

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Literature is a form of art in any collection of written work that serves to give knowledge and to entertain, such as novels, prose, drama, and poetry, which indicates that literature serves as a medium for expressing ideas in written form. Literature is written text that is characterized by the careful use of language, which includes features such as metaphors, beautiful sentences, elegant syntax, rhyme, and alliteration that are aesthetically pleasing to read or intended by the author to be read aesthetically and are deliberately open to interpretation (Cindy, 2019).

One form of literature is song. Although songs are generally regarded as musical works, their lyrics function as written texts that convey meaning, emotion, and narrative. This is in line with Ammer (in Fadilla et al., 2023), who defined a song as a piece of vocal music, and its lyrics are the written version of the song. Song lyrics are often used to convey the performer's emotions, stories, and experiences. They can bring up a wide range of feelings, such as joy, memories, or even grief.

Meanwhile, grief is a normal emotional, physical, and psychological reaction to loss, often because of death or any other event that involves sorrow, yearning, or even madness as an adaptation process to a new reality. According to the American Psychological Association, grief is the anguish experienced after a significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person, that differs from

bereavement and mourning. In short, grief is the response to loss. There are five stages of grief as the response to loss, according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Moving on with life after losing someone special is not simple. They go through those five stages to reach the acceptance phase.

In literary texts, grief is often depicted not as a static condition but as an emotional journey that continues to evolve. Chatterjee (2025) argues that literature can assist individuals in processing their emotions and understanding their psychological struggles. Likewise, music and song lyrics provide a powerful medium for expressing and coping with grief, as they combine emotional language with personal narratives that frequently wrap up in the use of figurative language.

Figurative language was commonly found in the songs' lyrics. The function of figurative language in song is to make the lyrics sound poetic while infusing the deep meaning intended by the songwriter. The use of figurative language differs from literal language. According to Perrine (1956), figurative language is a language that cannot or should not be interpreted literally, which is in line with Heller (Heller, 2011), who states that words in literal phrases indicate what they mean based on the dictionary or standard usage, whereas words in figurative expressions imply that they add more layers of meaning. So, based on the explanation above, the five stages of grief may be inferred in the song's lyrics, which use figurative language in them. One of the singers as well as songwriters that use this kind of technique is Sufjan Stevens. Therefore, I want to study the

use of figurative language to represent the five stages of grief in Sufjan Stevens' selected songs in the album *Carrie & Lowell*.

I categorize previous studies into three groups: data about the singer's album, figurative language analysis, and the five stages of grieving analysis. The Five Stages of Grief analysis was the basis for several earlier studies, including "Five Stages of Grief in the Song Burn from Hamilton the Musical: A Psycholinguistic Approach" by Novia and Widianingtyas (2023). "Analysis of Five Stages of Grief in the Album Ballads 1 by Joji" by Pilomonu (2024); "Exploring Grief Through Music: Analyzing the Five Stages in Jungkook's "Shot Glass of Tears" by Putri (2025); and "Five Stages of Grief: The Connotative Meaning in Song Lyrics of Taylor Swift's Album The Tortured Poets Department (TTPD) The Anthology" by Tyas (2024).

Other previous studies were based on the figurative language analysis from Tanjung and Septiadi (2025) in their research entitled "Investigating Figurative Language Use in the Selected Songs of the 'Wicked: For Good' Musical Fantasy Film"; from Pandji et al. (2025), entitled "Analysis of Figurative Language in Anne Marie Songs"; from Oktalisa (2025), entitled "An Analysis of Figurative Language in Taylor Swift's Album (The Tortured Poets Department)"; and from Gea et al. (2025) in their study entitled "An Analysis of Figurative Language in Sabrina Carpenter's Song Album 'Short N' Sweet'."

Lastly, previous studies were based on the singer's albums, which are from Picker (2021) on his study "A Conceptualization of Sufjan Stevens's Bereavement Process as Seen in his Album, Carrie and Lowell, Through Several Contemporary Mechanisms for Grief and Bereavement" and from Harten (2018)

entitled "Call Me Queer: Queer Theory and the Soundtrack of Call Me by Your Name."

The studies mentioned focus either on figurative language in song lyrics or on the representation of the five stages of grief separately. However, none of them specifically analyses how different types of figurative language are used to represent the five stages of grief in songs. The most similar previous study was titled "A Conceptualization of Sufjan Stevens's Bereavement Process as Seen in His Album, *Carrie and Lowell*, Through Several Contemporary Mechanisms for Grief and Bereavement" because it discusses four of the five songs in this study and analyzes how they show Sufjan's process of bereavement. The difference lies in the theory of the grief process that the writer of that study used, which does not mention the theory used in this study at all. The previous study applies contemporary mechanisms of grief and bereavement from some experts, whereas mine applies Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief theory as its primary analytical lens, which leads to a different interpretation and conclusion. This study creates a more organized and sequential understanding of grief representation by systematically mapping figurative language onto particular emotional stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, using the Five Stages framework. Also, that previous study focuses only on the verse level, while this study goes deeper, to the figurative level. As a result, the conclusions drawn in this research emphasize how metaphors, imagery, and symbolism function as linguistic elements that construct and embody each stage of grief. The benefit of taking figurative language and the five stages of grief together could give a deeper understanding of how language could represent one's complex feelings regarding

their process of bereavement. Besides the differences, this study also uses the same methods and theories as previous studies on figurative language and the five stages of grief. This study will use theories of figurative language by Lawrence Perrine and the five stages of grief by Kübler-Ross. The method that I choose to analyze is qualitative descriptive. Therefore, this study fills in the gap by presenting an identification and interpretation of figurative language used in Sufjan's songs and how it represented the five stages of grief experienced by the singer himself, which has not been specifically discussed in previous studies.

1.2. Research Questions

Based on the background of the study above, the researcher developed two main research questions as follows:

1. What types of figurative language are used in Sufjan Stevens' selected songs from the album *Carrie & Lowell*?
2. How does the figurative language represent the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) in Sufjan Stevens' selected songs from the album *Carrie & Lowell*?

1.3. Purpose of the study

Based on the research question, the objective of this study is to:

- 1.1) To identify the types of figurative language used in the selected songs.
- 1.2) To analyze how the figurative language used in the lyrics of Sufjan Stevens's selected songs represents the five stages of grief.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study will focus on identifying and analyzing the five stages of grief that appear in the selected song lyrics from the *Carrie & Lowell* album by Sufjan Stevens. I chose the five stages of grief instead of the seven stages of grief, which is Kübler-Ross's revised version of the five stages of grief, due to time constraints. This study is restricted to the lyrics or verbal elements only, excluding the images or symbols present in their respective video clips. In addition, I also limits the focus of this analysis to the biographical aspect of the singer only to explain the figurative languages, excluding the historical and sociological aspects in which the songs were produced that might shape the songs. According to Benson (1989) in his paper entitled "Steinbeck: A Defense of Biographical Criticism," biographical criticism stands as a valid analytical approach on its own, without the need to incorporate historical or sociological perspectives. Lynn (1994) similarly recognizes biographical criticism as a distinct critical approach that operates independently from other schools of analysis. This is reinforced by Bosworth in The Daily Texan (2015), who mentioned that this album is the autobiographical product of Sufjan's mourning. I use Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory, which consist of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

1.5. Significances of The Study

This study is expected to be beneficial both practically and academically. This study offers a deeper understanding of how grief, loss, and mourning are expressed through lyrical elements such as metaphors, symbolism, and simile. The findings may help students and readers appreciate song lyrics not only as

musical compositions but also as meaningful literary works that reflect human emotional struggles. Academically, this study is expected to give knowledge to future researchers who are interested in analyzing psychological themes in music, particularly those focusing on grief, trauma, and emotional healing. It is also expected to enrich academic discussions on the intersection between literature, psychology, and popular music

