

Semantic Analysis of Similes and Metaphors in Baz Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet (1996): Implications for Teaching Shakespeare's Language

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how similes and metaphors function semantically in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and how their interpretation is influenced by the film's multimodal elements. Figurative language in Shakespeare's original works, while rich and expressive, often poses comprehension challenges for modern students due to its historical and linguistic complexity. To address this, the research examines how cinematic techniques such as visuals, sound, and performance can support the teaching of Shakespeare's figurative expressions in contemporary classrooms. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes 30 selected similes and metaphors from key scenes across all five acts of the film. Each expression is first interpreted semantically through comparison with its original textual context, and then examined in relation to the film's visual and auditory cues. The analysis integrates metaphor theory and multimodal discourse analysis to reveal how meaning is shaped through both language and cinematic form. Findings show that Luhrmann's adaptation not only preserves the poetic essence of Shakespeare's figurative language but also enhances its interpretability for modern learners. Metaphors such as love as fire, smoke, or the sea become more accessible when reinforced by imagery, music, and actors' expressions. The study concludes that film can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for teaching complex literary devices, fostering both semantic understanding and emotional engagement.

Keywords: Figurative Language, Metaphor and Simile, Multimodal Learning, Shakespearean English, Film Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Language is a vital tool for expressing thoughts, emotions, and social relationships. In literary contexts, figurative language, particularly similes and metaphors, serves as a powerful means of communicating abstract ideas through vivid and imaginative comparisons. William Shakespeare, one of the most influential figures in English literature, is well known for his masterful use of these devices. His figurative expressions not only enhance the aesthetic quality of his works but also deepen

emotional resonance and illuminate character development, as noted by Giovanelli and Mason (2018) and Stockwell (2020).

However, the linguistic features of Early Modern English present significant challenges for contemporary readers, especially students unfamiliar with the historical and cultural context of Shakespeare's time. Archaic vocabulary and complex metaphors often require interpretive assistance to be fully understood. This linguistic barrier can hinder student engagement and comprehension in classroom settings, making it difficult to appreciate the depth of Shakespeare's language (Crystal, 2019; Whitton, 2021). As Kress and Selander (2020) and Donnelly (2023) argue, modern pedagogical approaches must address these challenges through innovative instructional methods.

Film adaptations have emerged as valuable tools in this context, offering a way to reinterpret Shakespeare's texts using contemporary audiovisual media. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) is a prominent example of a multimodal adaptation that retains Shakespeare's original dialogue while placing it in a modern, urban setting. Through the integration of cinematic elements such as visuals, music, performance, and camera work, the film recontextualizes figurative language and enhances its accessibility for modern audiences (Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala, 2019; Gibbons, 2020).

The use of multimodal discourse theory, which explores how meaning is produced through the combination of different semiotic modes, provides a productive framework for analyzing such adaptations. Scholars like Jewitt (2020) and Serafini (2019) have emphasized how visual and auditory components can interact with language to shape meaning, making multimodal analysis especially relevant in educational contexts where students benefit from varied modes of input.

Although previous research has explored Shakespeare's use of figurative language and the role of film in literary education, there remains a lack of focused studies that investigate the semantic functions of similes and metaphors in multimodal film adaptations. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how such expressions are transformed through cinematic techniques for pedagogical purposes. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing selected similes and metaphors in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and examining how multimodal features influence their semantic interpretation and effectiveness in classroom instruction.

By adopting a semantic and multimodal perspective, this research contributes to the fields of literary studies, linguistics, and media-based pedagogy. It also responds to the practical need to make Shakespeare's complex language more accessible and engaging for students in today's diverse learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Figurative Language in Shakespearean Literature

Similes and metaphors are central elements in Shakespeare's literary style, serving to express deep emotions, highlight thematic tensions, and construct vivid imagery. These rhetorical devices allow abstract ideas such as love, fate, and conflict to be translated into relatable experiences through comparison and symbolism. As defined by Kövecses (2020), metaphors function as cognitive tools that shape the way individuals perceive and understand reality. In Shakespeare's works, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, metaphors and similes intensify emotional and psychological dimensions of characters by linking their inner states to external images.

In educational contexts, understanding figurative language remains one of the main obstacles for students engaging with Early Modern English. This is due not only to linguistic distance but also to shifts in cultural relevance and interpretive conventions (Paul & Elder, 2019). Modern readers often misinterpret or overlook metaphorical layers embedded in Shakespeare's language, which highlights the need for contextual and semantic scaffolding in teaching practices (Leech, 2020; Culpeper, 2021).

Semantic Analysis and the Interpretation of Metaphor

Semantic analysis plays a key role in decoding figurative expressions by investigating both literal and connotative meanings. As emphasized by Goddard (2021), semantics enables a deeper understanding of how meaning is shaped through language, context, and conceptual frameworks. Theoretical contributions such as Fauconnier and Turner's (2020) "Conceptual Blending Theory" help explain how multiple cognitive domains interact to generate metaphorical meaning.

When applied to Shakespeare's language, semantic theories offer insights into how similes and metaphors operate on both a linguistic and symbolic level. They reveal how meaning is not static but evolves depending on historical, social, and communicative contexts (Taylor, 2022). Therefore, teaching figurative language

through a semantic lens allows students to appreciate both the structural and interpretive richness of Shakespearean texts.

Film Adaptation and Multimodal Interpretation

The transformation of Shakespeare's texts into film introduces additional semiotic modes that expand how meaning is conveyed and interpreted. Adaptation studies suggest that film serves not merely as a translation of literary works but as a recontextualization that reflects new artistic, cultural, and pedagogical objectives (Elliott, 2020). Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* exemplifies this approach by integrating classical dialogue with contemporary visuals, performance, and sound design, allowing viewers to experience figurative language in a multisensory way.

Multimodal discourse theory provides an effective framework to study how figurative language is supported or modified through non-verbal channels. According to Bezemer and Kress (2020), multimodality examines how meaning is constructed across various modes such as image, gesture, speech, and spatial design. In a filmic context, metaphorical language is reinforced visually and aurally, making abstract expressions more accessible to diverse learners (Lim, 2021; Serafini & Gee, 2020).

Furthermore, research by Walsh and Simpson (2022) supports the claim that multimodal media can bridge the comprehension gap for students engaging with classical texts. When figurative expressions are presented alongside corresponding imagery or soundscapes, students are more likely to understand and retain meaning. Thus, combining semantic analysis with multimodal interpretation enhances the pedagogical value of Shakespearean film adaptations.

Teaching Figurative Language through Film

Integrating film into literature instruction can significantly improve students' engagement, especially when dealing with complex poetic language. According to Marsh and Dallacqua (2019), the combination of visual and auditory stimuli enables learners to decode symbolism and metaphor with greater ease. In the case of Shakespeare, where figurative expressions are often dense and abstract, cinematic adaptations can provide essential cues to meaning.

In sum, existing literature supports the educational use of film to illuminate Shakespeare's language. However, few studies focus specifically on the semantic functions of similes and metaphors in multimodal adaptations. This study aims to fill

that gap by analyzing how these literary devices are preserved, reinterpreted, or expanded through the film medium, offering both theoretical insights and practical strategies for teaching Shakespeare's language.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the semantic and multimodal representation of similes and metaphors in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to explore how language constructs meaning within complex cultural texts, especially when interpretation involves visual and auditory dimensions (Silverman, 2021). The approach focuses on understanding how Shakespeare's figurative language is preserved, transformed, and recontextualized in cinematic form, and how these transformations contribute to the comprehension of meaning in educational contexts.

Data for this study consisted of selected scenes from all five acts of the film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) that featured rich figurative expressions, particularly similes and metaphors. A total of 30 expressions were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on those with strong poetic imagery, thematic relevance (e.g., love, conflict, fate), and clear visual reinforcement in the film. The corresponding lines from Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet* play were also used for textual comparison and semantic grounding. Selection criteria included frequency of figurative usage, narrative significance, and the extent to which the cinematic adaptation provided multimodal cues to enhance understanding.

The research was conducted in three main stages. The first stage involved the identification and classification of figurative language. This step required transcription and close reading of selected scenes to isolate and categorize expressions as similes or metaphors. The second stage was a semantic analysis, focusing on the literal and figurative meanings of each expression. This analysis drew on contemporary semantic theories, such as contextual meaning construction (Goddard, 2021) and the theory of metaphor as conceptual mapping (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2021). The third stage involved multimodal analysis, examining how visual, auditory, and performative elements in the film influenced or clarified the meaning of each figurative expression.

This stage applied a multimodal discourse framework that highlights the interplay between language and other semiotic modes (Newfield, 2022; Cope & Kalantzis, 2020).

The inclusion of multimodal analysis was essential to understand how meaning is expanded or shifted in adaptation. Film elements such as camera angles, color palettes, character gestures, and soundtracks were analyzed to determine how they supported or reinterpreted the original figurative meaning. This aligns with the view that multimodal texts require layered interpretation beyond linguistic analysis alone (Bezemer & Kress, 2020).

By integrating semantic interpretation and multimodal analysis, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on how similes and metaphors function within both textual and visual domains. This dual lens not only enhances literary understanding but also addresses practical pedagogical challenges in teaching Shakespeare's language to modern learners.

RESULT

Findings

The first act of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), directed by Baz Luhrmann, contains a notably high concentration of figurative language, which serves to foreground the emotional intensity and underlying social conflicts among the characters. Dominant themes such as violence, loyalty, romantic idealism, and psychological unrest are articulated through a range of similes and metaphors adapted from Shakespeare's original dialogue. These expressions not only convey the characters' inner experiences but also establish the dramatic tone of the narrative.

The cinematic adaptation introduces visual and auditory enhancements that reinforce the semantic weight of these figurative elements. For example, the chaotic confrontation at the gas station and the vibrant depiction of the Capulet party provide contextual visual cues that deepen the audience's interpretive engagement. Through these multimodal techniques, the film recontextualizes Shakespeare's language, rendering it more accessible and resonant for contemporary viewers. This section identifies and analyzes selected similes and metaphors from Act 1, focusing on how the film retains the poetic function of the original text while simultaneously adapting its expressive impact for modern audiences.

Table 1. Figurative Language and Visual Context in Act 1

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
Sampson	Draw, if you be men.	Metaphor	Challenges masculinity through violence
Tybalt	What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?	Metaphor	Refers to Montague men as cowardly deer
Tybalt	Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death.	Metaphor	Tybalt identifies himself as death
Tybalt	I hate the word [peace], as I hate hell, all Montagues...	Simile	Compares hatred of peace to hatred of hell
Benvolio	Part, fools! Put up your swords; you know not what you do.	Metaphor	Calls aggressors foolish for fighting
Romeo	Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs.	Metaphor	Describes love's elusive, intangible nature
Romeo	Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes.	Metaphor	Love as fire purified in affection
Romeo	Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears.	Metaphor	Love as an ocean fed by sorrow
Romeo	A madness most discreet, / A choking gall and a preserving sweet.	Metaphor	Love as paradox: pain and pleasure
Benvolio	At thy good heart's oppression.	Metaphor	Romeo's sadness as a physical weight
Romeo	She'll not be hit / With Cupid's arrow.	Metaphor	Rosaline is immune to love
Romeo	O brawling love, O loving hate...	Metaphor	Paradox of emotions in love
Lady Capulet	Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face.	Metaphor	Compares Paris to a book
Lady Capulet	To beautify him only lacks a cover.	Metaphor	Juliet as the perfect book cover
Mercutio	If love be rough with you, be rough with love.	Metaphor	Love personified as a physical force
Mercutio	You are a lover; borrow Cupid's wings...	Metaphor	Love gives flight or joy
Mercutio	And soar with them above a common bound.	Metaphor	Being in love lifts you above the ordinary
Romeo	Under love's heavy burden do I sink.	Metaphor	Love as a weight pressing Romeo down
Romeo	Is love a tender thing? It is too rough, / Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn.	Simile	Compares love to a thorn (painful, dangerous)
Mercutio	Dreams are the children of an idle brain.	Metaphor	Dreams as offspring of a lazy mind
Romeo	O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!	Metaphor	Juliet's beauty outshines the lights
Romeo	It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear.	Simile	Compares Juliet's beauty to a jewel on dark skin
Romeo	So shows a snowy dove trooping with	Metaphor	Juliet as a pure dove

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
	crows.		among unattractive women
Romeo	Did my heart love till now?	Metaphor	Questions previous feelings; real love just began
Juliet	You kiss by th' book.	Metaphor	Romeo kisses formally or by-the-rules

Source : Research Data, 2025

In Act 2, the narrative focus of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) shifts from themes of conflict toward the development of romantic intimacy between the two protagonists. This act is marked by an increased use of expressive figurative language, particularly metaphors and similes, which serve to articulate the intensity and purity of Romeo and Juliet’s emotional connection. The well-known balcony scene, in particular, features a series of lyrical comparisons in which love is depicted as light, wings, and the vastness of the sea natural elements that symbolize freedom, depth, and transcendence.

These figurative expressions are central to the portrayal of idealized youthful love, capturing both its emotional intensity and its poetic quality. Luhrmann’s adaptation preserves the original Shakespearean dialogue while enhancing its semantic resonance through visual and auditory elements. The interplay between language, *mise-en-scène*, and performance enriches the audience's understanding of the metaphors, allowing the emotional significance of the text to be more effectively conveyed to contemporary viewers. This section highlights selected instances of figurative language from Act 2 and examines how their meanings are reinforced or reimagined through multimodal cinematic techniques.

Table 2. Figurative Language and Visual Context in Act 2

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
Romeo	With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these walls;	Metaphor	Love gives Romeo the strength to climb over the Capulet wall
Juliet	My bounty is as boundless as the sea,	Simile	Compares her generosity in love to the limitless sea
Juliet	My love as deep; the more I give to thee,	Simile	Continues sea metaphor to show the depth of her affection
Friar Laurence	These violent delights have violent ends.	Metaphor	Warns that intense passion can lead to tragic consequences
Friar Laurence	Therefore love moderately: long love doth so;	Metaphor	Advises that steady love is more enduring

Source : Research Data, 2025

Act 3 serves as a critical turning point in *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), marked by escalating violence and intensifying emotional conflict. The figurative language used in this act adopts a markedly darker tone, reflecting central themes such as fate, mortality, and impulsive decision-making. Metaphors articulated by characters like Mercutio and Romeo underscore the inevitability of tragedy and the characters' diminishing control over their circumstances. For instance, expressions related to death and misfortune signal a shift from romantic idealism to existential crisis.

Juliet's figurative language in this act reveals a deep internal conflict as she grapples with the contradiction between her personal affection for Romeo and her loyalty to her family. Her metaphors illustrate emotional turbulence and highlight the moral ambiguity she faces in the aftermath of Tybalt's death. Through these expressions, Shakespeare does not merely ornament the dialogue but uses metaphor as a vehicle to explore complex psychological and ethical dimensions of character development.

Luhrmann's cinematic interpretation intensifies these meanings through visual and auditory cues, reinforcing the semantic depth of the original text. The integration of dramatic lighting, musical score, and actor performance serves to heighten the emotional weight of the figurative language, making the tragic trajectory more accessible and impactful for contemporary audiences. This section analyzes key metaphors in Act 3, demonstrating how both textual and cinematic elements contribute to a deeper understanding of character motivation and thematic development.

Table 3. Figurative Language and Visual Context of Act 3

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
Mercutio	They have made worms' meat of me.	Metaphor	He is dying and refers to his body becoming food for worms.
Romeo	O, I am fortune's fool!	Metaphor	Expresses how fate has manipulated him into tragedy.
Juliet	Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!	Oxymoronic Metaphor	Reveals her emotional conflict over loving Romeo despite his actions.

Source : Research Data, 2025

In Act 4 of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the narrative shifts to Juliet's psychological response to the arranged marriage with Paris, which she perceives as a profound personal crisis. Her desperation leads her to seek counsel from Friar Laurence, initiating a series of events that reflect her resolve to subvert societal expectations. The figurative

language used throughout this act is rich in metaphors that express themes of fear, isolation, resistance, and symbolic death.

Juliet’s dialogue is dominated by imagery related to darkness, burial, and entombment, signaling her willingness to undergo a form of living death in order to remain faithful to Romeo. These metaphors reflect her internal struggle between conforming to familial pressures and asserting her individual agency. The language also conveys an escalating sense of emotional urgency and foreshadows the tragic resolution of the narrative.

Luhrmann’s adaptation enhances these metaphors through cinematic techniques that emphasize Juliet’s vulnerability and determination. Dim lighting, constrained camera framing, and the stark atmosphere of Friar Laurence’s cell visually parallel the metaphorical weight of entrapment and death present in Juliet’s speech. This integration of verbal and visual modes reinforces the semantic impact of the figurative language and makes the character’s psychological state more accessible to a contemporary audience. This section examines selected metaphors from Act 4 to illustrate how language and cinematic elements converge to express Juliet’s existential dilemma and heighten the play’s dramatic tension.

Table 4. Figurative Language and Visual Context of Act 4

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
Juliet	"O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris, / From off the battlements of any tower."	Metaphor	Juliet expresses her desperation to avoid marrying Paris, willing to risk death.
Juliet	"Or bid me go into a new-made grave / And hide me with a dead man in his shroud..."	Metaphor	She dramatizes her fear by comparing marriage to Paris with death.
Juliet	"Give me, give me! O, tell me not of fear."	Metaphor	Juliet dismisses fear, choosing agency over passivity.
Friar Laurence	"Take thou this vial, being then in bed, / And this distilled liquor drink thou off."	Symbolic metaphor	The sleeping potion symbolizes a false death and rebirth.
Juliet	"Love give me strength, and strength shall help afford."	Personification/Metaphor	Juliet personifies love as a source of inner power.

Source : Research Data, 2025

Act 5 of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) presents the narrative’s tragic resolution, centering on the irreversible consequences of the protagonists’ decisions. In this final act, the use of figurative language becomes increasingly focused on themes of death, fate, and the transcendent nature of love. Both Romeo and Juliet employ poetic metaphors and similes that elevate their deaths beyond mere personal tragedy, framing them as acts of devotion that preserve the purity of their bond beyond temporal constraints.

Metaphors such as “Here’s to my love” and “O happy dagger” function not only as expressions of romantic fatalism but also as symbolic gestures that aestheticize and ritualize death. Through these utterances, the characters reframe mortality as a gateway to eternal unity. Such expressions encapsulate the duality of love as both redemptive and destructive, illustrating how intense emotional commitment can result in irreversible loss.

Luhrmann’s cinematic techniques further amplify the metaphorical weight of these moments. The use of symbolic props, dim lighting, slow pacing, and close-up framing during the death scenes accentuates the solemnity and poetic resonance of the dialogue. These multimodal elements enable the film to visually manifest the figurative language, thereby enhancing the audience’s emotional engagement and interpretive clarity. This section analyzes key figurative expressions in Act 5, emphasizing how language, symbolism, and cinematography converge to underscore the emotional gravity and finality of the play’s conclusion.

Table 5. Figurative Language and Visual Context of Act 5

Character	Quotation	Type	Scene Context
Romeo	I will lie with thee tonight.	Metaphor	He intends to die and be reunited with Juliet in death.
Romeo	Here’s to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary!	Metaphor	He views the poison as a faithful means to end his life for love.
Juliet	O happy dagger!	Metaphor	She personifies the dagger as a joyful instrument of reunion in death.

Source : Research Data, 2025

The analysis reveals that figurative language, particularly similes and metaphors, serves a fundamental role in articulating emotion, shaping character identity, and reinforcing major themes in *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). These figurative expressions make abstract emotional states such as love, anger, sorrow, and internal conflict more concrete, thereby supporting students’ comprehension of the layered meanings in

Shakespeare's language. Characters including Tybalt, Romeo, and Benvolio demonstrate distinct figurative speech patterns that reflect their psychological profiles and relational dynamics. For instance, Tybalt's aggressive tone contrasts with Romeo's introspective and poetic tendencies.

The cinematic adaptation directed by Baz Luhrmann further enhances the impact of these literary devices through visual and auditory amplification. The use of symbolic imagery, stylized cinematography, music, and performance intensifies the semantic effect of the original metaphors, making their meaning more accessible and emotionally resonant for modern audiences. In Acts 2 and 3, oxymoronic phrases such as "brawling love" and "violent delights" highlight emotional contradictions and introduce learners to rhetorical nuance within the text. Meanwhile, Acts 4 and 5 emphasize metaphors related to death, destiny, and confinement, imbuing the narrative with symbolic depth and reinforcing its tragic dimension.

From an educational perspective, employing film as a medium to teach figurative language provides a multimodal learning experience that caters to varied learning preferences. It supports deeper literary interpretation, fosters empathy and critical thinking, and promotes media literacy skills. Importantly, this approach maintains the integrity of Shakespeare's poetic style while bridging the linguistic and cultural distance between historical texts and contemporary learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the semantic functions of similes and metaphors in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), highlighting how Shakespeare's figurative language is preserved and reinterpreted through a contemporary cinematic lens. The findings demonstrate that metaphors and similes are not merely ornamental but serve as essential tools for conveying emotional complexity, developing character identity, and reinforcing central themes such as love, conflict, fate, and mortality. Through a combination of semantic analysis and multimodal interpretation, the study reveals how figurative expressions—such as love as fire, smoke, or the sea—are rendered more accessible and meaningful through the film's visual, auditory, and performative elements.

Luhrmann's adaptation demonstrates that film can function as a pedagogical bridge between classical literature and modern learners. By preserving the integrity of Shakespeare's original text while enhancing comprehension through multimodal cues, the film provides educators with a valuable resource for teaching complex literary devices. The integration of language, imagery, sound, and gesture enriches student engagement and deepens interpretive understanding, particularly for those encountering Shakespeare for the first time.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited in scope to the analysis of one film adaptation and a selected range of figurative expressions. Future research could expand by comparing multiple adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* or exploring how students from different educational backgrounds respond to multimodal instruction of Shakespearean language. Additionally, incorporating classroom-based investigations would offer empirical insights into how film-based semantic analysis can enhance literary comprehension in diverse learning environments.

In conclusion, the study affirms the educational value of analyzing figurative language through film and supports the continued exploration of multimodal approaches in the teaching of classical texts.

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