

Language, Structure and Ideology: A Discourse Analysis of Dead Stars by Paz Marquez Benitez

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between language, narrative structure, and ideology in *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez Benitez through the lens of discourse analysis. It investigates how linguistic choices, characterization, dialogue, and narrative organization construct meanings that reflect the social, cultural, and gender ideologies of early twentieth-century Philippine society. Drawing on discourse analytical principles, the study explores the ways power relations, social expectations, and individual identity are represented in the text. Particular attention is given to the portrayal of love, duty, marriage, and personal desire, revealing how language reinforces or challenges prevailing norms and values. The analysis demonstrates that the story's discourse not only shapes readers' interpretations of the characters' emotional conflicts but also exposes the ideological tensions between tradition and personal freedom during the American colonial period. The findings suggest that *Dead Stars* functions as both a literary narrative and a social commentary, illustrating how discourse serves as a vehicle for expressing cultural beliefs and ideological positions. This study contributes to literary discourse analysis by highlighting the significance of linguistic and structural features in uncovering the deeper meanings embedded in Philippine literature.

Keywords: Language, Structure, Ideology, Discourse Analysis

I. Introduction

Literature reflects the social, cultural, and ideological realities of the society in which it is produced. Beyond entertainment, literary texts serve as mediums through which authors express values, beliefs, and power relations embedded in language. Discourse analysis provides an effective framework for examining how linguistic features and narrative structures create meaning and communicate ideological perspectives. By analyzing language in its social context, discourse analysis reveals how literary works shape readers' understanding of identity, gender, class, and cultural norms. *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez Benitez is regarded as one of the earliest and most influential short stories in Philippine literature written in English. The story explores themes of love, duty, illusion, and societal expectations through the experiences of its characters. While previous studies have primarily focused on its symbolism, characterization, and feminist interpretations, fewer studies have examined how language and narrative structure work together to construct the ideological messages embedded in the text. This study aims to analyze the discourse of *Dead Stars* by examining its linguistic choices, narrative organization, and ideological representations. Through discourse analysis, the study seeks to uncover how the story reflects and critiques the social values and gender expectations of early twentieth-century

Philippine society. The findings may contribute to literary criticism by demonstrating how discourse functions as a tool for understanding deeper meanings within Philippine literary texts.

Dead Stars is a widely recognized in Philippine literature as one of the earliest examples of modern short fiction written in English. Critics often classify the story under literary realism due to its emphasis on psychological conflict, moral responsibility, and the disillusionment of romantic ideals (Lumbera & Lumbera, 2005). Benitez's narrative explores the complexity of human emotions, particularly through the character of Alfredo Salazar, whose shifting affections between Esperanza and Julia illustrate the instability of romantic desire. According to Mojares (2006), early Philippine fiction in English often reflects the tension between traditional moral expectations and emerging modern individualism, a theme clearly evident in *Dead Stars*. In addition, literary scholars note that the story critiques romantic idealism by portraying love as something that changes over time and is often influenced by illusion and memory rather than reality (Abad, 1993). The metaphor of "dead stars" symbolizes love that once appeared bright but has already lost its true existence, leaving only an afterimage.

A study titled *Historical and Cultural Context Research* by McMahon (2011) places *Dead Stars* within the context of American colonial influence on Philippine literature. The story reflects the emergence of Filipino writers who used English while exploring distinctly Filipino experiences, values, and social realities. The *Postcolonial Reading of Dead Stars* by Garcia (20215) examined *Dead Stars* through a postcolonial perspective. He argued that the story should not only be interpreted as a romantic narrative but also as a text reflecting the cultural and historical conditions of Philippine society under colonial influence.

Although numerous studies have examined *Dead Stars* from literary, feminist, psychological, and historical perspectives, limited research has integrated language, narrative structure, and ideology within a single discourse analysis framework. Existing studies often emphasize themes and symbolism without thoroughly investigating how specific linguistic features and discourse strategies contribute to the construction of ideological meanings. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that applies contemporary discourse analysis to reveal how the text reflects power relations, gender roles, and cultural values through its language and narrative design. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive discourse analysis that connects language, structure, and ideology, offering a deeper understanding of the story's social and cultural significance.

The research explores how readers construct meaning from the characters' conversations, narration, and symbolic language. Rather than focusing solely on the author's intended message, the study emphasizes the reader's role in interpreting themes such as love, indecision, regret, and social expectations. Through qualitative discourse analysis, the findings suggest that the story's language and dialogue encourage multiple interpretations depending on the reader's experiences and perspectives. The study demonstrates that meaning is created through the interaction between the text and the reader, making *Dead Stars* a significant work for reader-centered literary analysis.

This study is anchored on Louise Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory, which emphasizes that literary meaning is created through the interaction between the reader and the text and Jacobson's Formalism

allows readers to examine how its symbolism, imagery, narrative structure, and language contribute to its meaning.. Every reader may interpret *Dead Stars* differently because personal experiences, beliefs, and emotions influence the reading process. The theories support the idea that literature has multiple valid interpretations rather than a single fixed meaning.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative discourse analysis. The primary text analyzed is *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez Benitez. The analysis focuses on dialogues, narration, and symbolic expressions interpreted through Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory and Jakobson's Formalism.

Reader-Response Theory by Louise Rosenblatt examines how readers interpret the language, symbols, and interactions in the story. Rosenblatt argues that meaning does not exist solely in the text but is created through the transaction between the reader and the literary work. Therefore, readers' emotions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of *Dead Stars*.

Formalism is a literary theory associated with Russian Formalists such as Roman Jakobson. It focuses on the form, structure, language, literary devices, and artistic techniques of a text rather than the author's biography, historical background, or social context. According to Jakobson, literature achieves its artistic quality through literariness—the special use of language that makes a text distinct from ordinary communication.

Analysis and Discussion

Language

Formalism allows readers to examine how its symbolism, imagery, narrative structure, and language contribute to its meaning. Language and literariness as emphasized by Jakobson is the poetic function of language, where attention is drawn to the message itself. In *Dead Stars*, Benitez uses descriptive and poetic language that elevates the story beyond a simple love triangle. For example, the narrative contains rich descriptions of emotions, nature, and memory. The language is carefully crafted to reflect Alfredo's inner conflict and uncertainty. Rather than directly stating his feelings, Benitez presents them through subtle descriptions and reflections, creating a literary effect that encourages interpretation. This artistic use of language exemplifies Jakobson's concept of literariness because the words are chosen not merely to communicate information but to create aesthetic and emotional meaning.

In the study titled *Transitivity Analysis of Dead Stars* Managbanag and Juanillo (2025) conducted a linguistic study of *Dead Stars* using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Their analysis found that material processes (actions) dominate the story, highlighting Alfredo's decisions and emotional conflicts. The language choices in the story effectively reveal themes of love, regret, and personal dilemmas.

Symbolism as a Formal Device. The most important formal element in the story is the symbol of the dead stars. A dead star is a star that has already ceased to exist but whose light remains visible from Earth. Within the story, this image symbolizes Alfredo's love for Julia. Although he believes his feelings are real and enduring, he eventually realizes that they were merely remnants of a past illusion.

The title itself functions as a structural key to the entire narrative. The symbol unifies the story and reveals its central theme: First, love can be an illusion. Second, feelings may continue even after their source has disappeared. Third, people sometimes mistake memory or desire for genuine love. From a formalist perspective, the meaning emerges from the symbol within the text rather than from external historical or social factors. A Historical and Cultural Analysis paper Cruz-Lucero conducted a close reading of the original 1925 version of *Dead Stars*. The research connected the story to indigenous, Hispanic, and American cultural influences and examined how its historical context shaped its themes and symbolism.

Imagery and Motifs. Benitez repeatedly employs imagery related to light, stars, nature, and distance. These recurring images serve as motifs that reinforce Alfredo's emotional state. The contrast between brightness and fading light mirrors the contrast between romantic idealization and reality. The repeated references to beauty, moonlight, and the natural environment create an atmosphere of longing and uncertainty. According to Formalism, these patterns are significant because they contribute to the unity and artistic design of the text.

Irony is one of the story's most important literary devices. Throughout the narrative, Alfredo believes Julia represents a deeper emotional fulfillment. However, when he finally sees her again years later, he realizes that the passion he once felt no longer exists. This ironic ending supports the symbolism of the dead stars. The reader discovers that Alfredo's emotions survived only as memories, not as living realities. The irony strengthens the story's artistic effect and exemplifies Jakobson's emphasis on how literary techniques create meaning.

The title *Dead Stars* is a symbol and is the most important literary device in the story. A dead star may no longer exist, but its light remains visible. Similarly, Alfredo's feelings for Julia continue to shine in his memory even though they have lost their emotional reality. The symbol conveys the idea that people often hold onto emotions, dreams, or relationships that are no longer meaningful.

The literary significance *Dead Stars* is notable for its psychological realism and subtle exploration of human emotions. Rather than focusing on dramatic events, the story examines the inner workings of the mind and the complexities of romantic relationships. Its sophisticated characterization and symbolism helped establish the Philippine short story in English as a respected literary form.

The study by Managbanag and Juanillo (2025) found out that *Dead Stars* uses language to reveal character relationships and personal dilemmas. Their transitivity analysis found that the story's language emphasizes actions and choices, helping readers understand Alfredo's emotional struggle and the consequences of his decisions. Literary critics also regard *Dead Stars* as a landmark in Philippine literature in English. Grow notes that its publication in 1925 marked a turning point in the development of the Filipino short story, demonstrating a mature and sophisticated literary style.

Using Jakobson's Formalist theory, *Dead Stars* can be understood as a highly structured literary work whose meaning emerges from its internal elements. The story's poetic language, symbolism of the dead stars, recurring imagery, balanced narrative structure, characterization through contrast, and ironic ending work together to create a unified artistic whole. From a formalist perspective, the story

demonstrates how literary devices shape readers' understanding of love, illusion, and reality, making the text significant not because of external factors but because of the craftsmanship of its form.

Dead Stars presents a rich literary discourse that invites diverse interpretations. Through Reader-Response Theory, readers become active participants in constructing meaning. The story's language, symbolism, and characterization encourage reflection on love, illusion, and human decision-making, demonstrating that meaning evolves through the interaction between the reader and the text.

Structure

The narrative structure of Dead Stars is carefully organized into two major movements: First Movement is Emotional Conflict when Alfredo is engaged to Esperanza. Then, he becomes attracted to Julia. Then, he struggles between duty and desire. Second Movement is Realization after several years pass when Alfredo meets Julia again and he discovers that his feelings have vanished. Most of all, he realizes that what he once considered love was merely an illusion. This structure creates irony. Readers anticipate that Alfredo's feelings are profound, but the ending overturns that expectation. The narrative progression from attraction to disillusionment gives the story artistic coherence. A formalist reading focuses on how this arrangement of events produces meaning through contrast and revelation.

Managbanag and Juanillo (2025) used transitivity analysis to show how language reveals the characters' emotional struggles and decisions. Garcia (2015) offered a postcolonial interpretation, arguing that the story reflects broader colonial influences on Filipino identity.

Alfredo Salazar is the protagonist and the most complex character in the story. He is indecisive, reflective, and emotionally conflicted. His internal struggle drives the narrative and illustrates the human tendency to idealize what is unattainable. Esperanza symbolizes stability, loyalty, and commitment. She expects sincerity and certainty from Alfredo and represents practical love grounded in reality. Julia Salas embodies charm, mystery, and possibility. She becomes the object of Alfredo's romantic fantasies, though she never fully encourages or reciprocates his feelings. Much of her significance comes from Alfredo's perception of her rather than from her actual actions.

Through Contrast Formalism examines how characters function within the structure of the text. Benitez develops meaning through oppositions: Character Function in the Story Esperanza Stability, duty, commitment Julia Desire, fantasy, uncertainty Alfredo Conflict between reality and illusion The contrast between Esperanza and Julia creates a binary opposition that drives the narrative. Alfredo's inability to distinguish genuine love from romantic fascination becomes the central tension of the story.

The story revolves around Alfredo Salazar, a man engaged to Esperanza who becomes attracted to Julia Salas. Through Alfredo's emotional journey, the story explores themes of love, illusion, choice, and regret. Alfredo Salazar is engaged to Esperanza, a woman who represents stability and commitment. Despite his engagement, he develops feelings for Julia Salas, the sister-in-law of his friend. Alfredo becomes fascinated by Julia and begins to question his relationship with Esperanza. Although Alfredo is drawn to Julia, he eventually marries Esperanza. Years later, he encounters Julia again and realizes that the intense feelings he once had for her have disappeared. This realization leads him to understand that what he believed was love may have been only an illusion.

A Feminist Reading of *Dead Stars* by Manlapaz analyzed the story from a feminist perspective, focusing on the portrayal of women characters such as Esperanza and Julia. The study explored gender roles, expectations, and the position of women in early twentieth-century Philippine society.

Several academic studies have analyzed *Dead Stars* in terms of psychological realism and ideological meaning. Studies in literary psychology suggest that Alfredo's emotional indecision represents cognitive dissonance, where an individual struggles to reconcile desire with duty (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Other research highlights the moral dimension of the story, emphasizing how Alfredo's failure to commit reflects the consequences of emotional irresponsibility and social obligation in early 20th-century Filipino society (Fernandez, 1979). This aligns with broader ideological readings that position the story as a critique of selfish romantic pursuit over ethical commitment. Feminist readings of the text also examine the roles of Esperanza and Julia. Esperanza is often interpreted as a symbol of stability and social conformity, while Julia represents passion and emotional freedom.

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Dead Stars is a story about the difference between appearance and reality in matters of the heart. Through Alfredo's emotional conflict and eventual realization, Paz Marquez Benitez shows how people can mistake infatuation for love and become attached to illusions. The symbol of the dead stars reinforces the message that some feelings continue to shine in memory long after their true meaning has disappeared, making the story a timeless reflection on love, choice, and self-understanding.

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Ideology

The story presents a realistic view of love—showing that human emotions are complex, changeable, and often shaped by illusion rather than truth. *Dead Stars* presents a dominant ideology of realism and disillusionment in romantic relationships, emphasizing that love is not always permanent and is often shaped by illusion, time, and moral conflict.

In *Dead Stars*, the ideology centers on realism and a critique of romantic idealism, particularly in love, duty, and human desire. First is Realism versus Romantic illusion. The story challenges the idea of “true love” as something absolute and permanent. Alfredo's feelings for Julia appear intense, but they are ultimately shown as an illusion—more of a romantic memory and emotional desire than a lasting,

practical love. Second is moral responsibility and commitment. A key ideology is the conflict between personal desire and social/moral duty. Alfredo is engaged to Esperanza, yet he struggles to fully commit because of his emotional confusion, highlighting the consequences of indecision and emotional selfishness. Third is time and change in human emotion. The story suggests that feelings are not fixed. Over time, love can fade or transform, and what once seemed powerful may become distant—like a “dead star,” whose light is only a lingering memory. Fourth is illusion vs. reality. A central idea is that people often confuse emotional excitement or nostalgia with true love, only realizing the truth when it is already too late.

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Dead Stars by Paz Marquez Benítez has been widely studied for its exploration of love, illusion, and regret. One of the dominant themes of *Dead Stars* is the difference between genuine love and infatuation. Alfredo's attraction to Julia ultimately proves to be an illusion, symbolized by the "dead stars" that continue to shine despite having already burned out. The story explores how people can cling to feelings that no longer have substance, leading to regret and dissatisfaction.

A *Feminist Reading of Dead Stars* by Manlapaz (2012) analyzed the story from a feminist perspective, focusing on the portrayal of women characters such as Esperanza and Julia. The study explored gender roles, expectations, and the position of women in early twentieth-century Philippine society.

Love versus Infatuation. The central theme of the story is the difference between genuine love and infatuation. Alfredo mistakes his attraction to Julia for true love. However, when he meets her again after several years, he discovers that his feelings were temporary and superficial. The story suggests that strong emotions do not always indicate real love. Sometimes people become captivated by an idealized image rather than by the person themselves.

Illusion and Reality. The title *Dead Stars* symbolizes feelings that appear alive but have already lost their true substance. Just as light from a dead star continues to travel through space long after the star has ceased to exist, Alfredo's feelings for Julia continue to influence him even after their emotional reality has faded. This symbolism highlights how people can cling to memories, fantasies, or unrealized possibilities.

Choice and Responsibility. Alfredo struggles between duty and desire. His engagement to Esperanza represents responsibility and commitment, while Julia represents excitement and uncertainty. The story demonstrates that choices have consequences and that avoiding clear decisions can create emotional confusion and regret.

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Regret and Self-Realization. Alfredo's final realization is a moment of self-discovery. He recognizes that he had romanticized Julia and misunderstood his own emotions. This realization brings insight but also reveals the time and emotional energy he spent pursuing an illusion.

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Conclusion

Dead Stars by Paz Marquez Benitez is considered one of the earliest and most influential short stories in Philippine literature in English. It tells the story of Alfredo Salazar, a man caught between his commitment to Esperanza and his attraction to Julia Salas. The story explores themes of love, illusion, and personal choice through carefully crafted dialogue and narration. This study applies discourse analysis using Louise Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory to examine how readers interpret the language, symbols, and interactions in the story. Rosenblatt argues that meaning does not exist solely in the text but is created through the transaction between the reader and the literary work. Therefore, readers' emotions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of Dead Stars. Using Jakobson's Formalist theory, Dead Stars can be understood as a highly structured literary work whose meaning emerges from its internal elements. The story's poetic language, symbolism of the dead stars, recurring imagery, balanced narrative structure, characterization through contrast, and ironic ending work together to create a unified artistic whole. From a formalist perspective, the story demonstrates how literary devices shape readers' understanding of love, illusion, and reality, making the text significant not because of external factors but because of the craftsmanship of its form.

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