

Exploring the Figurative Language through Confessional Discourse in Madeline Miller's *Circe*

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Abstrak

Studi ini menyajikan analisis kualitatif atas novel *Circe* karya Madeline Miller, menyelidiki peran bahasa kiasan dalam monolog batin pengakuan diri sang protagonis. Dengan bersandar pada teori bahasa kiasan (Perrine, 1982), fungsi-fungsi pengakuan (Mandziuk, 2001), dan wacana pengakuan (Mills, 1997), penelitian ini menggali bagaimana perangkat-perangkat linguistik ini membentuk makna dan menegosiasikan kekuasaan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa perangkat seperti metafora, simile, personifikasi, dan sejenisnya merupakan bagian tak terpisahkan dari fungsi terapeutik, didaktik, dan interogatif dalam pengungkapan diri Circe. Perangkat-perangkat ini memungkinkannya untuk mengartikulasikan pergulatan internal yang kompleks, memproses trauma, dan mempertanyakan sistem patriarkal serta ilahi yang menindasnya. Analisis ini menyoroti pola naratif berulang di mana pengakuan-pengakuan Circe memetakan perjalanannya dari posisi marginalisasi dan ketidakberdayaan menuju agensi dan aktualisasi diri yang signifikan. Transformasi ini ditandai oleh evolusi penggunaan bahasanya untuk mendefinisikan kembali keberadaannya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa bahasa kiasan bukan sekadar hiasan, melainkan alat fundamental untuk rekonstruksi identitas. Bahasa kiasan adalah wahana utama bagi Circe untuk mensubversi peran yang ditentukan untuknya, menegaskan kehendaknya, dan mencapai jati diri yang kuat terlepas dari validasi eksternal.

Kata Kunci: bahasa kiasan, wacana pengakuan, fungsi, Circe

Abstract

This study provides a qualitative analysis of Madeline Miller's *Circe*, investigating the role of figurative language in the protagonist's confessional inner monologues. Drawing on theories of figurative language (Perrine, 1982), confessional functions (Mandziuk, 2001), and confessional discourse (Mills, 1997), the research explores how these linguistic devices shape meaning and negotiate power. The findings show that devices like metaphor, simile, and personification and the like are integral to the therapeutic, didactic, and interrogatory functions of Circe's self-revelations. They enable her to articulate complex internal struggles, process trauma, and question the patriarchal and divine systems that oppress her. The analysis highlights a recurring narrative pattern where Circe's confessions map her journey from a position of marginalization and powerlessness toward one of significant agency and self-actualization. This transformation is marked by her evolving use of language to redefine her existence. The thesis concludes that figurative language is not merely ornamental but a fundamental tool for identity reconstruction. It is the primary vehicle through which Circe subverts her prescribed role, asserts her will, and achieves a powerful sense of selfhood independent of external validation.

Keywords: figurative language, confessional discourse, function, Circe

1. INTRODUCTION

Confessional discourse is a type of discourse taken in a form a narrative in which the speaker engages in a closely bonded revelation of one's personal experiences, feelings, and conflict within oneself. Commonly found within the spectrum of self-examining voice that exposes one's own vulnerabilities and struggles, thus creating a sense of transparency within oneself. As Foucault (1978) once

mentioned, confession functions as a ritualized form of discourse that allows individuals to "extract truth from the self," therefore revealing hidden thoughts and feelings while simultaneously reinforcing social norms and power structure. Confessional discourse might not as prominent as the other discourse model, mainly due to its limited appearance in which only encompasses in autobiographies, memoirs, and literature where a first-person narratives dominates. The previous notion is then

supported by Lanser (1992) in which he notes that confession which taken in the form of narrative writing functions as a “vehicle for self-reflection and identity formation,” commonly used by the marginalized in order to assert one’s dominance and redefine one’s own perception.

Although confessional discourse is more often than not related with non-fictional genres of writing, it can also appear in fictional works where the characters involve in downward spiral of emotional wrestling which consist of the characters doing personal reflections, admitting vulnerabilities, weakness, and even guilt. Mills (1997) highlights how confessional discourse within fiction often provides insight into “underlying power dynamics and social pressures,” particularly through the lens of marginalized identities. In linguistic discourse analysis, confessional discourse has become a vital subject for examining how language conveys vulnerability, self-reflection, and personal transformation. As Lakoff and Johnson (2008) suggest, metaphor is not merely a literary device but a fundamental mechanism of thought. They propose that metaphor shapes the way we understand and interact with the world. This conceptual metaphor theory suggests that figurative language reflects and reinforces cognitive and emotional frameworks, which in turn influence the tone and meaning of communication.

Metaphor—and figurative language in general is a gate in which open up to myriad possibilities of meaning to a writing. Figurative language—such as metaphors, similes, and personification—has the unique ability to convey complex emotions and abstract concepts in ways that literal language cannot, as what Perrine (1982) said, “language that uses figures of speech, a way of saying one thing and meaning another.”. This allows for a richer understanding of the protagonist's self-reflections, identity struggles, and emotional transformations in *Circe*. Additionally, figurative language likely plays a significant role in shaping the protagonist's confessional function. It amplifies the therapeutic, didactic, and interrogatory aspects of Circe's narrative, allowing her inner voice to communicate both vulnerability and resilience.

Through her frequent introspections, Circe’s narrative unpacks both societal constraints and individual agency, offering an in-depth view of how language conveys internal struggles. For instance, Circe’s confessions about her own power, guilt, and exile reveal the limitations imposed upon her as a powerful woman in a patriarchal

society. According to Mills (1997), confessional discourse in such contexts underscores the intersection of power and vulnerability, as it uncovers how societal biases can shape an individual's self-conception and voice. Miller has mentioned her admiration for Circe’s character in interviews, noting how she sought to highlight the misogynistic forces that led to Circe’s isolation as society’s response to a woman with power and autonomy—a theme often explored through confessional narrative techniques.

Circe’s self-disclosures provide rich material for linguistic analysis of confessional discourse. By analyzing its literary device fused with linguistic elements such as confessional discourse, this study will explore how Circe’s narrative conveys her internal struggles, self-revelation and identity struggles, capturing her attempts to reconcile her divine and human qualities in a male-dominated world. As Foucault (1978) suggests, confessional discourse serves as a form of self-revelation that both illuminates personal truths and challenges societal frameworks, making *Circe* an ideal subject for examining the intricate relationship between language, gender, and power.

Numerous studies that are relevant to this topic are employed to strengthen this research, such as a research done by Bahar & Ariyanti (2020). The research utilized a suicide note as the main data to analyze the function of hedging/hedges expression used in the suicide note to pictures the note’s certainty or uncertainty with confessional discourse as its theoretical framework; this research helps enrich future research regarding the connection between linguistics device in a confessional discourse topic.

Furthermore, a study of confessional discourse conducted by Nistiti (2019) demonstrated how presupposition contribute to confessional discourse which conveys the main idea of a power-sharing agreement in a speech within the context of feminism.

In addition to the previous aforementioned studies, a research written by Rakmasari (2024) shown how Sara Mills’ Confessional Discourse is being used as a theoretical framework in a fictional feminist literary works with abortion as the main issue of the context—as abortion per se, seen as a big problem in a patriarchal society.

Beside the previous confessional discourse studies, there is also a study done by Zolkifli & Hani (2024) which

examines figurative language used in songs within the theme of feminism using Perrine's theory of figurative language, it is believed that employing figurative language in any sort of medium—in this case, songs—can help to advocate and reinforce shared feminist beliefs while constructing a bridge of connection and a beautiful symphony. However, limited attention has been given to how these elements interact within how the language being used fictional confessional discourse.

Despite these valuable insights, there is a notable gap in examining how these elements interact within one another. This research aims to fill this gap by combining the analysis of figurative language in Madeline Miller's *Circe* with Sara Mills' confessional discourse, thus contributing a nuanced understanding of confessional discourse in literary works. This thesis examines the confessional discourse in *Circe*, focusing on how the protagonist uses figurative language to reflect her internal struggles.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Figurative language is a crucial element in both linguistic and literary analyses, providing deeper layers of meaning and emotional resonance. Scholars have long emphasized its role in communication as it presumably shapes our perception, influences thought processes, and enhances literary and everyday language. Perrine (1982) defines figurative language as "language that uses figures of speech, a way of saying one thing and meaning another," highlighting its ability to enrich text by adding depth and emotional impact. Based on Perrine (1982), he classifies figurative language into twelve categories: simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, synecdoche, metonymy, symbolism, allegory, paradox, hyperbole, understatement, and irony. Meanwhile, in this short article format, only two of the most prominent will be shown and elaborated; that is being simile and metaphor.

a. Simile

A comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as", helping readers visualize and understand the similarities between different things.

b. Metaphor

A direct comparison between two unlike things without using "like" or "as", purposely adding layers of meaning by associating two unlike things.

CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

Confessional discourse involves the speaker's intimate revelations of personal experiences, emotions, and internal conflicts. Scholars such as Foucault (1980) describe it as a mechanism for self-disclosure, often associated with a power dynamic where the speaker feels compelled to confess. This form of discourse frequently appears in autobiographies, memoirs, and fictional narratives where first-person perspectives dominate.

In linguistic studies, confessional discourse is significant for analyzing how language reveals vulnerability and self-reflection in one's confession. Although it is not stated explicitly in his book, Morin (2004) suggests that inner speech can serve as a cognitive tool for self-reflection and problem-solving, helping individuals access self-information and build a self-concept, functions as a tool for introspection and identity negotiation which very much linear with the concept of confessing especially within the context of confessional discourse. This aligns with Madeline Miller's *Circe*, where the main protagonist does a lot of inner monologues which serve as confessions of her struggles, questions and transformations.

CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE MARKERS

Although Sara Mills (1997) in her book never mentioned any lexical pattern that serves as a marker of a confession, however, Mills (1997) emphasize more of contextual marker and broader structuring of utterances instead (though Mills did not name it 'contextual markers' either) which mean she underline the pattern based on the situation, the content of speech, and the role of the speaker.

a. First Person Pronoun

All confessional utterances are anchored entirely in the first person point of view using first person pronoun (I, and My), becoming the most prominent linguistic markers out of all. This pattern automatically places the reader straight into the confessor's mind, offering a much intimate and deeper understanding her subjective experiences. It indicates the confessor as the primary object of their own observation, staying true to the essence of self-examination of confessional discourse.

b. Compare and Contrast

Based on Mills (1997) comparing and contrasting is a key part of the paragraph structure that makes Alice Thornton's confession a confessional discourse. In Alice Thornton's diary, she directly compares her immense physical suffering to what she believes she truly deserved. She writes that her pain "was nothing to that which I have

deserved from the hand of God". This act of comparison minimizes her actual hardship and, by contrast, magnifies the mercy of God for not giving her the greater punishment she feels she earned. Mills (1997) stated that Thornton's writing works to "force these problems to become, despite everything, signs of God's goodness and mercy rather than his malevolence". This is an explicit contrast. Thornton is actively choosing to interpret her suffering in one way (as a sign of mercy) over another (as a sign of cruelty). This contrast is the central transformative work of the confession.

c. Cause and Effect

Cause and effect is another crucial structural element that, according to Sara Mills' analysis (1997), makes a confession a confessional discourse. The narrative is built upon chains of cause and effect that operate on both a physical and a spiritual level. In accordance with the previous notion, the structure of cause and effect also present and is a part of crucial element of confessional discourse. In Alice Thornton's diary, she confessed the "hard childbirth of my son" causes her to become "lame almost a quarter of a year" implying a physical suffering. This physical suffering then causing her to seek "into alignment with God and hence a position of strength" Mills (1997). The act of aligning with God is the cause, while the result of in gaining personal power is the effect.

CONFESSIONAL FUNCTION

The act of confessing in confessional discourse has its own function and attributes, as stated by Mandziuk (2001) discusses the concept of tone within confessional discourse. She emphasizes how each confessional function can reveal underlying power dynamics and social norms, as well as the emotional state of the speaker. Mandziuk (2001) categorizes confessional function to help analyze how confessions are delivered and perceived into three, namely:

a. Confessional Discourse as Therapeutic

Confessional discourse as therapeutic focuses on the healing and cathartic effects of revealing personal experiences and emotions. This type of discourse allows the speaker to process and release emotional burdens, leading to a sense of relief and emotional well-being.

b. Confessional Discourse as Didactic

Confessional discourse as didactic aims to teach or impart moral lessons and wisdom through the

speaker's experiences. The speaker shares personal stories to convey messages, values, and lessons learned, often with the intent to educate or guide others.

c. Confessional Discourse as Interrogatory

Confessional discourse as interrogatory involves the speaker examining and questioning their own actions, motives, and beliefs. This type of discourse encourages self-examination and critical reflection, often leading to greater self-awareness and understanding.

POWER NEGOTIATION

According to Mills (1997) one can gain power though one is in powerless situation, which affirm the previous notion that power is not permanently fixed as there is a way to negotiate it though one might not as powerful as the head of the authority. For instance, in her book, Mills (1997) provides the example of secretaries who, through "verbal dexterity," can negotiate a more powerful position in their interactions with their bosses, forcing them to use polite and deferential language. Similar to what she exemplified on her book, a study done by Savitri *et al* (2025) analyzed how in the ancient Javanese text *Serat Cethini* that the female characters while often adhering to cultural norms on the surface, adopt strategies of negotiation to resist oppressive domestic situations. They use "cautious behavior and careful choice of words" to navigate power imbalances. The study highlights how one character, after being treated as a powerless object, negotiates her role by taking command of an army, demonstrating her value as a subject, before strategically bestowing the final victory on her husband to maintain harmony.

All of the aforementioned notion can be concluded into, that eventually there will be any form of resistance, as stated "Where there is power there is resistance," meaning no power dynamic is one total domination, as the potential to challenge it is always present within the relation itself. This can be done through the action of challenging the subject-object position, this approach examines who gets to speak (the subject) and who is spoken about (the object), revealing how power is exercised through narrative roles.

3. METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach to conduct a deep analysis of the figurative language used in confessional discourse in Madeline Miller's *Circe*. This study focuses on textual elements that demonstrate how figurative language shapes the confessional tone and contributes to the construction of meaning within the protagonist's

monologues in Madeline Miller's *Circe*. Given that the narrative text serves as the primary data source, an in-depth description and explanation are essential to clearly present the story's context and the study's findings. Consequently, this research adopts descriptive qualitative research methods, which aim to provide a detailed and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is particularly valuable for exploring complex social phenomena, uncovering hidden meanings, and obtaining in-depth insights into specific contexts. Additionally, qualitative data are utilized to deliver a thorough and specific interpretation of the figurative language in the text.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. The Frequency of Figurative Devices in the Selected Passages

Types of Figurative Devices	Data	Freq
Simile	[3], [5], [6], [8], [9], [13], [17], [25], [28], [34], [36], [40], [41], [43], [47]	15
Metaphor	[7], [10], [11], [14], [16], [19], [22], [24], [26], [29], [39], [44], [45]	13
Personification	[1], [4], [12], [21], [23], [30], [32], [37], [46]	9
Hyperbole	[15], [18], [35], [42]	4
Symbolism	[2], [31], [49]	3
Apostrophe	[27]	1
Synecdoche	[20]	1
Metonymy	[33]	1
Irony	[38]	1
Paradox	[48]	1
Total		49

There are 49 datum found scattered around eight passages with simile being the most frequent one (fifteen datum) and allegory and litotes are the least ones; both are not present in the passages. However, this article will only examine two of the most prominent devices from the selected passages, which is simile and metaphor; taken from each of passages which represents different themes throughout the novel.

a. Simile

In passage 1—Circe's early life— represented by datum [3], in sentence '**...that it would pass through me, like a falling smoke**'. The simile, is used to compare her experience with an abstract concept in order to help the reader visualize how Circe's new experience amazes her deeply. The sentence '**like falling into smoke**' is deliberately said to convey Circe's deepest existential fear which

is that she cannot be physically harmed or distinguished.

Since passage 3 (the early exile life) is relatively short, the simile is in datum [17]. Relatively simple explanation on why Circe used this comparison of '**...as a bow is bent to an arrow**,' as Circe gain significant power mid-passage, she now has the ability to exert control upon the world, the comparison of 'bend the world' and 'as a bow' meaning she can do it with precision and potentially impactful. The same thing goes for passage 5 (the new beginning of witchcraft), also consisting of only one simile; which can be found in datum [28]. In datum [28] Circe compares the flowers' power to a divine being thus '**worshipped like a god**' emphasizing its absolute authority.

In passage 7 (the burden of motherhood), the simile in datum [41] as stated '**He fell like a toppled stone**' and '**staring wildly back at me like a cornered beast**' is used to compare Circe's son's behavior over something terrible, '**fell like a toppled stone**' means Circe's son fell head first and made clanking sound like a stone hitting the floor.

Ultimately, in passage 8 (the embracing of mortality), the simile can be located in datum [47]. In datum [47] there is a unique way to picture a way of saying goodbye by Circe through the usage of simile in the phrase "**shines in me like the last rays of the sun before they drown in sea**" by comparing her departing divinity soul as "**last rays of the sun**" indicating a once powerful being that slowly getting weaker and weaker like "**[the sun] before they drown in the sea**".

b. Metaphor

In passage 2—Circe's early life—represented with datum [10] in sentence '**my luminous sister Pasiphaë**' functions as the likeliness of her perfection since birth, since this is Circe's inner thought; this very sentence high likely happened due to Circe's self-loathe and make herself look small by using an extravagant vocabulary in order to contrasting her own dimness.

Passage 3 with the theme of early life in exile, represented with datum [16], in datum [16], Circe deliberately branding herself '**I left no prints, I did no deeds**' to convey her lack of impact and purpose within her community, as if she existed without truly being. Passage 5 (the beginning of Circe's witchcraft

mastery) is in datum [29]. **'The only thing [the flower] in all the world you could be certain would not turn against you'** it suggests that the flower is a symbol of loyalty, trustworthiness, and absolute reliability in divine world which filled with betrayal, war, and chaos.

Fast forward to passage 7 and 8—with the theme of the burden of motherhood and the embracing of mortality, respectively—represented by datum [39] and [45]. Datum [39] came up as metaphorical phrase, stated **'I was angry, burning hot'**. The aforementioned phrase was using the adjective; **'hot'** to imply the immense tense and the heat at the moment, in datum [39], Circe uses the metaphor in order to purely capture the imagery of her madness. Meanwhile, in passage 8 datum [45] as stated in **"This is what it means to swim in the tide, to walk the earth and feel it touch your feet"** it is not that Circe don't know how to swim nor walk but instead Circe refer **'to swim'** and **'to walk'** as mortal being, as someone who can get hurt by doing so, as something fragile, so real.

Across the selected passage, Circe's confession consistently revealing its confessional function both explicitly and implicitly. These confessional function reveals Circe's ongoing process of self-identify, vulnerabilities, and struggles in which according to Mandziuk (2001) divided the function of confession into three; namely, **didactic, interrogatory, and therapeutic**. By using figurative language in her confession, Circe adds a slight more sentimental value to it, rather than just plain straight out of her mind type of confession.

Through her confession in which employing first person narrative, this encourage readers to lean onto the confessor, feel empathy, and recognizing similarities within one's own life, this type of confessional function called (1) **therapeutic function**. Circe done this confessional function in order to gain the reader's empathy by confessing her fault in the past, and also her shortcomings when faced obstacles during her journey.

(2) **Didactic function**, this type of function can be seen multiple times in Circe's confession; quite similar with the previous function, in which the speaker confesses the obstacles they stumble upon during their life, however this function acts as the 'aftermath' of the previous function, which is functions as a way to teach or impart moral lessons and wisdom through the speaker's experiences; as Bahar (2020) mentioned "The confessor could be a mediator between the readers and their life experience". Circe's confession caught repeatedly uses this function to 'make a better version of herself' as she put her past doings into her present perspective with better understanding of how things works.

(3) **Interrogatory function**, a confessional function which involves the speaker examining and questioning their own actions, motives, and beliefs. In her confessions, Circe adds some rhetorical question about herself and her surroundings, her motive of rhetorically questioning herself is none other than to encourage self-examination and critical reflection within herself, which by then lead herself to greater self-awareness and understanding.

Lastly, when it comes to **power negotiation**, Mills (1997) stated that confession is "perhaps the discourse which displays the operation of power most clearly". It involves submitting oneself to a relation of power to whoever the interlocutor is. In the aforementioned findings Circe indicates losing power in the beginning of each confession, this concept of losing power is when—according to Mills theory which draws upon Foucault—"those who confessed and displayed themselves as **compliant subjects**, in the process constructed themselves as those compliant subjects." (Foucault, 1979c, as cited in Mills, 1997), she also states that when the **subject is turned into a "case"** in the process of confessing, and also when the confession is used to construct the speaker as mentally ill or unstable, and to attribute blame to them for their own difficulties.

The corresponding findings suggested that Circe checks all of the boxes, she turned herself into a **compliant subject** by **admitting herself as a 'case'** due to her difficulties within her confession; what that means is that Circe's shortcomings and 'stupidity' is internalized by herself which in return she can analyze what is wrong and what she supposed to do in the future to make it right using the act of confession. This act of ever-changing nature in Circe's is a form of resistance on its own which can also be found in the study done by Wardani et al (2024) which analyzed the movie "Enola Holmes", it reveals how Enola's portrayal as an active agent of change, intelligence, and empowerment is central, encouraging viewers to reconsider traditional gender roles and advocate for equality.

Circe's acknowledgement to make her life 'right' is when exactly Circe gains power within her confession, Mills (1997) mentioned that the act of confessing can generate "a certain amount of resistance to oppression," and Circe showed it poignantly. According to her, a confessor can gain power when, one's compliance becomes their source of strength and when their act is subversive. In accordance with Alice Thornton's diary (Thornton, 1658, as cited in Graham et al, 1989) that is mentioned in Sara Mills' book (1997), Mills argues that by constructing herself as a devout and conforming religious subject, Thornton was adopting a "position of some strength" within her society; meanwhile Circe was adopting a "position of some strength" by constructing herself as a literal goddess, an immortal, and a witch with 'weapon' of mass destruction within her arm reach. Circe's act can be categorized as subversive because of how the way she live her immortal life, she does not want to be chained by the societal constraint of divine being—she wanted to be free, to feel

alive—that is the reason on why she becoming a mortal by the end of the story; just like Thornton, “The very fact of a woman ‘speaking out’, albeit within the seemingly private sphere of the diary, is in itself, given the constraints of the seventeenth century, highly subversive” as what Mills (1997) suggest.

5. CONCLUSION

The research findings revealed ten out of twelve types of figurative devices are being used in the selected data of Circe’s confession based on Perrine’s theory (1982) namely; metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, synecdoche, irony, apostrophe, symbolism, metonymy, and paradox. With the other two—litotes and allegory can be concluded with either those two are too rarely occurred, or it is not suitable with Madeline Miller’s writing style, or it is simply not found in the eight selected passages. Each selected data then consist of at least one type of confessional function; namely didactic, therapeutic, and interrogatory function based on Circe’s needs and goals within her confession. The function of the three acts accordingly and is very much in-line with the main framework of confessional function.

In addition to the previous notion, within Circe’s confession also consist of power dynamic in which Circe can be seen losing and gaining power through her confession. These three corresponding pillars form a solid base of understanding each confessions meaning and context. Circe’s use of figurative language within her inner monologue contributes to the depth of the confessional discourse. Rather than just a surface-level interpretation of each figurative device, figurative language as a whole helps to reveal more detailed meaning by using cross-reference. For example what Circe states in chapter seven can still contextualize her statement/inner-monologue in the previous chapter and it also works the other way around; thus creating meaning in much broader sense.

6. SUGGESTION

This study might provide new information for future researchers regarding study of both figurative language and confessional discourse. It is expected for future researcher to expand the scope of this thesis into much broader theme and subject matter; for example, future research could undertake more comprehensive textual of all relevant confession in Circe, which then allow broader empirical basis for claim of recurrence across the entire novel.

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