

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS IN LANA DEL REY'S "YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL"

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings contained in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey. Song lyrics, like poetry, are a form of literary work rich in layered meanings that go beyond their literal definitions. This makes them a highly relevant object for semantic analysis. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with content analysis technique, focusing on identifying words and phrases in the lyrics that carry both denotative and connotative meanings. The object of this study is the full lyrics of "Young and Beautiful," which was written by Lana Del Rey and Rick Nowels and released in 2013 as part of the soundtrack for the film *The Great Gatsby*. The theoretical framework used is based on Geoffrey Leech's classification of meaning, particularly conceptual (denotative) meaning and connotative meaning, as well as supporting theories from Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007) in *Semantics: A Coursebook*. The results of this study show that the lyrics contain numerous words and phrases with significant denotative meanings that serve as the literal foundation of the song, while at the same time carrying deep connotative meanings related to themes of love, fear of aging, existential longing, and the human desire for unconditional affection. Words such as *young*, *beautiful*, *soul*, *diamonds*, and *sun* are found to carry particularly rich connotative layers. This study concludes that Lana Del Rey uses language strategically to create emotional depth through the interplay of denotative and connotative meaning.

Keywords: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, semantics, song lyrics, Lana Del Rey

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a medium for expressing emotions, values, and artistic experience. In literary works such as poetry and song lyrics, language is used in its most concentrated and intentional form. According to Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007), semantics is the study of meaning in language, and it cannot be separated from words because language itself functions as a symbolic system.

Song lyrics occupy a unique position in literary study. They share structural and linguistic qualities with poetry — including the use of figurative language, rhythm, and

carefully chosen diction — while simultaneously functioning as a form of popular culture accessible to a wide audience. This makes song lyrics a particularly valuable object for semantic analysis, as the meanings embedded in them often operate on multiple levels simultaneously.

"Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey, released in 2013 as part of the soundtrack for the film *The Great Gatsby*, is one such song. Its lyrics are remarkably rich in both literal and figurative language, exploring themes of love, mortality, beauty, and existential fear. The song's central question — "*Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?*" — operates powerfully on both denotative and connotative levels, making it an ideal subject for semantic analysis.

The study of denotative and connotative meaning in song lyrics is important because it reveals how artists use language to communicate meaning beyond the surface level. As noted by Setiani (2020), the use of connotative or figurative language in literary works creates an aesthetic effect and enables the writer to convey something indirectly, adding layers of meaning that enrich the reader's or listener's experience.

Research Questions

Based on the background above, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What denotative meanings are found in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey?
2. What connotative meanings are found in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey?

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Identify and describe the denotative meanings contained in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful."
2. Identify and describe the connotative meanings contained in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semantics

Semantics is one of the branches of linguistics concerned with the systematic study of meaning. Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007) define semantics as the study of meaning in language, emphasizing that it cannot be separated from the words themselves because language is characterized as a symbolic system. Linguistic semantics, more specifically, is the study of how languages organize and express meaning.

In the context of communication, meaning is what the sender expresses and conveys in their message to the receiver. According to Leech (as cited in Umagandhi & Vinothini, 2017), semantics can break down "meaning" into seven types: denotative or conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, reflected meaning, affective or emotive meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. Of these seven, this study focuses specifically on denotative and connotative meaning, as both are most prominently and richly reflected in song lyrics.

Denotative Meaning

Denotative meaning is identified as the central aspect of word meaning. It is the literal or actual meaning of a word — the same as its dictionary definition — which is generally agreed upon by speakers of a language. Isfandiyary (as cited in Zuhdah & Alfain, 2020) defines denotation as the literal meaning of a word that has only one specific meaning; in other words, it is the basic, objective meaning of a word.

Arifin and Tasai (as cited in Tudjuka, 2018) further explain that denotative meaning has explicit meaning according to what it actually is. It is commonly understood as the meaning based on the results of direct experience through sight, smell, hearing, or feeling. Therefore, denotative meaning concerns objective, factual information and is also known as conceptual meaning — dealing with the core meaning of an expression.

For example, the word "*young*" denotatively refers to a person who is at an early stage of life. The word "*beautiful*" denotatively means something that is aesthetically pleasing in appearance.

Connotative Meaning

Connotative meaning, by contrast, refers to the personal and emotional aspect of meaning — the associations, feelings, and implications that a word carries beyond its literal definition. Elnaili (as cited in Zuhdah & Alfain, 2020) defines connotation as the wide collection of positive and negative associations that most words carry with them; it is the additional meaning or sense value contained in a word.

Kreidler (1997) further explains that connotations vary according to the experience of individuals, and because people share common experiences, some words carry shared connotations. A word is said to have connotative meaning when it carries a taste value — either positive or negative. If it has no such value, it is said not to have connotation.

In literary works, connotative meaning plays an especially important role. As noted by Setiani (2020), by using connotative or figurative language, a poem or song lyric can be seen as more beautiful and contains an aesthetic effect. It also enables the writer to convey something indirectly, enriching the listener's interpretive experience.

Song Lyrics as a Literary Object

Song lyrics share fundamental qualities with poetry as a literary form. According to Waluyo (as cited in Setiani, 2020), poetry is a literary work that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet imaginatively, using language in its most concentrated and structured form. Likewise, Sayuti (as cited in Setiani, 2020) describes poetry as a form of language expression that produces sound and rhyme and expresses emotional and intellectual experience.

Because song lyrics function as a form of poetry set to music, they are a legitimate and rich object of semantic analysis. The deliberate use of word choice, imagery, and figurative language in song lyrics makes them particularly suited to the study of denotative and connotative meaning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative research is used when the goal is to understand, describe, and interpret phenomena in their natural context without numerical measurement. A descriptive qualitative design is appropriate for this study because

its primary goal is to identify, describe, and interpret the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in song lyrics, rather than to quantify or measure them statistically.

The data in this study are words, phrases, and lines taken from the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey. More specifically, the data consists of all linguistic units—individual words and phrases—identified as carrying denotative and connotative meanings relevant to the research question. The data source is the official lyrics of "Young and Beautiful," written by Lana Del Rey and Rick Nowels and released in 2013 as part of the original motion picture soundtrack for the film *The Great Gatsby* (directed by Baz Luhrmann, 2013). The song lyrics were accessed from the officially licensed lyrics platform Genius ([genius.com](https://www.genius.com)) to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the textual data.

In accordance with the principles of qualitative research, the primary instrument of this study is the researcher herself, the human instrument. As explained by Sugiyono (2016), in qualitative research, the researcher serves as the key instrument because she directly collects, selects, interprets, and analyzes data based on her understanding of the theoretical framework. To support the researcher's analysis, several secondary instruments were also used, namely the lyrics of the song "Young and Beautiful" as the primary textual document and theoretical references—specifically Leech's classification of meaning and the supporting semantic theories of Hurford, Heasley, and Smith (2007) and Kreidler (1997)—which served as analytical lenses throughout the study.

Data were collected through a series of systematic steps. First, the complete lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" were read carefully and repeatedly to ensure a full understanding of the text. Second, words and phrases with potential denotative and connotative meanings were identified and systematically marked throughout the lyrics. Third, from the identified items, those most relevant to the research questions and most analytically productive were selected as the final data for the study.

The data were analyzed using content analysis, following five steps. The first step is reduction, where the complete lyrics are reduced to the most semantically significant words and phrases for analysis. The second step is denotative analysis, where each selected item is analyzed for its denotative meaning by referring to standard dictionary definitions and its literal function within the line. The third step is connotative analysis, where each item is examined for its emotional associations, cultural implications, and figurative dimensions within the context of the complete lyrics. The fourth step is interpretation, where the

denotative and connotative meanings are interpreted in relation to the song's overall themes of love, fear of aging, beauty, and existential longing. The fifth and final step is drawing conclusions to answer the two research questions stated in the introduction

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table presents a classification of data identified in the lyrics of Lana Del Rey's song 'Young and Beautiful.' A total of 6 data items were identified and classified based on their denotative and connotative meanings.

No	Data	Lyric Line	Word/Phrase	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
1	Data 1	<i>"Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?"</i>	Young and beautiful	Youthful and physically attractive	Conditional worth; fear of being unloved as one ages; social value tied to physical appearance
2	Data 2	<i>"Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul?"</i>	Aching soul	A spirit or inner self experiencing pain or discomfort	Emotional vulnerability; the raw, stripped-down self left when all external value is gone
3	Data 3	<i>"Diamonds, brilliant, and Bel Air now"</i>	Diamonds	A precious gemstone known for hardness, rarity, and brilliance	Wealth, luxury, elite social status; the glamorous world the speaker inhabits
4	Data 4	<i>"He makes me shine like diamonds"</i>	Shine like diamonds	To reflect light brightly like a gemstone	Feeling precious, radiant, and elevated by the power of love
5	Data 5	<i>"He's my sun, he makes me shine like diamonds"</i>	My sun	The star at the center of our solar system; source of	The emotional center of one's life; the person who gives

				light and heat	warmth, energy, and meaning
6	Data 6	"When you and I were forever wild"	Forever wild	Permanently existing in an unrestrained, natural state	Passionate, uninhibited youth; nostalgia for a time of boundless freedom and intensity

The following analysis examines selected words and phrases from the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful," presenting their denotative meanings first, followed by their connotative meanings.

"Young and Beautiful"

"Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?"

The word *young* literally refers to being at an early stage of life, characterized by physical vitality and youth. The word *beautiful* literally refers to having an appearance that is aesthetically pleasing. Together, the phrase *young and beautiful* denotatively describes a person who is youthful and physically attractive.

Connotatively, *young and beautiful* carries much deeper emotional weight. Youth and beauty in this context represent social and personal value — the qualities by which a person is deemed worthy of love and admiration. The line thus expresses a profound fear: the fear that love is conditional on physical appearance and age. The connotation shifts from a simple description of appearance to an existential anxiety about whether one's intrinsic worth will remain when external beauty fades.

"Aching Soul"

"Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul?"

The word *soul* literally refers to the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being. The word *aching* literally means experiencing pain or discomfort. Denotatively, *aching soul* refers to a spiritual self that is in a state of pain.

Connotatively, *aching soul* represents the raw, stripped-down self — a person who has lost all external value (youth, beauty, wealth) and is left with only their emotional and

spiritual core. The phrase connotes vulnerability, longing, and the fear of being unloved in one's most exposed state. It suggests that the speaker fears being seen as insufficient when she has nothing to offer but her inner, imperfect self.

"Diamonds"

"Diamonds, brilliant, and Bel Air now" "He makes me shine like diamonds"

Denotatively, *diamonds* refers to a precious gemstone known for its hardness, rarity, and brilliance. It is one of the most valuable naturally occurring minerals.

Connotatively, *diamonds* carries associations of wealth, status, luxury, and elite social standing — consistent with the glamorous, cinematic world the speaker describes in the first verse. In the second usage — *"he makes me shine like diamonds"* — the connotation shifts to radiance, transformation, and the illuminating power of love. Here, diamonds symbolize how love elevates a person, making them feel precious and brilliant in the eyes of another.

"Sun"

"He's my sun, he makes me shine like diamonds"

Denotatively, *sun* refers to the star at the center of our solar system — the source of light and heat that sustains life on Earth.

Connotatively, *sun* is a powerful metaphor for a person who is the center of another's world — the primary source of warmth, energy, and life. By calling her lover *my sun*, the speaker implies absolute emotional dependence and admiration. This usage reflects a metaphorical extension identified in semantics where a natural phenomenon is used to describe the emotional significance of a person, amplifying the depth and centrality of the relationship.

"Heaven" and "Dear Lord"

"Dear Lord, when I get to Heaven / Please, let me bring my man"

Denotatively, *Heaven* refers to the afterlife — the place in religious belief where the soul resides after death. *Dear Lord* is a direct address to God in a prayer.

Connotatively, this stanza elevates the love story to a spiritual and eternal dimension. By invoking Heaven and God, the speaker suggests that her love transcends the physical world and even death itself. This connotes a love so profound and sacred that she cannot

conceive of eternity without her partner. It also reinforces the song's central theme: the desire for a love that is unconditional and everlasting, beyond the limits of youth, beauty, and time.

"Wild" and "Forever Wild"

"When you and I were forever wild"

Denotatively, *wild* means living or occurring in a natural state; unrestrained or uncontrolled.

Connotatively, *forever wild* evokes a sense of passionate, uninhibited youth — a time of freedom, recklessness, and intensity. The phrase suggests that the relationship was once defined by unbounded energy and excitement. Combined with *forever*, the phrase connotes nostalgia for a past that felt limitless, contrasting bitterly with the present fear of loss and aging that runs throughout the song.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the denotative and connotative meanings found in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" by Lana Del Rey. The analysis was conducted in response to two research questions, and the findings are presented accordingly.

In response to the first research question regarding the denotative meanings found in the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful," this study found that the lyrics contain clear and identifiable literal meanings grounded in everyday language. The phrase young and beautiful denotatively describes a person who is youthful and physically attractive. The phrase aching soul denotatively refers to a spiritual self experiencing pain or discomfort. The word diamonds denotatively refers to a precious gemstone known for its hardness and brilliance. The word sun denotatively refers to the star at the center of the solar system. The word Heaven denotatively refers to the afterlife in religious belief, and the phrase forever wild denotatively means existing in a permanently unrestrained or natural state. These denotative meanings serve as the literal foundation upon which the deeper layers of the song are built.

In response to the second research question regarding the connotative meanings found in the lyrics, this study found that the same words and phrases carry significantly richer emotional and cultural associations that go far beyond their literal definitions. Young and beautiful connotatively expresses existential fear — the anxiety that love is conditional on physical appearance and will fade as one ages. Aching soul connotatively represents

emotional vulnerability and the fear of being unloved when stripped of all external worth. Diamonds connotatively symbolizes both social status and the radiance that love brings to a person. Sun connotatively represents the emotional center of one's life — the source of warmth and meaning. Heaven connotatively elevates the love story to a spiritual and eternal dimension, expressing a desire for love that transcends even death. Forever wild connotatively evokes nostalgia for a passionate, uninhibited youth that the speaker fears is gone forever.

Based on these findings, this study concludes that the lyrics of "Young and Beautiful" operate simultaneously on two semantic levels. On the denotative level, the language is accessible and grounded in familiar, objective meanings. On the connotative level, however, these same words carry profound emotional weight, constructing themes of unconditional love, the transience of youth and beauty, spiritual longing, and existential fear. The central question of the song — "Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?" — encapsulates this dual operation: denotatively a straightforward question about continued affection in the face of aging, and connotatively a profound meditation on whether love can truly be unconditional when physical beauty has faded.

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