Finding metaphors in hit songs and poems

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Rihanna pictured singing in 2012. There is more poetry in pop music than many people expect. Photo by: Jørund F. Pedersen/Wikimedia.

A metaphor, as defined by Literary.net, is a figure of speech that makes an "implied or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics."

For example, "he is such a pig" is a metaphor that you might hear about someone who eats too much. A similar figure of speech is a simile. The difference between the two is that similes use words such as "like" and "as." The expression "she eats like a bird" is an example of a simile.

Take a look at the lyrics from Michael Jackson's song "Human Nature," which includes the following line:

If this town is just an apple
Then let me take a bite

In these lyrics, Jackson is referring to New York City, which is also called the Big Apple. The New York Public Library notes that the metaphor "the Big Apple" had various other meanings throughout history: "Throughout the 19th century, the term meant 'something regarded as the most significant of its kind; an object of desire and ambition." The library also notes on its website that "to 'bet a big apple' was 'to state with supreme assurance; to be absolutely confident of."

Another example of a metaphor is Elvis Presley's 1956 song "Hound Dog," which includes the following lyrics:

You ain't nothin but a hound dog Cryin all the time



Here there is the unflattering comparison to a former lover as a hound dog! The song was actually first recorded by Big Mama Thornton in 1952, a full four years before Elvis recorded his own version. Indeed, Elvis' music was greatly influenced by the blues sounds of great black artists from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

As a final example, the title of "Your Love is a Song" by Switchfoot is itself a metaphor. There are also other examples of this figure of speech in the lyrics:

Ooh, your love is a symphony
All around me, running through me
Ooh, your love is a melody
Underneath me, running to me

This comparison of love to music is chronicled throughout history. Poets and writers have often compared love to various forms of music or beautiful objects. For example, Scotland's most famous poet, Robert Burns, compared his love to both a rose and a song in the 18th century:

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,

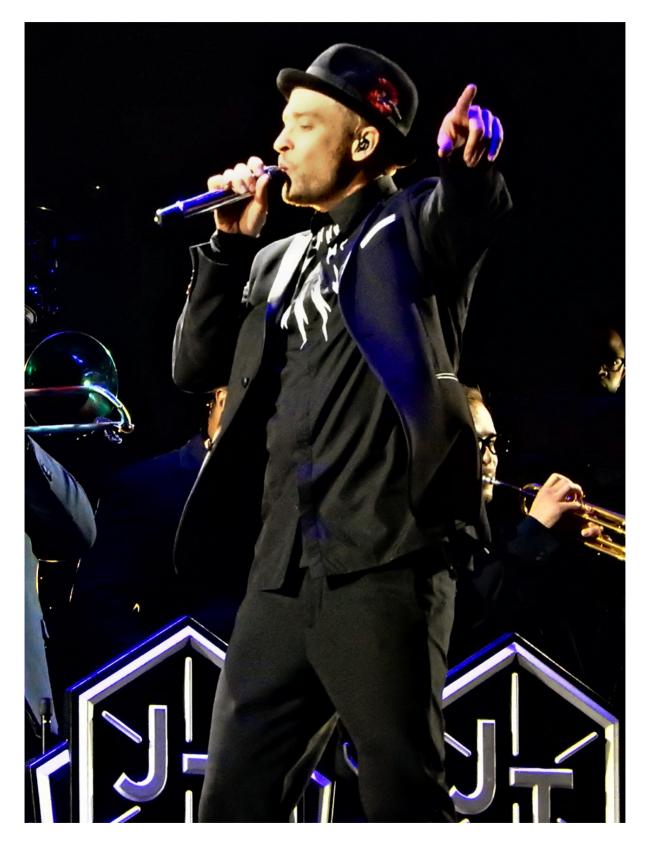
That's newly sprung in June:

O my Luve's like the melodie,

That's sweetly play'd in tune.

Metaphors and the other literary device of comparison, the simile, are very common in everyday speech, writing and music. Music is a great way to learn about both metaphors and similes. The following list features songs with metaphors.

"Can't Stop The Feeling" - Justin Timberlake



The song "Can't Stop the Feeling" by Justin Timberlake recently topped the music charts. In it he sings:



I got that sunshine in my pocket Got that good soul in my feet

The sunshine in the pocket is an implied reference to the happiness felt when the singer sees his lover dance. There is also the play on words with the word "soul," which has to do with dancing to soul music. The word also sounds like "sole," the bottom of a foot.

The sun is a common metaphor in art and writing. Shakespeare used the sun in his play "Henry IV" as a metaphor for the monarchy: "Yet herein will I imitate the sun / Who doth permit the base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world ..."

The American poet E.E. Cummings also used the sun, but to describe his feelings of love: "Yours is the light by which my spirit's born: you are my sun, my moon, and all my stars."

"One Thing" - One Direction

In the song, "One Thing," by One Direction, the lyrics include the following lines:

Shot me out of the sky

You're my kryptonite

You keep making me weak

Yeah, frozen and can't breathe

The image of Superman has long been a part of pop culture, from the 1930s comic books to many popular TV shows and films today. Kryptonite was Superman's weakness, and is commonly used as a metaphor for someone's Achilles' heel.



"My Heart's A Stereo" - Maroon 5



The title of Maroon 5's song "My Heart's a Stereo" is a metaphor. This phrase is repeated multiple times to prove its point.

My heart's a stereo

It beats for you so listen close

The image of the beating heart is infused in literature, and hasn't always meant romance. Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart" describes experiences of a man — a murderer — driven crazy by the increasingly loud thumping of his victim's beating heart. "It grew louder — louder! And still, the men (the police who were visiting his home) chatted pleasantly and smiled. Was it possible they heard not?" In the end, the man cannot ignore the beating of the heart and confesses his crime to the police.

"Naturally" - Selena Gomez

Selena Gomez's song, "Naturally," includes the following lyrics:

You are the thunder and I am the lightning
And I love the way you
Know who you are and to me it's exciting
When you know it's meant to be

This may be a pop song, but it harkens back to ancient Norse and Viking mythology, where the name of its main god, Thor, literally means "thunder." Thor's main weapon was his hammer, or in the Old Norse language, "mjöllnir," which translates as "lightning." The metaphor presents a pretty intense image for what, at first glance, seems like a light pop song.

"This Is What You Came For" - Rihanna; Lyrics By Calvin Harris



Lightning is another common metaphor, and is seen in "This is What You Came For," with lyrics by Calvin Harris. The song describes a woman as having power by referencing her ability to strike with the force of lightning and get everyone's attention:

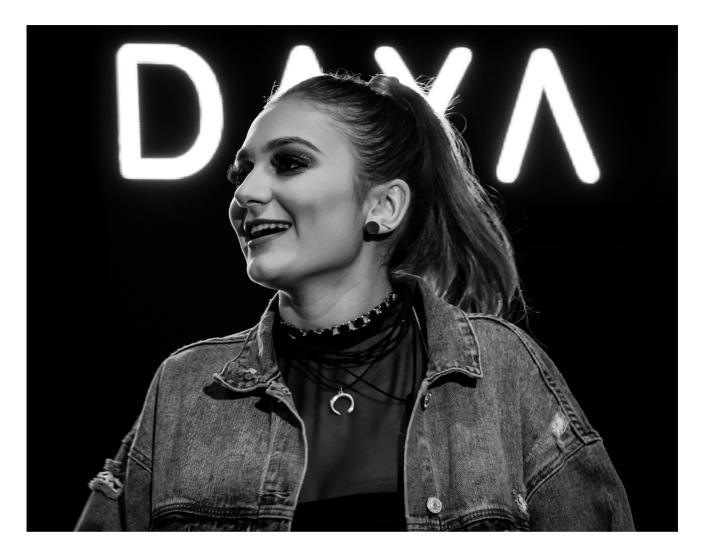
Baby, this is what you came for Lightning strikes every time she moves And everybody's watching her

Lightning is often a symbol of power, as also seen in the poem by Emma Lazarus, titled "The New Colossus," which begins:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles.

The woman with a torch of imprisoned lightning is a reference to the Statue of Liberty. The torch shows her power as an ally to those who come to the shores of America.

"Sit Still, Look Pretty" - Daya



Daya sings about not being a "puppet" in the song "Sit Still, Look Pretty." She is suggesting she does not want someone to control her, or pull her strings. She also uses a metaphor when she calls herself as a "queen" who does not want to be ruled by a "king":

I know the other girlies wanna wear expensive things
Like diamond rings
But I don't wanna be the puppet that you're playing on a string
This queen don't need a king

The use of puppets as a metaphor is also common in political science or civics classes. A puppet government is one that looks like it has authority, but is actually controlled by another power. This meaning of "puppet" is similar to the meaning of the lyrics of this song.



"H.O.L.Y." - Florida Georgia Line

The song "H.O.L.Y." by Florida Georgia Line uses angels and other religious images. However, this does not make it a religious song. Instead, the lyrics express a belief in a lover that is like a religious belief.

You're an angel, tell me you're never leaving
'Cause you're the first thing I know I can believe in

and

You made the brightest days from the darkest nights
You're the river bank where I was baptized
Cleanse all the demons
That were killing my freedom

In many literary texts, babies and young people are "angelic" because they have not been in the world long enough to do bad deeds. In John Milton's "Paradise Lost," however, it is the brilliant Angel of Light, Lucifer, who challenges God. He then falls to become Satan, the Prince of Darkness.

"Adventure Of A Lifetime" - Coldplay



Coldplay's "Adventure of a Lifetime" uses both metaphor and hyperbole, or exaggeration, in the lyrics:

Turn your magic on, to me she'd say
Everything you want's a dream away
Under this pressure, under this weight
We are diamonds

Here, a love relationship that is under pressure is compared to the natural creation of diamonds. On the Live Science website, the recipe for creating diamonds is: Bury carbon dioxide 100 miles into Earth. Heat to about 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Squeeze under pressure of 725,000 pounds per square inch. Quickly rush towards Earth's surface to cool.

The pressure will produce a diamond, which is something valuable. Coldplay suggests the same for this relationship.

"One" - U2



In U2's song, "One," the band sings about love and forgiveness. It includes the following lines:

Love is a temple Love a higher law

There's an interesting history in comparing love to the law. According to the book "Metaphor Networks: The Comparative Evolution of Figurative Language," the term "love" was considered equal to the term "law" during the Middle Ages.

Love was also a metaphor for economic debt. Geoffrey Chaucer, who is considered to be the father of English literature, wrote: "Love is an economic exchange," meaning, "I'm putting more into this (economic exchange) than you," according to the "Metaphor Networks."



Quiz

- 1 The CENTRAL idea of the article is developed by:
 - (A) including background that shows how often metaphors have been used by artists, and by including recent examples from pop artists
 - (B) explaining how metaphors and other figures of speech work, and by providing examples that are followed with interpretations
 - (C) showing how all metaphors are comparisons, and by explaining how writing and music use similar methods to express ideas
 - (D) introducing a literary definition for the term "metaphor," and by following it immediately with the example "he is such a pig"
- 2 Read the selection from the section "H.O.L.Y. Florida Georgia Line."

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What is the relationship between the excerpt from the song and the paragraph that follows?

- (A) The excerpt shows how the writer created a vivid metaphor based on religious language; the paragraph provides interpretations of biblical metaphors in classic texts.
- (B) The excerpt provides a metaphor for the writer's personal religious experience; the paragraph gives another example of classic Christian allusions.
- (C) The excerpt includes a metaphor that describes the writer's intense love; the paragraph mentions the religious imagery often used in literary classics.
- (D) The excerpt highlights the religious overtones used by the writer; the paragraph shows how religious metaphors often appeared in classic texts.



3 Read the following selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-9].

In these lyrics, Jackson is referring to New York City, which is also called the Big Apple. The New York Public Library notes that the metaphor "the Big Apple" had various other meanings throughout history: "Throughout the 19th century, the term meant 'something regarded as the most significant of its kind; an object of desire and ambition.'" The library also notes on its website that "to 'bet a big apple' was 'to state with supreme assurance; to be absolutely confident of."

What does the author convey by referring to the metaphor "the Big Apple"?

- (A) the sense that "the Big Apple" is an apt metaphor for New York
- (B) the sense that few people know the origins of common terms
- (C) the sense that metaphors can take on new meanings
- (D) the sense that New York is proud of its heritage
- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "One Thing One Direction."

The image of Superman has long been a part of pop culture, from the 1930s comic books to many popular TV shows and films today. Kryptonite was Superman's weakness, and is commonly used as a metaphor for someone's Achilles' heel.

Which of the following phrases from the section provides a context clue to the meaning of the word "Achilles' heel"?

- (A) out of the sky
- (B) my kryptonite
- (C) making me weak
- (D) image of Superman