

An Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Taylor Swift's Album The Tortured Poets Department

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Abstract. *This research explores the use of conceptual metaphors in Taylor Swift's album The Tortured Poets Department, focusing on how metaphorical language is used to express emotional depth and personal experiences. Applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the study classifies metaphorical expressions into three types: structural, orientational, and ontological. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from the official lyrics of 16 songs in the album. The analysis shows that conceptual metaphors are employed consistently to depict abstract ideas such as heartbreak, vulnerability, self-perception, and emotional transformation. Structural metaphors are used to map personal experiences through familiar frameworks, orientational metaphors describe emotional states using spatial direction, and ontological metaphors give physical form to intangible feelings. Through metaphor, Swift constructs vivid imagery that allows listeners to relate to complex emotions in a concrete and meaningful way.*

Keyword: *Conceptual Metaphor, Metaphor, Song Lyric, Taylor Swift*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is essentially an arbitrary system of sound symbols, meaning there is no inherent relationship between the sound of a word and its meaning (Monaghan et al., 2014, p. 1). As the main medium of human communication, language allows us to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas in both spoken and written form. Beyond its communicative function, language also plays a central role in shaping the way we think and understand the world. One way language becomes more expressive and meaningful is through the use of figurative language, which involves creative and non-literal expression.

According to Steen (2020), figurative language is not only decorative, but also plays an important role in conceptual understanding. Figurative language allows people to understand abstract concepts by relating them to more concrete experiences, thus influencing cognition and meaning-making. Figurative language includes several types, such as metaphor, simile, personification, metonymy, symbol, allegory, paradox, hyperbole, and irony (Perrine, 1992, in Prasetyo & Yulianti, 2022).

This research focuses on one particular type of figurative language: metaphor. Among the various forms of figurative expression, metaphor has a distinctive role in shaping human cognition. Lakoff (1987) defines metaphor as the expression of one concept by another, based on a perceived similarity or correspondence between the two. Although traditionally considered

a literary device, metaphor has been redefined by cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This theory states that metaphors are fundamental to human thought, allowing individuals to understand abstract concepts by mapping them onto a more concrete and more familiar domain. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) categorised conceptual metaphors into several types based on the nature of the conceptual mapping involved. These include structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors.

The Tortured Poets Department is the eleventh studio album from American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. The album was released on April 19, 2024 by Republic Records. Swift developed this album in the midst of the Eras Tour in 2023, with the result of increased media attention on her life that inspired this album. Taylor Swift's The Tortured Poets Department album deals with various aspects of love relationships and heartbreak, including love instability, infidelity, and also about how an artist struggles with public perception. Some songs also deal with regret, sadness, and the inner struggle to get over an ex-lover.

The purpose of this study is to analyse types of conceptual metaphors of structural, orientational, and ontological types found in the lyrics of the songs in the album The Tortured Poets Department. In addition, this study also aims to analyze how conceptual metaphors express emotion and shape the lyrical narrative. By using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how Taylor Swift expresses emotions, experiences, and meanings through the use of metaphors in her music.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a linguistic context, metaphor refers to the use of a word or phrase to describe something in a non-literal way, by “carrying” meaning from one concept to another. Metaphor is the use of words or expressions that involve the transfer of meaning from one thing to another that has a similar relationship (Rahmat & Dianita, 2024). Another definition of metaphor is the use of terms that are not real but have the same meaning to describe something (Arif & Apriyanti, 2024). According to (Nugraheny & Yuwita, 2023) metaphor is a way of expressing an idea or concept by comparing it with another idea or concept that is easier to understand.

One of the most influential frameworks in the study of metaphor is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They argue that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but reflect how people conceptualise the world. In this theory, metaphors consist of two domains: the source

domain, and the target domain, which represents abstract concepts. Through the use of source domains, metaphors can achieve the transfer of meaning and understanding from one domain to another (Fadhila & Juanda, 2023). On the other hand, metaphor is a way of understanding one domain, known as the target domain (usually abstract or difficult to explain), by mapping it onto another domain, known as the source domain (which is concrete and easy to understand) (Nugraheny & Yuwita, 2023).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) categorised conceptual metaphors into several types based on the nature of the conceptual mapping involved. These include structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors.

1. Structural metaphors

A structural metaphor is a type of conventional metaphor in which one complex and usually abstract concept is understood and expressed in other terms. (Fatwansyah et al 2022) explain that structural Metaphor occurs when one concept is expressed in terms of another defined concept. Structural metaphor is the most productive type of all conceptual metaphors (Thu, 2019). For example: “Time is money” This is a classic example of a structural metaphor, where one concept (time) is understood and structured in terms of another concept (money). In this metaphor, the abstract notion of time is framed using the more concrete concept of money, which has a clear value and can be spent, saved, squandered or invested.

2. Orientational Metaphors

A type of conceptual metaphor in which abstract concepts are understood and organised through spatial relationships such as top-bottom, inside-out, front-back, and similar orientations. According to (Anisa, 2022) orientational metaphors a system of ideas is organized in the relation and interaction in space like up-down, inside-out, front-behind, shallow-deep, center-periphery, etc. For example: “I'm feeling up” (meaning feeling happy or in a good mood). This is an example of an orientation metaphor, where abstract concepts such as emotions are understood in terms of spatial orientation. In this case, the metaphor maps the concept of happiness in an “up” spatial direction, which implies that positive feelings are at the ‘top’ and negative feelings are at the “bottom”.

3. Ontological Metaphors

Ontological metaphor is when an abstract concept is represented as something concrete, such as an object, substance, container, or person. Ontological metaphor, entity metaphor or substance metaphor, is based on the experience of physical objects and substances (Chuyi, 2020). An example of an ontological metaphors like, “She has a lot

of energy today” In this case, energy—an abstract quality—is treated as a substance or object that a person can possess in varying amounts. We talk about having "a lot" or "little" energy as if it were a physical thing that can be measured or depleted.

Some previous studies have discussed metaphor. The study by (Kamandanu et al, 2022) with title “Analyzing Conceptual Metaphors Through Michael Bublés ‘*Call Me Irresponsible*’ Album” A study on metaphor in song lyrics was conducted using Michael Bublé’s album, focusing on 13 selected songs. Using Lakoff and Johnson Conceptual Metaphor Theory and a descriptive qualitative approach, the research identified 137 metaphorical expressions categorized into structural, orientational, and ontological types. The findings revealed that metaphors were primarily used to express themes of love and relationships, contributing to the emotional and interpretive depth of the lyrics. This study shows how metaphors enrich meaning but can also complicate interpretation in popular music.

A relevant previous study is Metaphor on Song Lyrics in the Album “*Born to Die*” by Lana Del Rey: A Semantic Analysis by Nafiza Meiliana Rahmat and Dianita (2024). This study examines the use of conceptual metaphors in Lana Del Rey’s song lyrics with a semantic approach, identifying three types of metaphors—ontological, orientational, and structural—and analyzing their functions based on Pittner's framework. The results showed 27 metaphors in the lyrics, with expressive, cognitive, and persuasive functions as the most dominant.

While that study focused on Lana Del Rey, this study analyzes metaphors in Taylor Swift's song lyrics on the album *The Tortured Poets Department*. The aim is not only to identify the contextual metaphors used, but also to analyze how conceptual metaphors express emotion and shape the lyrical narrative. By comparing these two studies, we can see how both artists use metaphors to construct meaning in their lyrics and understand the differences and similarities in their approaches to figurative language.

3. METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative method as described by Creswell (2014), which aims to understand and describe phenomena systematically and deeply based on text or document data. This research is descriptive because it aims to find out how many conceptual metaphors of structural, orientational, and ontological types are found in the lyrics of the songs in *The Tortured Poets Department* album. This research also aims to analyse which type of metaphor is the most dominant in the lyrics.

The data in this study were the song lyrics from Taylor Swift’s album *The Tortured Poets Department*, officially released in 2024. A total of 16 songs were analyzed. The lyrics

were sourced from the website or trusted platforms and cross-checked with official releases to ensure accuracy. Data collection was conducted by collecting song lyrics from the album *The Tortured Poets Department*, reading, and identifying lyrics that contained metaphors. Metaphorical expressions were identified manually based on linguistic structure and conceptual mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Data analysis will follow the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Where each metaphor will be classified into one of three main types: Structural Metaphor, Orientation Metaphor, and Ontological Metaphor.

Findings & Discussion

In Taylor Swift's album *The Tortured Poets Department*, there are approximately 135 metaphorical expressions categorized into 41 (30,37%) structural metaphors, 34 (25,19%) orientational metaphors, and 60 (44,44%) ontological metaphors. These conceptual metaphors are distributed across all 16 tracks and serve as a crucial linguistic tool in expressing the album's central themes—heartbreak, fame, identity, resilience, and the complexities of romantic and personal relationships. The study aims to investigate the use of metaphor as a means of conceptualizing and communicating emotional and experiential realities within the album. By identifying and categorizing each metaphorical expression, the analysis offers insights into how Swift constructs meaning and emotion through figurative language. This research utilizes the Metaphor Identification Procedure to systematically decode the connections between the *source* and *target* domains. The source domain (often a more concrete or familiar concept) is used to understand the target domain (often abstract or emotional experiences), reflecting the cognitive mechanisms behind metaphor use.

A.) Structural Metaphor

In the album *The Tortured Poets Department*, we found around 45 metaphorical expressions categorized as structural metaphors, where abstract experiences are systematically understood through more concrete conceptual frameworks. According to Lakoff and Johnson's theory in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), structural metaphors allow one concept to be fully structured in terms of another, more familiar concept, shaping how we think, speak, and feel about complex realities.

Table 1. Structural Metaphor in the Album *The Tortured Poets Department*

No.	Song Title	Amount of Data
1.	Fortnight	1

2.	The Tortured Poets Department	1
3.	My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toy	2
4.	Down Bad	2
5.	So Long, London	4
6.	But Daddy I Love Him	5
7.	Fresh Out the Slammer	4
8.	Florida!!!	5
9.	Guilty as Sin?	5
10.	Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?	3
11.	I Can Fix Him (No Really I Can)	2
12.	Loml	2
13.	I Can Do It with a Broken Heart	1
14.	The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived	1
15.	The Alchemy	2
16.	Clara Bow	1

Analysis Example :

1. **"The Cage was one just fine."**

This lyric associates life with a cage, expressing the metaphor *life is a prison*. The word "cage" implies emotional and existential confinement. Just as a physical cage restricts movement and freedom, the metaphor suggests that the speaker's life is structured by limitations and control, even if they appear normal or acceptable ("just fine"). It maps the abstract concept of life onto the concrete structure of a cage, providing a framework through which we understand life as something that restricts and confines.

2. “I dream on cracking locks”

This lyric frames the longing for freedom as the act of cracking locks, expressing the metaphor *freedom is unlocking*. The phrase “cracking locks” conveys a desire to break free from internal or external restraints, even if only imagined. Just as opening a lock removes physical barriers, the metaphor structures the abstract concept of liberation through a mechanical and physical action. It allows us to understand emotional release as something tangible and active.

3. “Throwing my life to the Wolves or the ocean rocks.”

This lyric presents life as being thrown into dangerous situations, expressing the metaphor *life is a battle or a perilous journey*. The mention of “wolves” and “ocean rocks” symbolizes destructive forces and unpredictable threats. By comparing life to an object being thrown into harm’s way, the metaphor maps the experience of hardship onto a physical struggle for survival. It structures life through the lens of confrontation with danger, chaos, and risk.

4. “Crashing into Him tonight, He’s Paradox.”

This lyric depicts emotional connection as a physical collision, expressing the metaphor *emotion is a physical impact*. The word “crashing” evokes sudden intensity and lack of control, suggesting that falling for someone, especially someone paradoxical, is overwhelming and chaotic. It maps emotional experience onto the concrete event of a crash, structuring feelings as something forceful and potentially damaging, thus allowing the abstract nature of emotion to be understood through bodily impact.

Taylor Swift’s use of structural metaphors throughout her album *The Tortured Poets Department* reveals the depth and complexity of emotions in her lyrics. With 41 structural metaphors found throughout *The Tortured Poets Department*, Swift explores themes such as heartbreak, identity, betrayal, and personal growth. Her poetic songwriting transforms abstract emotions into vivid, relatable images, making her lyrics more powerful and expressive. These metaphors help listeners connect with the stories behind the songs and highlight the role of language in expressing difficult feelings. This analysis shows how metaphors enhance the album’s impact and artistic value.

B.) **Orientational Metaphor**

In the album *The Tortured Poets Department*, we found around 38 orientational metaphorical expressions. These metaphors reflect the way spatial orientation such as up, down, in, or out is used to conceptualize emotional and psychological states. As defined by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), orientational metaphors help structure our experiences by mapping physical directionality onto

abstract concepts. They don't just describe position, they shape how we understand and experience emotion, identity, and relationships.

Table 2. Orientational Metaphor in in the Album *The Tortured Poets Department*

No.	Song Title	Amount of Data
1.	Fortnight	1
2.	The Tortured Poets Department	-
3.	My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toy	1
4.	Down Bad	1
5.	So Long, London	5
6.	But Daddy I Love Him	6
7.	Fresh Out the Slammer	4
8.	Florida!!!	5
9.	Guilty as Sin?	2
10.	Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?	2
11.	I Can Fix Him (No Really I Can)	1
12.	Loml	2
13.	I Can Do It with a Broken Heart	1
14.	The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived	1
15.	The Alchemy	1
16.	Clara Bow	1

Analysis Example :

1. “Breaking down, I hit the floor”

This lyric associates *emotional collapse* with downward motion, expressing the metaphor *sadness is down*. The phrase “hit the floor” intensifies the directionality, portraying despair as a literal fall. It relies on our bodily experience where low physical position (e.g., slumping or falling) often corresponds to low emotional states.

2. “Your friends lift you up over their heads”

The upward movement in this lyric symbolizes joy, triumph, or admiration, exemplifying the metaphor happiness or success is up. Being lifted “over their heads” implies elevation in both physical and social/emotional terms, showing how being emotionally uplifted is tied to spatial verticality.

3. “I took the miracle move-on drug the effects were temporary”

This sentence implies that the effect of the ‘move-on drug’ is short-lived, and afterwards the feelings return to bad. This reflects the orientational metaphor of up is good, down is bad, as improved emotions are ‘up’ while a return to sadness is likened to ‘down.’

4. “My boy only breaks his favorite toys”

Although it is literally about toys, it is a metaphor for emotional relationships. ‘Breaks’ implies damage, a fall, or a descent from good to bad. It is an orientational metaphor that follows the pattern of wholeness is up, brokenness is down-when something precious is ‘broken,’ it means it has dropped to an emotionally lower state.

A total of 34 orientational metaphors were identified in The Tortured Poets Department. These metaphors express abstract feelings and psychological states through spatial directions such as up-down, in-out, or high-low. Rather than depicting emotions directly, Taylor Swift lets the direction and movement represent inner experiences such as rising hope, falling into despair, or being stuck in confusion. This technique adds to the emotional depth of the album by making invisible feelings feel tangible and visual, helping listeners connect more deeply with the artist’s inner journey.

C.) Ontological Metaphor

Emotional intensity runs deep in The Tortured Poets Department, and one way Taylor Swift captures this is through the use of ontological metaphors around 60 of which were identified in the album. These metaphors enable her to give shape, boundaries, and physical qualities to intangible experiences like heartbreak, memory, and identity. Drawing from Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory in *Metaphors We Live By*, ontological metaphors allow us to understand abstract concepts as if they were

objects, containers, or substances, making them easier to name, analyze, and emotionally engage with.

Table 3. Ontological Metaphor in in the Album The Tortured Poets Department

No.	Song Title	Amount of Data
1.	Fortnight	1
2.	The Tortured Poets Department	1
3.	My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toy	2
4.	Down Bad	2
5.	So Long, London	4
6.	But Daddy I Love Him	5
7.	Fresh Out the Slammer	4
8.	Florida!!!	5
9.	Guilty as Sin?	20
10.	Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?	4
11.	I Can Fix Him (No Really I Can)	3
12.	Loml	4
13.	I Can Do It with a Broken Heart	1
14.	The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived	1
15.	The Alchemy	2
16.	Clara Bow	1

Analysis Example :

1. “The sign on your heart said it’s still reserved for me”

Here, the heart is metaphorically treated as a container or a space with a reservation sign, something that can be claimed, entered, or closed off. This is an example of the metaphor the heart is a container for emotion, a classic ontological metaphor. It gives shape and boundaries to emotional availability, turning it into something spatial and tangible.

2. “All the pieces of me shattered”

In this lyric, the *self* is conceptualized as a physical object that can be broken into pieces. This reflects the metaphor *the self is an object*, which is characteristic of ontological metaphors. Emotions and inner experiences are turned into something physical and breakable. This makes emotional pain feel concrete and vividly real.

3. “Now I’m down bad”

The phrase ‘down bad’ describes a bad emotional state, but metaphorically treats the emotional state as a space or place that can be ‘down’. It combines orientational and ontological metaphors: Negative emotion as a container → you can be in it, so this is an ontological metaphor (emotion is a container).

4. “You swore that you loved me but where were the clues?”

Love is perceived as something that can be given clues or solved like a puzzle. Clues are treated as concrete objects, even though this is about feelings. Feelings as objects that leave traces.

From the data, it can be concluded that Ontological Metaphors have the same number is the most dominant in the album, with 60 (44,44%) occurrences. This shows that Taylor Swift tends to use metaphors that connect abstract concepts with more concrete concepts and that give physical form to abstract ideas. Meanwhile, Orientational Metaphors appear less, namely 34 (25,19%) times, so it can be said to be less dominant than the other two types of metaphors. However, the fairly high frequency shows that orientational metaphors also play an important role in organizing emotions and experiences in her songs, especially in describing emotional states through direction and position (for example, “feeling up” for happiness).

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that in Taylor Swift’s *The Tortured Poets Department* album, there are 41 (30.37%) structural metaphors, 34 (25.19%) orientational metaphors, and 60 (44.44%) ontological metaphors spread throughout the songs. These types of metaphors are used to express various main themes such as disappointment, identity, pain, and emotional struggle.

Structural and ontological metaphors are the most dominant, suggesting that Swift makes extensive use of concepts that connect abstract experiences with concrete, physically understandable images. Meanwhile, orientational metaphors serve to describe emotional states through direction and position, adding emotional depth to the lyrics. Taylor Swift uses metaphors to describe her emotions in a more powerful and creative way. Instead of stating her feelings directly, she compares them to things like war, ghosts, or poems, making the emotions feel stronger, more vivid, and more relatable. This metaphorical approach connects the songs and builds a cohesive emotional narrative, allowing listeners to feel the depth of her pain, love, and transformation throughout the album.

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