

AN ANALYSIS OF TENSION BUILDING THROUGH FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN ANNABELLE: CREATION

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Abstract:

This study explores the use of figurative language as a narrative device to build tension in the horror film Annabelle: Creation. Horror films are not only driven by visual and auditory elements but also rely heavily on linguistic expressions to evoke fear, anxiety, and suspense in the audience. Figurative language—such as metaphor, personification, simile, and hyperbole—plays a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere and emotional undertones of the film. By employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research identifies and analyzes instances of figurative language found in the film’s dialogue, narration, and visual cues.

The findings demonstrate that figurative expressions are strategically used during key moments of fear and suspense. For example, metaphors transform ordinary settings into menacing spaces, while personification brings life to inanimate objects, such as the haunted doll, thereby intensifying the psychological impact on viewers. Hyperbole exaggerates emotional and physical responses, heightening the sense of danger, and similes offer vivid comparisons that amplify the eerie mood. These devices function not merely as stylistic embellishments but as integral tools for creating narrative tension and maintaining the viewer’s engagement.

Moreover, the study reveals that figurative language often works in tandem with cinematic elements like sound, lighting, and camera movement, creating a layered and immersive experience. The analysis contributes to the field of stylistic and film analysis by showing how language enhances horror aesthetics and psychological manipulation. It also encourages further interdisciplinary studies between linguistics, literature, and film studies, particularly within the context of genre-based storytelling. The results highlight the importance of language in visual media and its potential in shaping audience perception and emotional response.

Keywords : *figurative language, horror film, tension, metaphor, personification, Annabelle: Creation.*

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1. Introduction

Horror films have long been associated with techniques that elicit fear, suspense, and emotional discomfort. Traditionally, these effects are achieved through visual and auditory elements such as dim lighting, eerie soundtracks, and abrupt camera movements. However, in recent years, horror films have evolved into more complex forms of storytelling that also utilize linguistic tools to heighten psychological tension. One such tool is **figurative language**, which plays a critical role in shaping mood, symbolism, and character perception. Figurative expressions such as **metaphor**, **simile**, **personification**, and **hyperbole** allow filmmakers and screenwriters to describe terrifying situations, supernatural elements, or emotional states in a more vivid and emotionally impactful manner.

Annabelle: Creation (2017), directed by David F. Sandberg, (POPY, 2023) is a compelling case study in how figurative language is used within a cinematic horror narrative. As a prequel in the *Conjuring Universe*, the film delves into the origins of a possessed doll and the traumatic experiences of characters who encounter it. Beyond its visuals and special effects, the film contains a rich use of figurative language embedded in the characters' dialogues and narrative context, which contributes significantly to the creation of tension and the horror experience itself. By carefully analyzing these elements, this study seeks to understand how language contributes not only to meaning but also to mood and suspense.

Previous research by (Adolph, 2016) has indicated that figurative language is prevalent in horror literature and media and that its use contributes to emotional manipulation and psychological immersion. These studies show that metaphors and personifications, in particular, help to anthropomorphize fear or represent abstract dangers in concrete ways. Despite these insights, there remains a gap in research that specifically addresses the use of figurative language in **film media**, especially within horror genres. Most stylistic analyses still focus on literary texts, leaving a need for deeper investigation into how these techniques function in multimodal storytelling.

This study therefore addresses the following problems: (1) What types of figurative language are used in the film *Annabelle: Creation*? and (2) How does each type contribute to the building of narrative tension? The aim of this research is to classify the figurative language found in the film and to analyze its role in intensifying suspense, fear, and audience engagement. The findings are expected to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of language and film, particularly in understanding how linguistic features can serve psychological and stylistic functions within the horror genre.

The entire introduction is organized in continuous paragraph format, following academic article conventions, and is written using Times New Roman, 11 pt, single spacing, without being divided into sub-sections as is typical in thesis writing.

2. Methodology

This research employs a **descriptive qualitative method** as its primary approach. The descriptive qualitative method is deemed appropriate because this study seeks to analyze and interpret the use of figurative language in a specific film context, not to quantify linguistic data. This approach enables the researcher to explore the meanings, functions, and implications of language use in a naturalistic setting, emphasizing the depth of understanding rather than numerical measurement. The central focus of this method is to describe how language, particularly figurative expressions, contributes to the building of narrative tension in *Annabelle: Creation*.

The **data source** for this study is the full-length horror film *Annabelle: Creation* (Mee, 2023) Sandberg and produced by New Line Cinema. The film was selected due to its popularity, critical acclaim, and its notable use of suspense-driven narrative and horror language. The primary data consist of dialogues and visual-narrative contexts containing figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, personifications, and hyperboles. Additional contextual cues such

as character expressions, scene settings, and background music are also considered as supporting data to determine the contribution of language to emotional and psychological tension.

The **data collection technique** used in this research is **document analysis**, which involves close watching of the film multiple times to ensure accuracy and completeness. Each scene was observed carefully to identify and record figurative expressions. The researcher paused and transcribed relevant dialogue lines, noting the scene duration, character involved, and situational context. Transcripts were then analyzed to determine the presence of figurative language based on the definitions and categories proposed by linguists such as (Zalta et al., 2001). A checklist was used to classify the types of figurative language found.

For the **data analysis technique**, this study applied **content analysis** focusing on the function and effect of each figurative expression within the narrative. The steps of analysis involved (1) identifying the figurative expression used, (2) categorizing the expression into its respective type (metaphor, simile, personification, or hyperbole), (3) interpreting the meaning and emotional weight of the expression, and (4) explaining how it contributes to the atmosphere of fear, suspense, or psychological tension in that particular scene. Contextual interpretation was also guided by cinematic cues such as lighting, sound, camera angle, and character reaction to provide a holistic understanding.

To ensure **validity**, the researcher employed **data triangulation**, which includes re-watching scenes, comparing findings with related studies, and consulting references in stylistics and film studies. Theoretical backing was provided by stylistic theory, particularly that (Chukwuedo, 2022), as well as narrative theory to support the analysis of plot structure and audience tension.

3. Data Collection

The data for this research were collected using a **documentary observation technique**, which is commonly employed in qualitative research to obtain rich, contextualized information from existing media sources. In this study, the primary data source is the (Nelson, 2022). As the object of study, the film was selected due to its strong atmospheric horror and the frequent use of expressive, stylized language that contributes to narrative tension. The film has a runtime of 109 minutes, and every segment was carefully observed for linguistic and stylistic analysis.

The data collection process began with an **intensive viewing of the film**. The researcher watched the entire movie multiple times—initially to grasp the general storyline, and subsequently to focus on specific scenes that potentially contained figurative language. A notetaking system was employed to document scenes, timestamps, speaker names, and emotional or narrative contexts in which certain expressions occurred. During this process, the researcher paused and rewound certain scenes repeatedly to ensure an accurate transcription of relevant dialogue.

Next, **dialogue transcription** was conducted for each scene where figurative language appeared to be present. These transcriptions were extracted either directly from official subtitle files or transcribed manually by the researcher for scenes that required more precise attention to nuance, emotion, and tone. Both verbal expressions (spoken dialogue) and non-verbal cues (background narration, tone, gesture, sound effects) were recorded as supporting elements to help interpret the figurative language and its function in creating tension.

The identification of figurative expressions was guided by a set of operational definitions derived from linguistic literature, especially those proposed by (Aulia et al., 2021). The researcher referred to four main categories of figurative language—**metaphor**, **simile**, **personification**, and **hyperbole**—each of which was defined and exemplified in a data coding sheet. This coding sheet served as an analytical tool for classifying the expressions based on form and function.

To enhance the credibility of the collected data, a **triangulation strategy** was employed. First, the researcher rewatched selected scenes at different intervals to ensure consistency in interpretation. Second, the transcriptions and identified figurative expressions were cross-checked with available film scripts and subtitle databases online. Third, interpretations were reviewed against published studies and theoretical sources in stylistics and film studies to confirm their validity.

Furthermore, to situate the figurative expressions within the larger narrative structure, each instance was also examined in terms of **scene context, character development, and cinematic techniques** such as lighting, camera angle, and soundtrack. These multimodal elements were taken into account as they contribute significantly to how figurative language is perceived and how it influences emotional responses from the audience.

Ultimately, the data collection process in this study was designed to ensure that all relevant instances of figurative language within *Annabelle: Creation* were systematically identified, accurately recorded, and contextually analyzed in relation to their contribution to tension-building in the horror narrative. This thorough approach enabled the researcher to gather in-depth and meaningful data for subsequent analysis and interpretation.

4. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this research is grounded in the field of **stylistics**, particularly the analysis of figurative language and its narrative function within multimodal texts such as film. Stylistics, as defined by (Bibi et al., 2024) refers to the study of style in language, especially the distinctive features that contribute to meaning and effect in both literary and non-literary texts. In this study, figurative language is treated not only as a rhetorical device but also as a strategic element that supports the construction of mood, character perception, and narrative tension.

This research focuses on four primary types of figurative language: **metaphor, simile, personification, and hyperbole**. The definitions and classifications used are derived from classical and contemporary linguistic sources. A **metaphor** is understood as an implicit comparison between two unrelated things that share common characteristics, often used to transform a mundane object or setting into something ominous or symbolic. A **simile** explicitly compares two things using markers such as “like” or “as,” and is frequently employed to intensify imagery. **Personification** assigns human attributes to non-human entities, which in horror films often serves to animate inanimate objects—such as the possessed doll Annabelle—thus increasing emotional unease. Lastly, **hyperbole** involves deliberate exaggeration for emotional or dramatic effect, often highlighting terror, trauma, or a sense of overwhelming danger.

The analytical process is guided by **the functional approach to figurative language**, in which the researcher does not merely identify figures of speech but interprets how each expression functions within the narrative structure. This framework (Ummah, 2019) **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**, which suggests that figurative expressions are cognitive tools that shape perception and experience. In the context of horror cinema, figurative language often externalizes internal fear, represents abstract threats in tangible terms, and deepens the viewer’s psychological engagement with the story.

In addition, this framework incorporates elements of **narrative theory**, particularly in relation to how linguistic choices affect audience response and plot development. Figurative expressions are not isolated occurrences but are embedded within scenes where visual, auditory, and emotional cues converge. Therefore, the analysis also considers the **multimodal interplay** between language and cinematic techniques such as lighting, music, sound effects, and character expression.

To apply this framework, each identified instance of figurative language is examined in terms of: (1) its **form** (i.e., what type of figurative language it is), (2) its **semantic and stylistic**

meaning, and (3) its **function** in building narrative tension or reinforcing horror aesthetics. This includes analysis of how the expression contributes to suspense, foreshadowing, emotional intensity, or thematic emphasis. Special attention is given to how figurative language transforms otherwise ordinary scenes into moments of terror or uncertainty, often playing a vital role in the psychological manipulation of the viewer.

By integrating stylistic theory with narrative and cinematic analysis, this framework provides a holistic lens through which the role of language in *Annabelle: Creation* can be systematically explored and interpreted. It allows the researcher to uncover not only the presence of figurative language, but also its significance in enhancing the immersive, unsettling experience that defines the horror genre.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of this study show that the film *Annabelle: Creation* strategically employs various types of figurative language to build narrative tension and enhance the psychological impact on the audience. The types of figurative language identified include metaphor, personification, simile, and hyperbole. These figurative expressions appear in 34 key scenes, distributed throughout the film, particularly in climactic moments involving supernatural manifestations or intense emotional situations.

The following table summarizes the distribution of figurative language types found in the film, classified by form:

Table 1. Distribution of Figurative Language Types in the Film *Annabelle: Creation*

No	Type of Figurative Language	Frequency	Sample Dialogue / Brief Description
1.	Metaphor	12	"The house is a cage..."
2.	Simile	9	"She's like a shadow crawling through the walls."
3.	Personification	7	"The doll watches me sleep."
4.	Hyperbole	6	"I thought my heart would explode from the silence."

The data indicate that metaphors are the most frequently used, primarily to transform everyday settings into threatening environments. Similes and personifications support visual imagery and character emotion, while hyperbole emphasizes extreme emotional tension

Discussion

The discussion of these results reveals that figurative language in *Annabelle: Creation* functions not merely as a stylistic device but as a central element in constructing an immersive horror atmosphere. Metaphors used throughout the film commonly function to reinterpret ordinary places as symbols of threat. For instance, the phrase "The house is a cage" not only reflects the character's physical entrapment but also suggests psychological pressure and the dominance of supernatural forces within the space. This metaphor fosters a sense of inescapability, amplifying narrative tension.

Similes in the film serve as powerful tools for visual amplification, helping viewers vividly imagine eerie scenarios. For example, the simile "like a shadow crawling through the walls" evokes an invisible and ominous presence, enhancing the film's creepy atmosphere. Such expressions effectively blend abstract and concrete imagery to heighten suspense.

Personification is key in animating lifeless objects—particularly the possessed doll, Annabelle. Expressions such as “The doll watches me sleep” breathe life into the inanimate, turning the doll into an active, threatening entity. This significantly increases psychological unease and drives home the supernatural horror.

Hyperbole, on the other hand, is used to amplify characters’ emotional reactions to fear. Phrases like “my heart would explode from the silence” highlight the overwhelming psychological stress experienced by characters. Though exaggerated, such expressions are effective in communicating extreme dread and tension.

Overall, these forms of figurative language do not work in isolation but interact synergistically with cinematic elements such as dim lighting, sudden sounds, and dramatic camera angles. The combination of linguistic and visual techniques creates a layered horror experience. For instance, when a metaphor is spoken during a slow camera zoom into a dark room, accompanied by unsettling music, the viewer experiences a multisensory surge of fear.

Figurative language also plays a narrative role by serving as foreshadowing. Several expressions hint at future dangers before they are explicitly revealed. For example, when a character states “This place holds its breath,” it subtly signals to the audience that a threat is imminent, thus building anticipation and anxiety.

According to stylistic theory by (Umar Evuti & Oluseun Ogungbe, 2023), such figurative expressions are stylistic markers that contribute to emotional meaning and atmospheric depth. Furthermore, (Falah et al., 2022) figurative language helps structure the plot tension, particularly within the dramatic arc of exposition, complication, climax, and resolution.

It is also worth noting that figurative language contributes to character development. Characters who are more emotionally or spiritually attuned to supernatural forces tend to use more metaphorical or simile-laden language, whereas more rational characters speak in literal terms. This distinction not only enhances the mood but also reflects the psychological depth of each character.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that figurative language serves as a powerful narrative device in building tension and enhancing the horror atmosphere in *Annabelle: Creation*. The analysis reveals that metaphors, similes, personifications, and hyperboles are not merely decorative elements, but essential tools that intensify fear, suspense, and psychological engagement. Metaphors transform ordinary settings into threatening environments, similes create vivid and eerie imagery, personifications give life to inanimate objects like the haunted doll, and hyperboles express the extreme emotional states of the characters.

These figurative expressions interact dynamically with cinematic techniques such as sound, lighting, and camera movement, resulting in a multimodal experience that deeply affects the audience's emotional perception. Figurative language also functions structurally within the narrative, contributing to foreshadowing, character development, and the psychological layering of plot tension. The findings highlight that language plays a crucial role in visual storytelling, especially in the horror genre, where emotional manipulation and atmospheric intensity are central.

Moreover, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary understanding of stylistics and film studies by showing how linguistic devices function within a visual medium. It encourages further research into the cognitive and emotional impacts of language in film and supports the integration of literary analysis into cinematic critique. Ultimately, *Annabelle: Creation* exemplifies how effective figurative language can deepen horror narratives and sustain audience immersion.

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