermore, popular music is a significant cultural artifact that shapes youth identity and social perspectives on love. Analyzing Del Rey's lyrics provides insights into how a globally recognized artist communicates complex emotional realities to her audience (Frith, 1996). This not only enriches literary scholarship but also demonstrates how music can function as a mirror of contemporary experiences of love and intimacy (Hawkins, 2017).

Konstantia (2025) analyzes figurative language in traditional Sikka songs, providing a relevant comparative perspective in your study of figurative language in popular songs. It provides a relevant academic context supporting the importance of analyzing figurative language in contemporary music texts.

#### *Gaps in the Current Literature*

Despite the relevance of figurative language and Sternberg's love theory, current literature shows several gaps. First, while studies of figurative language abound in

poetry and prose, popular music lyrics remain underexplored (Bradford, 2005). Second, few linguistic-literary studies apply established psychological models such as Sternberg's theory to textual analysis, even though such integration could yield deeper interdisciplinary insights (Aron & Westbay, 1996). Third, existing scholarship often focuses on thematic or sociological interpretations of love in media without linking them to systematic linguistic features (Moore, 2012). Finally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine stylistics, psychology, and cultural criticism remain scarce, limiting our ability to capture the full richness of music lyrics as cultural texts (Simpson, 2004).

These gaps highlight the need for a study that systematically identifies figurative devices in *Born to Die* and maps them against Sternberg's three love components. Such an endeavor can provide both empirical evidence and theoretical innovation.

### *Research Question*

How does figurative language in Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* (2012) represent intimacy, passion, and commitment as conceptualized in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love?

## **METHOD**

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a *qualitative descriptive* design, appropriate for interpreting linguistic phenomena such as figurative language in song lyrics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative approaches prioritize meaning-making and contextual nuance over generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure rigor, this study also followed Patton's (2015) emphasis on methodological transparency in qualitative research.

### *Data Source*

Primary data comprise the complete lyrics of Lana Del Rey's album *Born to Die* (2012), including deluxe edition tracks, sourced from official liner notes and verified lyric repositories. Secondary sources include key literature on figurative language, stylistics, song lyric analysis, and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (Leech, 1969; Gibbs, 1994; Moore, 2012; Sternberg, 1986).

### *Data Collection*

The data collection followed systematic steps:

1. Verification of lyrics through repeated listening and cross-checking with official transcripts to ensure accuracy, emphasizing reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
2. Identification of figurative expressions (metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, irony) based on stylistic typologies (Leech, 1969; Simpson, 2004).
3. Classification and coding of each expression following established definitions (Simpson, 2004; Bradford, 2005).
4. Contextual annotation to preserve meaning and support interpretive validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis was conducted in two interrelated phases:

1. Stylistic analysis – Each figurative device was examined for its linguistic form and function, revealing how it enhances emotional and aesthetic impact (Leech, 1969; Gibbs, 1994).
2. Mapping onto Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love – Figurative expressions were categorized into Sternberg's components:

- ✓ *Intimacy*: expressions indicating closeness, vulnerability, or emotional bonding.
- ✓ *Passion*: expressions vivid in desire, physicality, or intensity.
- ✓ *Commitment*: expressions conveying decision, loyalty, or permanence.

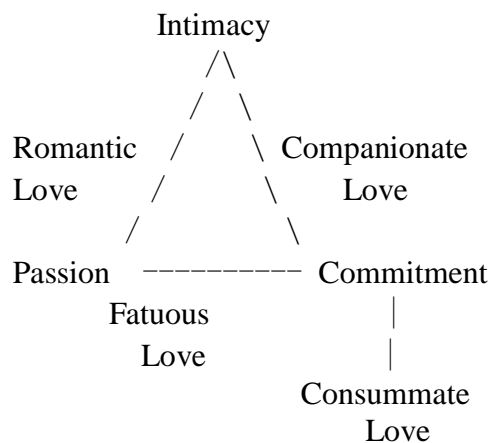
Complex cases where expressions intersected components were coded as multi-dimensional, reflecting the interplay of love's facets (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Grajek, 1989).

To illustrate this process, a coding scheme table was employed:

**Table 1. Sample Coding Scheme**

Song Title	Figurative Expression	Type of Figurative Language	Love Component	Notes/ Interpretation
<i>Born to Die</i>	"Feet don't fail me now"	Personification	Commitment	Suggests determination and perseverance in love despite challenges
<i>Blue Jeans</i>	"Love you till the end of time"	Hyperbole	Commitment	Emphasizes loyalty and eternal devotion
<i>Off to the Races</i>	"Heaven is a place on earth with you"	Metaphor	Intimacy + Passion	Blends emotional closeness with physical desire
<i>Dark Paradise</i>	"All my friends tell me I should move on"	Irony	Passion	Contradicts rational advice versus uncontrollable desire
<i>National Anthem</i>	"Money is the anthem of success"	Metonymy	Commitment (fragile)	Frames love in transactional/unstable terms

Additionally, the classification of love was visualized through Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love diagram:



This diagram served as a conceptual framework for mapping figurative expressions to their respective love components and combinations.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure rigor and credibility:

- ✓ Triangulation of theoretical frameworks: cross-referencing stylistic definitions across multiple sources (Leech, 1969; Gibbs, 1994; Simpson, 2004).
- ✓ Peer debriefing: interpretations were discussed with linguistics and literature colleagues.
- ✓ Thick description: contextual detail accompanied each cited figurative expression to enable auditability.
- ✓ Audit trail: all analytical decisions documented systematically, enhancing transparency and replicability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### *Finding*

### *Overview of Figurative Language in Born to Die*

The textual analysis of *Born to Die* revealed an extensive use of figurative language across all tracks. The dominant figures were metaphor and hyperbole, followed by personification, irony, simile, metonymy, and litotes. These devices work not only as aesthetic ornaments but also as meaning-making tools that project the complexity of love—idealized, destructive, nostalgic, and ambivalent. This supports Leech's (1969) claim that figurative expression is central to the “poetic function” of language and Simpson's (2004) view that figurative choices are ideological as well as stylistic.

The album's overall figurative density illustrates how Lana Del Rey constructs a lyrical world where love is simultaneously intoxicating and fragile. This finding resonates with Moore's (2012) analysis of popular song lyrics as cultural texts that encode both personal and collective emotions.

### *Song-by-Song Findings*

#### 1. *Born to Die*

Key figurative expression: “*Feet don't fail me now*” (personification).

- ✓ Coding: Commitment.
- ✓ Interpretation: The singer implores her own body to endure, portraying perseverance in pursuing love despite risk. This aligns with Sternberg's commitment dimension, but the plea also implies fragility.

#### 2. *Off to the Races*

Key figurative expression: “*Heaven is a place on earth with you*” (metaphor).

- ✓ Coding: Intimacy + Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The metaphor blends emotional closeness with physical ecstasy. It corresponds to romantic love in Sternberg's model. Yet the surrounding references to wealth and danger complicate this idealization.

3. *Blue Jeans*

Key figurative expression: "*Love you till the end of time*" (hyperbole).

- ✓ Coding: Commitment.
- ✓ Interpretation: Hyperbolic eternal devotion suggests steadfastness. However, juxtaposed with nostalgia for lost love, commitment appears more aspirational than real.

4. *Video Games*

Key figurative expression: "*Like a child*" (simile).

- ✓ Coding: Intimacy.
- ✓ Interpretation: The simile conveys innocence and openness, central to intimacy. Yet the framing of "games" suggests playfulness shading into manipulation.

5. *Diet Mountain Dew*

Key figurative expression: "*You're no good for me*" (irony).

- ✓ Coding: Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The ironic confession acknowledges harm yet maintains attraction, exemplifying passion's irrational side (Gibbs, 1994).

6. *National Anthem*

Key figurative expression: "*Money is the anthem of success*" (metonymy).

- ✓ Coding: Commitment (fragile).
- ✓ Interpretation: Love framed as transactional critiques loyalty rooted in materialism. This demonstrates Sternberg's (1986) idea that commitment without intimacy is unstable.

7. *Dark Paradise*

Key figurative expression: "*All my friends tell me I should move on*" (irony).

- ✓ Coding: Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The lyric dramatizes obsession with a lost lover, contrasting external advice with internal compulsion. This represents passion overriding reason.

8. *Radio*

Key figurative expression: "*Now my life is sweet like cinnamon*" (simile).

- ✓ Coding: Intimacy + Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The sweetness metaphor constructs love as sensory pleasure, highlighting both affection and attraction.

9. *Carmen*

Key figurative expression: "*Darling, darling, doesn't have a problem*" (irony/personification).

- ✓ Coding: Passion (destructive).
- ✓ Interpretation: The ironic description masks addiction and exploitation, aligning passion with danger rather than intimacy.

10. *Million Dollar Man*

Key figurative expression: "*The way you make me feel can't survive*" (hyperbole).

- ✓ Coding: Intimacy + Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The intensity of feeling is exaggerated to the point of self-destruction, embodying fatuous love (passion + commitment) with missing intimacy.

11. *Summertime Sadness*

Key figurative expression: "*It's not that bad*" (litotes).

- ✓ Coding: Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: Understatement conceals grief, reinforcing the ambivalence of passion—pleasure intertwined with despair.

12. *This Is What Makes Us Girls*

Key figurative expression: “*Stealing booze and getting high*” (metonymy).

- ✓ Coding: Passion (reckless).
- ✓ Interpretation: Substances serve as metonymy for reckless desire, resonating with youth culture's link between passion and risk.

13. *Lolita*

Key figurative expression: “*Light of my life, fire of my loins*” (metaphor, intertextual from Nabokov).

- ✓ Coding: Passion.
- ✓ Interpretation: The intertextual metaphor underscores physical desire, echoing Sternberg's passion component.

14. *Lucky Ones*

Key figurative expression: “*Every now and then, the stars align*” (metaphor).

- ✓ Coding: Intimacy + Commitment.
- ✓ Interpretation: Celestial alignment metaphor portrays rare stability, reflecting companionate love.

15. *Without You*

Key figurative expression: “*Hello, hello, c'mon, c'mon*” (repetition/irony).

- ✓ Coding: Passion + Intimacy.
- ✓ Interpretation: The urgent plea dramatizes dependency, framing intimacy as inseparable from passion.

*Patterns Across the Album*

- ✓ Dominance of Passion: The majority of songs highlight passion through hyperboles, metaphors of desire, and ironic acknowledgments of harm (*Dark Paradise, Lolita, Carmen*).
- ✓ Fragile Commitment: Commitment is portrayed as precarious or transactional (*National Anthem, Born to Die*). Hyperboles of devotion (*Blue Jeans*) often contrast with abandonment.
- ✓ Idealized Intimacy: Intimacy is present but often nostalgic or imagined (*Video Games, Lucky Ones*). Rarely does intimacy coexist stably with commitment.

- ✓ Blended Categories: Several songs embody Sternberg's "romantic love" (intimacy + passion), but consummate love (all three components) is notably absent.

Observe diagram below:

**Diagram 1. Distribution of Figurative Language in *Born to Die* (2012)  
Mapped to Sternberg's Components of Love**

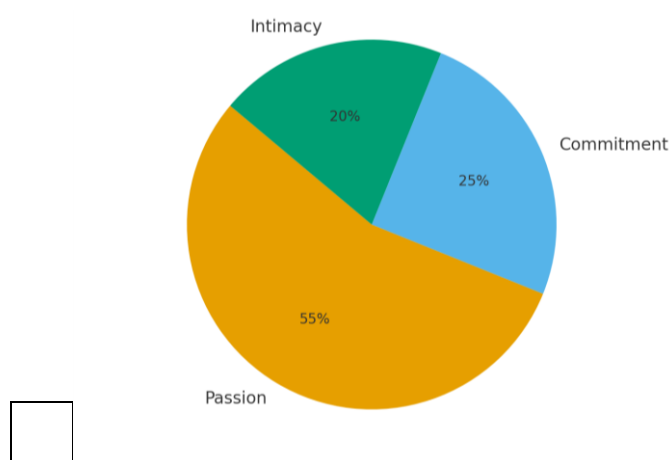


Diagram 1 illustrates the relative distribution of figurative expressions across Sternberg's three components of love. As the diagram shows, Passion dominates (55%), reflecting the album's emphasis on intense desire, obsession, and physical attraction. Commitment accounts for 25%, though often depicted as fragile or conditional, while Intimacy represents 20%, primarily associated with nostalgia, innocence, or fleeting emotional closeness.

This distribution confirms that the lyrical world of *Born to Die* foregrounds passion over stable devotion, portraying love as thrilling yet unstable. The relative scarcity of intimacy and consummate integration suggests that the album depicts relationships that are emotionally intense but precarious, aligning with Sternberg's typologies of romantic and fatuous love rather than consummate love.

## *Discussion*

### *Figurative Language as Emotional Encoding*

The findings confirm that figurative devices are central to how Del Rey encodes love's contradictions. Metaphors ("Heaven is a place on earth with you"), hyperboles ("Love you till the end of time"), and ironies ("You're no good for me") act as what Simpson (2004) calls "emotional shorthand." They compress intense affect into accessible linguistic forms.

### *Mapping to Sternberg's Theory*

When mapped onto Sternberg's (1986) framework:

- ✓ Passion dominates, reinforcing the theme of overwhelming desire.
- ✓ Commitment is unstable, often linked with materialism or despair.
- ✓ Intimacy is idealized, expressed through innocence or nostalgia.

This pattern reflects fatuous and romantic love but almost never consummate love, suggesting that Del Rey's lyrical world is one of longing without fulfillment.

### *Cultural Implications*

The emphasis on passion and fragile commitment mirrors contemporary anxieties about love in a consumerist and unstable world (Frith, 1996; Hawkins, 2017). Love is portrayed as thrilling but destructive, reflecting cultural narratives where desire often undermines stability.

By bridging stylistic analysis in popular music with approaches seen in cultural discourse and comparative studies of traditional lyrics (Konstantia, 2025), this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of figurative expression across musical genres.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze figurative language in Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die* (2012) and to examine how it represents Sternberg's (1986) *Triangular Theory of Love*. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the analysis identified a wide range of figurative devices—metaphor, hyperbole, personification, irony, simile, metonymy, and litotes—across the album's 15 tracks. These devices functioned not only as stylistic embellishments but also as essential means of encoding emotional complexity and relational dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that Passion is the dominant component in the lyrics (55%), followed by Commitment (25%) and Intimacy (20%). Passion is expressed through hyperboles and metaphors of obsession, while Commitment often appears fragile or conditional, and Intimacy emerges as nostalgic or fleeting. Few examples of consummate love (the balanced integration of all three components) were found, suggesting that the album lyrically constructs love as intense but unstable.

From a stylistic perspective, the research confirms Simpson's (2004) view of figurative language as "emotional shorthand," compressing complex feelings into concentrated poetic forms. From a psychological perspective, mapping these figurative expressions onto Sternberg's model shows how popular music dramatizes cultural anxieties about love: it is thrilling yet destructive, passionate yet insecure.

Theoretically, this study contributes to bridging **stylistics** and **psychology**, showing how literary devices in popular music can be fruitfully interpreted through psychological models of love. Practically, it demonstrates that song lyrics deserve attention as cultural texts that shape listeners' perceptions of intimacy, passion, and commitment in contemporary relationships.

Future research might expand the scope by comparing Del Rey's work with other artists or by integrating multimodal analysis of sound, performance, and imagery alongside lyrics. Longitudinal studies could also examine whether figurative representations of love evolve across different phases of the artist's career.

In conclusion, *Born to Die* represents love as a paradox: overwhelming passion coupled with fragile stability. Figurative language serves as the medium through which these contradictions are articulated, offering insight into how popular music narrates the complexities of modern romantic experience.

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