

Analyzing literal and non-literal meaning in poetry: “What if” by Claudia Rankine

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Abstract

Literal language in poetry provides clarity and concrete imagery, while non-literal expressions reveal deeper psychological and cultural meanings. This combination enables readers to engage intellectually and emotionally, fostering a more profound, reflective, and empathetic experience. Using a qualitative descriptive method grounded in semantic theory, this study examines Rankine's use of metaphor, irony, symbolism, and conditional expressions to convey themes of identity, emotional conflict, and social tension. This study highlights how Rankine's layered language encourages multiple interpretations, reinforcing the emotional and thematic impact of the poems. Findings suggest that combining literal and figurative analysis in literary studies, particularly in an educational context, can enhance students' understanding and critical thinking skills. By examining how language shapes meaning, this research confirms the educational value of poetry in fostering interpretive skills and emotional awareness.

Keywords: Literal Meaning, Non-Literal Meaning, Figurative Language, Poetry Analysis

Abstrak

Bahasa literal dalam puisi memberikan kejelasan dan gambaran yang nyata, sementara ungkapan non-literal mengungkap makna psikologis dan kultural yang lebih dalam. Kombinasi ini memungkinkan pembaca terlibat secara intelektual dan emosional, menciptakan pengalaman reflektif dan empatik yang lebih mendalam. Menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang berlandaskan teori semantik, penelitian ini menelaah penggunaan metafora, ironi, simbolisme, dan ungkapan kondisional oleh Rankine untuk menyampaikan tema identitas, konflik emosional, dan ketegangan sosial. Studi ini menyoroti bagaimana bahasa bertingkat yang digunakan Rankine mendorong berbagai penafsiran, memperkuat dampak emosional dan tematik puisi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa menggabungkan analisis literal dan figuratif dalam kajian sastra, terutama dalam konteks pendidikan, dapat meningkatkan pemahaman dan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa. Dengan menelusuri bagaimana bahasa membentuk makna, penelitian ini menegaskan nilai edukatif puisi dalam mengembangkan keterampilan interpretatif dan kesadaran emosional.

Kata kunci: Makna Literal, Makna Non-Literal, Bahasa Kiasan, Analisis Puisi

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1. Introduction

Meaning often lies within the complex interaction between what is explicitly expressed and what is implied. In verse, understanding both the exact and non-literal meanings becomes essential to unlocking the more profound messages conveyed through complex and metaphorical language. Strict dialect conveys coordinate data about objects, activities, and situations, while non-literal dialect evokes feelings, thoughts, and typical associations that extend beyond surface meaning. The combination of these two levels of meaning offers readers a multi-layered encounter, engaging both learned individuals and sincere ones. Claudia Rankine, in her lyric "What If," illustrates how strict and non-literal dialect can work together to challenge discernment, incite reflection, and raise awareness of socio-political issues.

Rankine's voice has become one of the most notable in twenty-first-century verse, especially for her intrepid engagement with subjects such as race, personality, and the microviolence inherent in everyday life. Even though "What If" is less often included in compilations than a few of her more well-known works, it offers a rich landscape for examination due to its deft negotiation between stark authenticity and theoretical engagement. The sonnet starts with a straightforward scene, described in a calm and insinuating tone. In any case, as the lines unfurl, the speaker presents an array of theoretical "what if" questions that rapidly rise above the surface story, inviting readers into a realm of mental and social instability. These shifts between concrete portrayal and abstract hypothesis not only disrupt ordinary reading habits but also emphasize the ways dialect itself can both uncover and obscure meaning.

Exacting meaning, within an excellent system, can be grasped through the lens of a semantic hypothesis. According to Searle (1979), strict meaning alludes to the semantic substance a speaker is serious about communicating, specifically, governed by phonetic traditions and relevant standards. In verse, in any case, this coordinate layer of communication frequently serves as a facade underneath which more profound truths and evaluations are concealed. Revealing or interrogative sentences that appear direct on the surface may carry incongruities, enthusiastic burdens, or social commentary. In *What If*, Rankine employs seemingly neutral theoretical constructions such as "What if you were responsible for saving more..." to confront the reader with moral dilemmas and implicit accusations. These questions are not mere rhetorical embellishments; instead, they function as appeals to awareness and accountability, urging the reader to engage with uncomfortable realities.

Non-literal language operates through metaphorical and symbolic frameworks that shape how readers interpret and engage with the world. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1981) in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor is not merely ornamental but central to human thought processes. They argue that metaphor structures human experience and that much of cognition is metaphorically organized. In *What If*, the repeated use of conditional clauses serves metaphorically as a form of insistent assertion, a continuous invocation of both speaker and reader into a shared realm of possibility and speculation. Through repetition, Rankine creates a rhythmic intensity

that simultaneously blurs the lines between hypothetical reflection and existential questioning.

The authors employ metaphorical language, repetition, anaphora, and conditional constructions to create rhythm and layered meanings (The Broken Spine., 2025). Rankine's repeated use of the phrase "what if" exemplifies anaphora where repetition functions not merely structurally but also rhetorically imbues the poem with both rhythmic cadence and thematic intensity. This persistent phrase invites the reader to engage with each line not only as an isolated proposition but as part of a cumulative force. The reader is drawn into a flow of unresolved possibilities and speculative anxieties, rendering each "what if" simultaneously as a question and a declaration. This ambiguity between interrogative and declarative forms allows the poem to occupy a liminal space, interrogating reality while affirming emotional truths.

The application of metaphorical language plays a significant role in shaping readers' emotional responses. According to Gibbs (1994) metaphorical expressions tend to evoke more intense affective reactions due to the cognitive mechanism of mapping source domains onto target domains. This process enables readers to interpret abstract concepts through the lens of concrete imagery. In *What If*, Rankine strategically engages the reader in these conceptual mappings by oscillating between literal interrogatives such as "What if you never say anything..." and their metaphorical underpinnings, exemplified by lines like "the brokenness that flows beneath your savior's language." This juxtaposition fosters critical reflection on the psychological ruptures that permeate ostensibly mundane experiences. Consequently, the poem's metaphorical structure not only amplifies its emotional resonance but also exposes the implicit, often internalized, dimensions of trauma.

What makes Rankine's sonnet particularly compelling is not only its linguistic innovation but also its deep political and ethical resonance. Her use of the repeated phrase "what if" serves as a powerful rhetorical device, opening up space for imagining alternate realities and confronting uncomfortable truths. In this context, Rankine's poetic utterance enacts what (Zacharias, 2024) describes as an "affective practice of witnessing" a mode of engagement where language, voice, and embodiment operate not merely as tools of expression, but as relational forces shaped by vulnerability, care, and resistance this approach aligns with Judith Butler's notion of the "speech act of resistance," which challenges dominant norms of recognition and foregrounds lives and experiences that are often rendered invisible in public discourse. Through this lens, Rankine's invocation of "what if" becomes more than a poetic refrain; it articulates a relational and ethical demand for presence, empathy, and recognition in a fractured social landscape. Rankine changes an explanatory address into a vehicle for activism and passionate acknowledgment. According to The Broken Spine (2025) The poem's "repeated conjuring of what if" serves as a channel for underrepresented voices to request recognition. It contends that this redundancy isn't only elaborate but also politically pressing, creating a performative space in which injury, trust, and office intersect.

The tension between literal and non-literal meaning in *What If* functions to destabilize the reader's sense of certainty. By beginning with a seemingly grounded scene and gradually shifting into abstract reflection, Rankine subverts narrative expectations, resisting closure and linear resolution. This progression reflects what Berlant (2011) refers to as "cruel optimism," a condition in which what we desire is also what impedes our flourishing, highlighting the fragile realities of those marginalized by race, class, or gender. In such contexts, clarity becomes elusive, and security is always conditional. Similarly, Ahmed (2025) notes that emotions and language do not simply describe the world but actively shape our orientations toward it, often unsettling fixed identities and assumptions. Rankine's refusal to provide a resolution forces the reader to remain in uncertainty, mirroring the psychological state of vulnerability that defines many marginalized lives. In doing so, she positions language as both a tool of articulation and a source of discomfort, capable of revealing truths while also concealing or distorting them, echoing. Concept of "affective dramaturgy," where language and embodiment operate as unstable sites of care, rupture, and resistance (Zacharias, 2024).

In instructional settings, the examination of sonnets like "What If" offers significant opportunities for developing students' interpretive abilities and emotional understanding. By exploring both exact and metaphorical dialects, students are encouraged to think critically about how meaning is developed and conveyed. This double center empowers a wealthier engagement with content, cultivating not only scholarly appreciation but moreover sympathy and social understanding. Through the careful perusal of layered dialect, students learn to explore complexity, appreciate equivocality, and address suspicions. As this examination illustrates, the transaction between exact and non-literal meaning is not simply a scholarly concern, but an imperative part of how we convey meaning to ourselves and others through writing.

In what case, if Rankine does not give answers, she creates an excellent space in which questions multiply. Each "what if" acts as an opening, a gap through which feeling, memory, and theory pour forward. The poem's structure invites recursive reading, where the repetition of shapes mirrors the repetition of injury and the uncertainty of unanswered questions. Through her mind-blowing utilization of exacting symbolism and non-literal suggestion, Rankine creates content that demands engagement on multiple levels. The sonnet becomes not a fair and tasteful artifact but a location of moral reflection and enthusiastic reverberation. It is in this space between the genuine and the envisioned, the strict and the metaphorical, that Rankine's work applies its most effective impact.

As Searle (1979) clarifies, strict communication follows shared semantic traditions; however, in verse, these traditions are often exploited for more profound expression. Rankine employs exacting articulations as the section focuses on a broader range of implications. In keeping with Lakoff and Johnson's (1981) cognitive allegory hypothesis, the poem's conditional structures become conceptual representations of defenselessness, possibility, and the delicacy of character. Each theoretical clause in *What*, on the off chance that it does not simply propose a scenario, conjures a reality

formed by systemic strengths and individual histories. The reiteration of “what if” in this way becomes more than a lovely gadget; it may be a philosophical strategy for examining presence.

Additionally, as Zacharias (2024) argues that poetic language possesses the unique capacity to activate affective and embodied responses in the reader, allowing abstract or painful concepts to be felt and processed rather than understood. Claudia Rankine leverages this affective power by crafting verses that do not instruct directly, but instead invite readers to confront brutal truths through sensory and emotional resonance. Rather than offering clear explanations or moral lessons, the strength of her poem lies in its ability to provoke reflection, to gesture rather than declare, and to create space for ambiguity and personal engagement.

Ultimately, the event represents how an idyllic dialect can serve as a locus of resistance, reflection, and rationality. Rankine's integration of exacting and non-literal dialect reveals the pressures inherent in human communication and the potential outcomes for change that emerge through meaningful engagement. In a world progressively shaped by division and displacement, her work offers a glimpse into how writing can convey pain while also promoting the potential for compassion and solidarity. The sonnet reminds us that dialect is not merely clear but performative, capable of challenging standards, conjuring alter, and communicating the indescribable.

In this way, Claudia Rankine's "What's on the off chance that is not fair" isn't a poem; it could be a basic reflection on dialect, personality, and the delicacy of meaning. Through her shrewd exchange of strict and non-literal modes of expression, she develops a content that's both hint and sweeping, individual and political. The lyric challenges us to consider how we studied, what we anticipate from dialect, and how we relate to others through words. By doing so, it reaffirms the persevering control of verse to shape not only thought but also feeling, not only understanding but moreover activity.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing the close reading technique, to analyze the literal and non-literal meanings in Claudia Rankine's poem "What If." This method enables the researcher to thoroughly examine the use of poetic devices, such as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and irony, within the text (Abrams, 2018). The analysis is conducted in three main stages: (1) textual identification, which involves extracting and classifying lines or phrases based on their literal and figurative meanings; (2) semantic interpretation to explore the denotative and connotative meanings of the poem; and (3) contextual correlation, where these meanings are related to relevant social and psychological issues, particularly concerning race and identity.

To enhance validity, the study employs peer debriefing and theory triangulation from the fields of linguistics and literary studies to ensure the analysis is scientifically accountable.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The data analysis in this study is presented in the form of a poem manuscript entitled "What if" by Claudia Rankine. Data were collected through observation, and the procedures were reading, analyzing, and determining the literal and non-literal meaning contained in the poem. The following are the results of analyzing the poem "What if," grouped into several tables.

Table 1. Literal and Non-Literal Meaning Categories in the Poem
"What If" by Claudia Rankine Part I

No.	Line of the poem "What if"	Literal	Non-literal
1.	What does it mean to want an age-old call	Someone who changes and wants to return to their past identity or role	It is useless, or it means to hope for the past or something past
2.	For change, not to change	making changes that do not change it	Improving one's skills without changing them completely
3.	and yet, also to feel bullied	A person feels awakened in terms of passion and enthusiasm	and also feel awakened by getting the spirit, so that you think again
4.	By the call to change?	Means that the call has the aim of changing in terms of circumstances and others	Various questions arise about whether it can change the situation.
5.	How is a call to change named shame, named penance, named chastisement?	Questioning why change is referred to or understood in negative terms, such as shame, redemption, and punishment.	This implies that the process of personal or social transformation is often framed in a narrative of suffering, as if one must feel shame or punishment to change.
6.	How does one say what if	guessing something that hasn't happened yet	Something that is said has not happened or will not happen
7.	without reproach? The root	She completed the project without reproach from her supervisor	He lived his life without reproach, embodying integrity and honor in every action
8.	The purpose of chastisement is to make pure. The impossibility of that is that what repels is not	The act of punishment is intended to cleanse or purify, but the impossibility of that cleansing process may be the very thing that rejects or resists change.	Punishment intended to bring about improvement often creates resistance or feelings of alienation, thereby preventing the original goal of cleansing or purification from being achieved.
9.	The call for change?	It's time for someone to improve themselves.	Call for change? There must be an invitation or even a warning to make changes.

Table 2. Literal and Non-Literal Meaning Categories in the Poem
"What If" by Claudia Rankine Part II

No.	Line of the poem "What if"	Literal	Non-literal
1.	There is resignation in my voice when I say I feel myself slowing down,	When I express that my body or energy is slowing down, my voice sounds resigned or surrendered.	A feeling of emotional or mental exhaustion, where 'slowing down' is not just physical, but can also mean a loss of enthusiasm, motivation, or an overall decline in life.
2.	gauging like a machine The levels of my response.	Measure my response level mechanically or automatically, as a machine would.	I monitor my emotions like a machine, calculating every reaction instead of feeling it freely.
3.	I remain within So sore, I think there is no other way than to release	still inside himself, feeling very sick, and feeling that there was no other choice but to let go or break free.	A person who is trapped in deep pain may suffer from emotional distress, psychological distress, or internal conflict.
4.	So I ask questions like I know how	When someone asks a question, they demonstrate that they already know the answer or that they comprehend the inquiry.	Someone asks with confidence or pretends to know, even though they are not sure or do not fully understand it.
5.	In the loneliness of my questioning.	Feeling lonely with solitude, I ask questions or look for answers while sitting alone in the room.	Loneliness is a feeling of isolation when struggling with doubts and questions that are internal and difficult for others to understand
6.	What is still true is that there is not even a tremor	A state that is quiet, steady, and tranquil; there is also no movement, shaking, or disruption of any kind.	The actual truth is constant and unaffected by doubt and conflict.
7.	When one is this historied out.	A person has reached a point where history is so much a part of, or so dominant in, their life.	Emotional exhaustion is shaped by trauma, the legacy of historical wounds, both personal and collective history
8.	I could build a container to carry this being,	Carrying biological specimens or alien creatures.	Ability to cope with emotional stress
9.	a container to hold all,	Every kind of living and non-living object needs a space to call home.	Be a source of happiness, sadness, issues, or anything else for other people.
10.	Though we were never about completeness;	never related to something complete, whole, or perfect.	Rejection of the notion that human connections should be flawless.
11.	We were never to be whole.	Two people can never be perfectly one	Existential or emotional rift

No.	Line of the poem "What if"	Literal	Non-literal
12.	I stand in your considered thoughts, also broken,	stand in a thoughtful mind	as part of another person's mind, but still incomplete and foreign
13.	Also unknown, extending	The presence of someone who remains nearby	An affirmation of identity or existence, even though not physically present
14.	One sentence here, I am here.	However, things are still where they should be	Revealing the conflict between closeness and alienation between two or more people.
15.	As I have known you, as I will never know you,	Whatever happens and is revealed, choose to stay	willingness to be present amid uncertainty or possibility
16.	I am here.	I am physically here.	Present as a consciousness, an inner voice, or an identity waiting to be recognized
17.	Waiting for you	Waiting for someone	Take a conscious attitude, or face reality
18.	In the what if	What if	Being in a space of uncertainty, hope, and fear
19.	In the questions,	Indecisive and guessing	Thinking about things that may not happen, struggling with uncertainty, and guessing
20.	In the conditionals,	An assumption that is not certain to happen	In a situation full of doubt or uncertain possibilities
21.	In the imperatives, what if?	In the command word	Under pressure, demands, or life's call to action

Table 3. Literal and Non-Literal Meaning Categories in the Poem
"What If" by Claudia Rankine Part III

No.	Line of the poem "What if"	Literal	Non-literal
1.	What if over tea, what if on our walks, what if	Explain a particular circumstance or moment to conjure up the potential for a discussion or event to take place.	Essential questions, hidden pain, or emotional truths may emerge.
2.	In the long yawn of the fog, what if in the long middle	A condition of being in the middle of a mist that slowly envelops and expands	What may occur if a person is caught in a protracted stage of life that is full of uncertainty and has no end in sight?
3.	of the wait, what if in the passage, in what if	There is an element of anticipation and possibility that arises in one thing.	Existential fear and doubt that a person feels when waiting or going through a change in their life.

No.	Line of the poem "What if"	Literal	Non-literal
4.	that carries us each day into seasons, what if	carrying humans from day to day through the changing seasons	Some forces shape humans into various life conditions.
5.	In the renewed resilience, what if in the endlessness,	An unfinished or hanging question	Someone who still questions the meaning or direction of life amidst endless uncertainty.
6.	What if, in a lifetime of conversations, what if	Something that may or may not happen in all the conversations we have throughout our lives.	Various doubts, deep regrets about the meaning and impact of all the conversations that have taken place in life.
7.	In the clarity of consciousness, what if nothing changes??????	The impossibility of change, even when one has attained consciousness in a state	reflecting disappointment, doubt, or even despair, and the question arises whether awareness is enough to change reality.

3.2. Discussion

Claudia Rankine's poem *What If* presents a deceptively simple linguistic surface that conceals an emotionally charged and symbolically layered meaning. Through the theoretical lens of literal and non-literal meaning, the poem can be unpacked as a deeply affective exploration of human vulnerability, resilience, and the socio-emotional dimensions of identity.

From a literal standpoint, the text describes hypothetical or conditional situations, inquiring about what would happen if the situation were to shift, reverse, or loop back. Lines such as "What does it mean to want an age-old call" or "for change not to change" articulate feelings of confusion, longing, and an unresolved desire for transformation. On the surface, these expressions may seem straightforward. However, as Cruse (2004) emphasizes, "literal meaning" refers only to the conventional, direct understanding of a word or phrase, whereas "non-literal meaning" arises when context and intention add symbolic or emotional weight beyond the surface level.

In the context of *What If*, Rankine's poetic language transcends the literal. The line "What does it mean to want an age-old call" may denote a simple inquiry, yet connotatively it reflects a profound existential frustration. It represents a yearning for meaning or belonging that is rooted in the past, a longing intensified by experiences of social exclusion or personal loss. Similarly, the phrase "for change not to change" metaphorically alludes to the paradox of personal growth: to evolve internally while retaining one's core identity. This aligns with Leech and Short (2013) argument that figurative language allows for multi-layered interpretation, wherein the emotive and stylistic choices are central to meaning-making.

According to Simpson (2004), stylistics involves analyzing how the formal features of language contribute to literary effects. Rankine's repetition of what if throughout the

poem exemplifies this. It functions as both a structural and rhetorical device, reinforcing the theme of uncertainty and amplifying the emotional resonance of hypothetical reflection. The rhythmic recurrence mimics mental loops experienced in trauma or grief, where the mind continuously revisits unanswered questions or imagined outcomes. Furthermore, the emotional depth of the poem is evident through its deliberate ambiguity, allowing readers to interpret the text based on their personal experiences. This openness in meaning makes each reading unique, as individuals may connect with different aspects of the poem depending on their own emotional and psychological contexts. The power of the poem lies not only in its language but also in the dynamic relationship formed between the text and its reader.

Ultimately, *What If* operates not merely as a poetic composition but as a narrative of empathy, dislocation, and recovery. It resonates with those who experience displacement, yearn for coherence, or grapple with the complexities of personal transformation. The juxtaposition of literal and non-literal meaning allows the verses to transcend linguistic simplicity and engage deeply with psychological and social realities. As Powell et al. (2025) Notes in a close reading of Rankine's work, the poem "functions as a meditative terrain where emotional dissonance meets collective awareness," offering readers both personal reflection and communal solidarity. In this way, *What If* exemplifies the power of poetic language to not only describe experience but to heal through recognition and resonance.

4. Conclusion

Claudia Rankine's poem "What If" skillfully combines literal and nonliteral language to provide the reader with a potent emotional and intellectual experience. Rankine questions accepted interpretations and encourages in-depth contemplation of concepts such as identity, metamorphosis, emotional resilience, and societal conflict by employing figurative tactics, including metaphor, symbolism, and irony. The study demonstrates how non-literal terms elicit complex and subtle understandings, thereby enhancing the poem's emotional depth, while literal interpretations provide a tangible foundation. By examining individual lines, the analysis reveals that each word and phrase has both explicit and implicit meanings, enabling a range of interpretations based on the reader's cultural and emotional context. The poem serves not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a sympathetic narrative and emotional healing. Therefore, comprehending modern poetry requires a combination of literal and non-literal meaning, which may also enhance literary pedagogy by fostering critical thinking and a sense of personal connection to the work.

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