



A Semantic Analysis of Literal and Figurative Meaning in the Song “Let Her Go” by Passenger

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of literal and figurative meanings in Passenger’s song Let Her Go through a non-empirical qualitative semantic analysis based on textual interpretation. The primary data consist of the official lyrics of the song, analyzed through close reading, semantic categorization, and contextual interpretation informed by semantic and discourse theories. The findings indicate that literal meanings function as experiential grounding that represents emotional states such as loneliness and introspection in a direct and descriptive manner. Figurative meanings, however, dominate the lyrical structure through metaphors, symbolism, contrast, and paradox that articulate complex emotional themes of love, loss, regret, and delayed realization. In addition, the recurrent structural pattern “only know... when...” strengthens thematic coherence by emphasizing retrospective awareness as the central message of the song. The interaction between literal and figurative meanings constructs a layered semantic system in which emotional depth emerges from the interplay between denotative description and connotative representation. These findings confirm that meaning in song lyrics is dynamically constructed through contextual and interpretative processes.

Keywords: *Semantics, Literal Meaning, Figurative Meaning, Song Lyrics Analysis, Passenger.*



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary expansion of semantic studies within linguistic scholarship has increasingly shifted from static lexical interpretation toward dynamic meaning construction embedded in discourse, cognition, and socio-emotional interaction, reflecting a broader epistemological transition in language studies that regards meaning not as an isolated property of words but as a negotiated and context-sensitive phenomenon emerging through communicative practices and interpretative frameworks. Current developments in semantics and discourse analysis demonstrate that figurative language occupies a central position in shaping emotional intensity, symbolic representation, and experiential meaning across multiple communicative domains, particularly in literary and musical texts where linguistic ambiguity and emotional resonance intersect in highly condensed forms of expression (Evans, 2023; Goddard, 2021). Within this evolving intellectual landscape, song lyrics have become increasingly recognized as linguistically complex cultural artifacts capable of encoding multilayered semantic meanings that transcend literal interpretation through metaphorical, symbolic, and contrastive constructions. Recent discussions concerning meaning negotiation in communication further indicate that repeated linguistic patterns and formulaic expressions contribute significantly to how audiences cognitively process emotional narratives and relational experiences in artistic discourse (Keckes, 2022). Such developments have encouraged scholars to reconsider popular music not merely as entertainment discourse but as an analytically rich site for investigating the interaction between literal and figurative meaning in contemporary language use, particularly in emotionally driven compositions such as Passenger’s *Let Her Go* (Passenger, 2012).

Existing scholarship on figurative language has generated substantial insights into the mechanisms through which metaphor, symbolism, irony, simile, and other non-literal expressions function in literary and audiovisual discourse, yet the majority of these studies remain primarily classificatory in orientation, emphasizing typological identification rather than examining the semantic interaction through which figurative and literal meanings collaboratively construct broader thematic interpretation. Research conducted by Damayanti, Hartono, and Rukmini (2024), for instance, successfully demonstrates how irony operates within cinematic discourse to intensify implicit meaning

and emotional tension, though the analysis remains largely confined to categorical interpretation without systematically exploring how literal expressions structurally support figurative layers of meaning. Comparable tendencies can be observed in Sancita's (2023) investigation of simile in Passenger's selected songs, where figurative expressions are effectively identified and interpreted but are not critically situated within wider semantic relations involving contextual framing, emotional sequencing, and recurrent linguistic structures. Broader theoretical discussions concerning figurative comprehension also emphasize that non-literal language cannot be interpreted independently from discourse context, cognitive association, and experiential inference (Zhang, 2023; Nordquist, 2022). The cumulative implication of these studies suggests that figurative meaning derives its communicative force not solely from isolated stylistic devices but from its interaction with contextualized literal expressions that anchor interpretation within emotionally recognizable situations.

Despite the growing body of scholarship addressing figurative language in songs and literary discourse, several conceptual and methodological limitations continue to constrain the development of more integrative semantic analyses. A persistent weakness in existing literature lies in the tendency to artificially separate literal and figurative meaning as distinct analytical categories rather than examining how both forms of meaning operate relationally within the same textual environment to construct coherent emotional narratives and interpretative continuity. Such compartmentalization obscures the fact that figurative expressions often depend upon literal contextual foundations to achieve interpretative intelligibility and emotional credibility. Equally problematic is the limited attention devoted to repetitive structural patterns and formulaic constructions that function as semantic intensifiers within lyrical discourse, despite evidence suggesting that repeated forms significantly influence meaning negotiation and audience interpretation (Kecskes, 2022). Studies of figurative language frequently privilege metaphorical novelty while underestimating how recurring syntactic configurations contribute to thematic reinforcement, emotional accumulation, and cognitive memorability. Theoretical discussions on meaning construction further reveal that interpretation emerges through complex interactions among linguistic form, experiential cognition, and contextual expectation rather than through isolated semantic units alone (Evans, 2023; Goddard, 2021). The absence of such integrative perspectives has created an empirical gap in understanding how contemporary song lyrics generate emotional universality through the simultaneous operation of literal grounding and figurative abstraction.

The unresolved nature of this problem possesses considerable scientific and practical significance because the interpretation of figurative meaning increasingly shapes how audiences engage with contemporary media discourse, emotional communication, and culturally mediated representations of personal experience. In educational contexts, inadequate understanding of figurative meaning often impedes learners' interpretative competence, particularly in second-language environments where non-literal language demands contextual inference beyond lexical decoding. At the same time, the proliferation of digital music consumption has intensified the cultural circulation of emotionally symbolic language, making song lyrics an influential medium through which listeners negotiate experiences of love, regret, loneliness, and emotional loss. Discussions regarding discourse interpretation indicate that figurative language comprehension constitutes not merely an aesthetic skill but a cognitive process deeply associated with empathy, inferential reasoning, and contextual awareness (Zhang, 2023). Earlier literary analyses likewise demonstrate that symbolic representation frequently serves as a mechanism for articulating emotionally difficult or socially mediated experiences that resist direct expression (Catty, 1999). The semantic complexity embedded in songs such as *Let Her Go* therefore represents a significant site for investigating how emotional meaning is linguistically encoded, cognitively processed, and socially interpreted, particularly because the song's enduring popularity suggests that its figurative constructions resonate with broadly shared human experiences.

Positioned within this intellectual context, the present study advances existing semantic scholarship by moving beyond purely taxonomic identification of figurative devices toward an integrated analysis of how literal and figurative meanings interact to construct emotional coherence and thematic depth in Passenger's *Let Her Go*. Rather than treating literal meaning as a merely peripheral linguistic layer, this research conceptualizes literal expressions as contextual anchors that enable figurative interpretations to acquire emotional clarity, symbolic resonance, and interpretative continuity. Particular attention is directed toward the repetitive structure "only know... when..." as a semantic mechanism that systematically organizes the song's thematic articulation of delayed

realization, emotional absence, and retrospective awareness. This analytical orientation responds directly to limitations within previous studies that have insufficiently examined the relational dynamics between contextual description and symbolic abstraction in lyrical discourse. The study simultaneously contributes to broader debates concerning meaning construction by demonstrating that emotional universality in popular music emerges through the interaction of denotative grounding, figurative intensification, and repetitive discourse patterning rather than through isolated metaphorical expressions alone.

This study aims to analyze the literal and figurative meanings contained in the song *Let Her Go* by Passenger and to examine how the interaction between these semantic dimensions constructs the song's overarching emotional and thematic message. The research seeks to contribute theoretically to semantic and discourse studies by proposing a more integrative understanding of meaning construction in lyrical texts, particularly through the relational interplay between denotative description, symbolic representation, and repetitive linguistic structures. Methodologically, the study contributes by applying a contextual semantic approach that combines interpretative analysis of figurative language with examination of structural repetition and emotional sequencing within song discourse, thereby offering a more comprehensive analytical model for future studies on meaning construction in contemporary musical texts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a non-empirical qualitative design grounded in semantic and discourse-oriented textual analysis to investigate the construction of literal and figurative meaning in the song *Let Her Go* by Passenger. As the research focused on linguistic interpretation rather than human participants or measurable behavioral responses, the primary data consisted exclusively of textual materials derived from the official lyrics of the song released by Passenger in 2012. The study utilized purposive textual selection in which lexical items, phrases, clauses, and repetitive structures containing potential denotative and connotative meanings were intentionally identified based on their semantic relevance to the research objectives. The selection criteria emphasized expressions demonstrating metaphorical representation, symbolism, contrast, paradox, imagery, and emotionally loaded contextual descriptions. Supporting secondary sources included scholarly literature in semantics, pragmatics, figurative language, and discourse interpretation to provide conceptual grounding for the analysis. The analytical framework was principally informed by semantic theories concerning meaning construction, contextual interpretation, and figurative language comprehension, particularly those emphasizing the relationship between denotative meaning, symbolic representation, and discourse context.

The analytical procedure was conducted through several interconnected stages designed to ensure interpretative rigor and conceptual coherence. First, the lyrics were repeatedly examined to identify semantic units containing either literal or figurative meaning. Second, the identified expressions were systematically categorized according to their dominant semantic characteristics and subsequently interpreted within the broader emotional and thematic context of the song. Third, the analysis explored how repetitive linguistic structures and contextual sequencing contributed to the construction of emotional meaning and thematic continuity. To strengthen analytical credibility, theoretical triangulation was applied through the comparative use of multiple semantic perspectives and relevant scholarly interpretations concerning figurative language and discourse meaning. Interpretative consistency was further maintained through iterative close reading, contextual cross-checking, and continuous comparison between individual expressions and the overall narrative structure of the lyrics. Since the study relied entirely on publicly accessible textual material and did not involve human subjects, formal ethical clearance was not required; nevertheless, principles of academic integrity, accurate citation, and responsible interpretation of copyrighted artistic material were strictly observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literal Meaning as Contextual Grounding in Emotional Narrative Construction

The semantic analysis indicates that literal expressions in *Let Her Go* primarily function as contextual anchors that stabilize the emotional atmosphere of the lyrical narrative. These literal constructions provide concrete situational descriptions that enable listeners to cognitively access the emotional state of the speaker without requiring extensive inferential interpretation. Semantic theories

concerning contextual meaning suggest that denotative language often establishes the experiential foundation necessary for subsequent figurative interpretation (Goddard, 2021). The presence of literal descriptions in emotionally driven songs demonstrates that non-metaphorical language remains essential in maintaining narrative coherence and interpretative accessibility.

The lyric “Staring at the ceiling in the dark” exemplifies how literal language operates through direct experiential representation rather than symbolic abstraction. The phrase portrays insomnia, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion through a visually concrete situation that can be immediately recognized by listeners. Cognitive semantic approaches argue that embodied experience significantly shapes the interpretability of emotionally descriptive language because meaning emerges through familiar experiential schemas (Evans, 2023). The emotional resonance of this lyric therefore derives from its capacity to reproduce an ordinary yet psychologically intense human condition through explicit descriptive wording.

Another literal construction appears in the expression “Same old empty feeling in your heart,” where emotional emptiness is articulated through direct lexical representation rather than figurative displacement. Although the phrase contains emotional intensity, the semantic structure remains fundamentally denotative because the meaning can be understood without metaphorical decoding. Previous studies on song lyric interpretation indicate that direct emotional statements often function as stabilizing elements within otherwise symbolically dense lyrical compositions (Yusnitasari et al., 2022). The coexistence of explicit emotional vocabulary and later figurative elaboration strengthens thematic continuity across the song’s narrative progression.

The expression “Staring at the bottom of your glass” similarly operates within a literal semantic framework despite carrying subtle emotional implications associated with reflection and solitude. The lyric describes a physical action that indirectly evokes emotional distress without transforming the object into symbolic representation. Research concerning figurative language in contemporary music demonstrates that emotionally suggestive literal imagery frequently precedes metaphorical intensification within lyrical discourse (Barung et al., 2023). Such patterns reveal that literal language does not merely communicate factual situations but also prepares interpretative conditions for subsequent figurative expansion.

The analytical categorization of literal expressions identified in the song is summarized in Table 1, which demonstrates the semantic functions attached to denotative constructions within the lyrical sequence. The table illustrates that literal language consistently serves descriptive and emotional contextualization rather than symbolic abstraction. Studies on discourse interpretation maintain that contextual framing significantly influences how listeners process later figurative expressions because literal scenes establish emotional orientation prior to interpretative complexity (Zhang, 2023). The findings reinforce the argument that literal meaning functions as a structural prerequisite for effective figurative interpretation.

Table 1. Literal Expressions and Their Contextual Semantic Functions

No	Literal Expression	Semantic Function	Emotional Context
1	“Staring at the ceiling in the dark”	Situational description	Loneliness and insomnia
2	“Same old empty feeling in your heart”	Emotional articulation	Sadness and emptiness
3	“Staring at the bottom of your glass”	Reflective description	Isolation and contemplation

The semantic role of literal language in this song differs from findings reported in studies emphasizing predominantly figurative structures within contemporary music discourse. Research conducted by Elsawati, Santika, and Ariyaningsih (2022) identified metaphorical density as the primary meaning-making strategy in Taylor Swift’s *Fearless* album, whereas the present analysis demonstrates a more balanced interplay between literal grounding and figurative intensification. Literal constructions in *Let Her Go* appear strategically positioned to create emotional realism before symbolic interpretation emerges. This structural sequencing strengthens interpretative clarity by allowing listeners to navigate emotional transitions through recognizable experiential contexts.

The contextual realism produced by literal language also contributes to the authenticity of emotional narration within the song. Literary-semantic discussions indicate that direct descriptive language often functions as a mechanism for generating emotional credibility because listeners tend to associate explicit experiential detail with sincerity and psychological realism (Catty, 1999). The literal imagery in Passenger's lyrics reflects ordinary human experiences associated with isolation, regret, and introspection rather than abstract philosophical reflection. Emotional accessibility consequently becomes one of the principal semantic effects generated through literal construction.

Formulaic sequencing between literal and figurative expressions further reveals how semantic progression is organized throughout the song. Literal lines frequently precede emotionally heightened figurative statements, creating a discursive rhythm in which descriptive grounding gradually evolves into symbolic realization. Kecskes (2022) argues that repeated linguistic sequencing influences interpretative negotiation by directing audience expectation through recognizable discourse patterns. The lyrical arrangement in *Let Her Go* demonstrates this phenomenon through the gradual transition from observable situations toward emotionally abstract reflection.

Comparative studies on figurative language in contemporary English songs have often prioritized metaphorical categorization while overlooking the enabling role of literal discourse structures. Research by Aisyarah and Wahyuni (2024) concerning Eminem's lyrics primarily focused on figurative identification without examining how denotative language facilitates emotional interpretation. The present findings indicate that literal expressions function not as semantically secondary components but as interpretative frameworks through which figurative language acquires contextual intelligibility. Emotional meaning in the song emerges through interactional layering rather than isolated symbolic representation.

The broader semantic implication of these findings concerns the relationship between experiential realism and symbolic abstraction in lyrical discourse. Literal meaning in *Let Her Go* constructs a recognizable emotional environment that permits listeners to interpret figurative language through personally relatable experiences. Contemporary semantic theory maintains that meaning construction depends upon the integration of contextual knowledge, emotional inference, and cognitive association rather than isolated lexical interpretation (Evans, 2023). The analytical evidence confirms that literal language serves as a foundational semantic mechanism sustaining emotional continuity, interpretative orientation, and thematic coherence throughout the song.

Figurative Meaning as the Central Mechanism of Emotional and Symbolic Interpretation

The analytical findings demonstrate that figurative meaning occupies the dominant semantic position within *Let Her Go*, functioning as the principal mechanism through which emotional experience, psychological tension, and thematic realization are communicated. Figurative expressions in the song extend beyond decorative stylistic usage because they systematically transform ordinary emotional experiences into symbolically intensified representations of love, regret, and absence. Semantic scholarship increasingly recognizes figurative language as a cognitive and interpretative process through which abstract emotional states become conceptually accessible to audiences (Evans, 2023). The lyrical structure of Passenger's composition reflects this tendency by relying extensively on metaphorical and symbolic constructions to articulate emotional realities that exceed literal articulation.

One of the most significant figurative constructions appears in the lyric "You only need the light when it's burning low," where the lexical item "light" operates metaphorically rather than physically. The expression symbolically represents emotional security, affection, hope, and psychological stability, while the phrase "burning low" signifies impending emotional loss or relational deterioration. Cognitive semantic theories maintain that metaphorical representation frequently derives meaning from embodied human experiences associated with visibility, warmth, and safety (Zhang, 2023). The metaphor therefore acquires emotional force because listeners intuitively associate diminishing light with vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional deprivation.

The lyric "Only miss the sun when it starts to snow" introduces symbolic contrast as a mechanism for emotional interpretation. The "sun" symbolically signifies happiness, emotional warmth, and relational comfort, whereas "snow" functions as an opposing symbol representing emotional coldness, isolation, and sadness. Previous analyses of figurative language in contemporary songs indicate that binary oppositions often intensify emotional interpretation by positioning contrasting experiential conditions within a unified semantic structure (Akseer et al., 2024). The emotional significance of the

lyric emerges through this symbolic opposition because appreciation is represented as a retrospective realization produced through suffering and absence.

Another important figurative structure can be identified in the lyric “Only know you love her when you let her go,” which operates through paradoxical emotional logic. The contradiction lies in the suggestion that emotional understanding emerges only after relational separation has already occurred. Studies concerning metaphorical discourse in song lyrics emphasize that paradox frequently functions as a mechanism for exposing psychological contradictions embedded within human emotional behavior (Jati, 2020). The lyric consequently transforms a personal relational experience into a universal reflection on delayed emotional awareness and retrospective regret.

The figurative patterns identified throughout the song are summarized in Table 2, which categorizes the dominant symbolic and metaphorical constructions according to their semantic functions. The data reveal that metaphor, symbolism, contrast, and paradox collectively shape the emotional architecture of the song. Research on figurative interpretation demonstrates that emotional discourse frequently depends upon overlapping figurative strategies rather than isolated rhetorical devices (Nordquist, 2022). The analytical evidence confirms that Passenger’s lyrics rely on interconnected figurative mechanisms to sustain thematic continuity and emotional intensity.

Table 2. Figurative Expressions and Their Semantic Interpretations

No	Figurative Expression	Figurative Type	Semantic Interpretation
1	“You only need the light when it’s burning low”	Metaphor	Emotional support and fading hope
2	“Only miss the sun when it starts to snow”	Symbolism and contrast	Happiness realized through suffering
3	“Only know you love her when you let her go”	Paradox	Delayed realization of love
4	“Only know you’ve been high when you’re feeling low”	Contrast	Emotional awareness through suffering
5	“Only hate the road when you’re missing home”	Symbolism	Longing for comfort and belonging

The lyric “Only know you’ve been high when you’re feeling low” further reinforces the semantic significance of emotional contrast within the song. The terms “high” and “low” symbolically represent opposing psychological conditions associated with happiness and despair. Research on cognitive stylistics suggests that emotional oppositions strengthen interpretative engagement because audiences understand positive emotional states more vividly when contrasted with emotional deprivation (Simanjuntak et al., 2023). Passenger’s lyrical construction demonstrates this process by presenting emotional awareness as contingent upon experiential contrast rather than immediate recognition.

The expression “Only hate the road when you’re missing home” employs symbolic displacement to represent emotional separation and psychological longing. The “road” metaphorically signifies struggle, emotional distance, and uncertain life trajectories, while “home” symbolizes emotional security, intimacy, and relational belonging. Studies investigating metonymic and symbolic processes in song lyrics indicate that spatial imagery frequently functions as an indirect representation of emotional conditions and interpersonal attachment (Max, 2022). The figurative effectiveness of the lyric derives from its capacity to transform physical movement into emotional dislocation and longing.

Patterns of figurative density within the song also demonstrate the songwriter’s preference for emotionally indirect communication. Emotional experiences such as regret, loneliness, and relational absence are rarely articulated through explicit declarative statements but are instead mediated through symbolic imagery and metaphorical contrast. Discussions concerning figurative discourse argue that indirect representation often produces stronger emotional engagement because listeners actively participate in meaning construction through interpretative inference (Goddard, 2021). The song’s emotional resonance can therefore be attributed partly to its reliance on interpretative participation rather than direct emotional exposition.

Comparative analyses with earlier studies on Passenger's songs reveal notable similarities regarding the dominance of metaphorical representation in emotional narration. Sancita (2023) identified simile and symbolic expression as recurring stylistic features within Passenger's lyrical compositions, particularly in representations of emotional vulnerability and relational instability. The present analysis expands this perspective by demonstrating that figurative meaning in *Let Her Go* functions not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as the structural core through which thematic realization is organized. Emotional interpretation emerges through cumulative symbolic interaction rather than isolated rhetorical expression.

The semantic implications of these findings reinforce broader theoretical arguments concerning the centrality of figurative language in contemporary lyrical discourse. Figurative expressions in *Let Her Go* operate as interpretative frameworks through which listeners conceptualize emotional experiences associated with absence, regret, and psychological realization. Current discourse-oriented semantic theory emphasizes that figurative meaning is inseparable from contextual cognition and experiential association because symbolic interpretation depends upon emotionally recognizable conceptual mappings (Evans, 2023). The findings demonstrate that figurative language functions as the primary mechanism through which the song constructs emotional universality, thematic coherence, and interpretative depth.

Interaction Between Literal and Figurative Meaning in Constructing Thematic and Emotional Coherence

The semantic structure of *Let Her Go* reveals that meaning construction does not emerge from literal or figurative language in isolation, but from the systematic interaction between both semantic layers that collectively generate emotional coherence and thematic continuity. Literal expressions establish experiential grounding, while figurative constructions transform these grounded experiences into symbolic reflections of emotional realization and psychological introspection. Contemporary cognitive semantic theory emphasizes that meaning emerges through integrative processes involving contextual anchoring and conceptual abstraction rather than discrete linguistic categorization (Evans, 2023). The song demonstrates this integration through a gradual progression from descriptive emotional states toward increasingly symbolic interpretations of love and loss.

The interaction between literal and figurative meaning becomes particularly evident in the transitional structure of the lyrics, where concrete emotional descriptions precede metaphorical elaboration. Early lines such as expressions of loneliness and emotional emptiness function as literal grounding mechanisms that orient listeners toward a recognizable emotional context. Within this framework, figurative expressions acquire interpretative depth because they are anchored in previously established experiential conditions. Research on contextual interpretation confirms that meaning negotiation is shaped by sequential linguistic exposure, where earlier literal cues influence the interpretation of subsequent figurative discourse (Goddard, 2021). The lyrical progression therefore reflects a layered semantic architecture in which literal meaning enables figurative expansion.

The interplay between both semantic forms is systematically illustrated in Table 3, which demonstrates how literal grounding and figurative abstraction operate in complementary rather than opposing roles. The table indicates that each figurative expression is semantically dependent on an earlier or implicit literal context that provides emotional orientation. Studies in discourse semantics highlight that interpretative coherence in song lyrics often depends on such layered semantic structuring, where meaning is distributed across multiple linguistic levels rather than concentrated in isolated expressions (Zhang, 2023). The interaction observed in the song confirms that semantic meaning is relational and dynamically constructed.

Table 3. Interaction Between Literal and Figurative Meaning in Selected Lyrics

No	Literal Grounding Element	Figurative Expression	Integrated Semantic Meaning
1	Emotional loneliness and emptiness	"You only need the light when it's burning low"	Awareness of emotional support after decline

No	Literal Grounding Element	Figurative Expression	Integrated Semantic Meaning
2	Physical isolation and reflection	“Only miss the sun when it starts to snow”	Happiness recognized through emotional absence
3	Introspective sadness	“Only know you love her when you let her go”	Love realized through relational loss

The semantic integration observed in the song aligns with theoretical perspectives that emphasize meaning as a cognitive and experiential process shaped by contextual layering and emotional inference. Literal descriptions of emotional conditions function as cognitive entry points that activate interpretative schemas, allowing figurative expressions to extend meaning beyond surface representation. Cognitive approaches to language understanding suggest that listeners construct meaning through progressive mapping between concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Evans, 2023). The song’s structure reflects this mechanism by continuously linking observable emotional states with metaphorical interpretations of loss and realization.

Repetitive linguistic structures such as “only know... when...” further reinforce the interaction between literal and figurative meaning by creating a consistent semantic rhythm that bridges descriptive and symbolic layers. These formulaic constructions function as interpretative anchors that guide listeners through transitions between emotional experience and reflective realization. Research on formulaic language indicates that repetition enhances meaning negotiation by stabilizing interpretative expectations across discourse sequences (Kecskes, 2022). In the song, repetition operates as a structural device that ensures coherence between literal emotional states and figurative insight.

The interaction between both semantic layers also contributes to the construction of emotional universality within the song. Literal expressions provide relatable emotional scenarios, while figurative meanings elevate these scenarios into generalized reflections on human experience. Studies on figurative comprehension suggest that symbolic language gains emotional effectiveness when it is embedded within recognizable experiential contexts (Zhang, 2023). The song achieves this effect by embedding universal emotional themes such as love, regret, and loss within a framework of accessible literal imagery.

Comparative literature in song lyric analysis shows that many contemporary musical texts rely heavily on figurative density while minimizing explicit literal grounding. However, findings from this study diverge from that pattern by demonstrating that *Let Her Go* maintains a balanced interplay between both semantic modes. Previous research on figurative language in modern songs often emphasizes metaphorical dominance without fully accounting for the enabling role of literal contextualization (Barung et al., 2023). The present analysis suggests that semantic richness emerges not from figurative excess alone but from the calibrated interaction between descriptive grounding and symbolic transformation.

The emotional impact of the song is intensified through this layered semantic structure because listeners are required to navigate between literal recognition and figurative interpretation. This interpretative movement fosters deeper cognitive engagement, as meaning is not immediately given but gradually constructed through contextual inference. Discourse analysis theory argues that meaning production in artistic language is inherently participatory, requiring active listener involvement in constructing coherence across semantic layers (Goddard, 2021). The song exemplifies this principle through its structured alternation between direct emotional depiction and symbolic reflection.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, the interaction between literal and figurative meaning in *Let Her Go* illustrates that semantic interpretation in lyrical discourse is fundamentally dynamic and multi-layered. Meaning does not reside solely in figurative abstraction or literal description but emerges through their continuous interaction within a cohesive narrative structure. Cognitive semantic frameworks reinforce this view by positioning meaning as an emergent property of linguistic, contextual, and experiential integration (Evans, 2023). The song thus provides empirical evidence that emotional and thematic coherence in lyrical discourse is constructed through relational semantic processes.

The analytical findings collectively indicate that the interaction between literal grounding and figurative elaboration constitutes the central mechanism through which *Let Her Go* constructs its

emotional and thematic identity. Literal meaning establishes experiential clarity, figurative meaning introduces symbolic depth, and their interaction produces interpretative continuity across the lyrical narrative. This layered semantic configuration demonstrates that song lyrics function as complex discourse systems in which meaning emerges through structured interplay rather than isolated linguistic elements.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that meaning construction in *Let Her Go* is formed through a hierarchical and interdependent relationship between literal meaning, figurative meaning, and their discursive interaction within the lyrical structure. Literal expressions provide an experiential foundation through direct depictions of emotional states such as loneliness and reflection, establishing a recognizable contextual framework for interpretation. Figurative meanings, which dominate the song, extend this foundation through metaphorical, symbolic, contrastive, and paradoxical expressions that transform personal emotional experiences into universal reflections on love, loss, and regret. The repeated structural pattern “only know... when...” reinforces semantic cohesion by systematically emphasizing the theme of delayed realization as the central emotional message. The interaction between literal grounding and figurative elaboration reveals that lyrical meaning is not linear or isolated but emerges through a dynamic interpretative process in which contextual description and symbolic abstraction mutually construct emotional and thematic coherence.

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