

Using popular songs to teach similes

By Melissa Kelly, ThoughtCo.com on 11.07.17

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Level **MAX**



Singer and actress Ariana Grande performing at a concert at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, New Jersey, in 2014. Photo by: Scott Roth/AP.

A simile is a literary device, a figure of speech in which a direct comparison of two unlike items is used to reveal a much greater meaning:

A simile draws resemblance with the help of the words “like” or “as.”

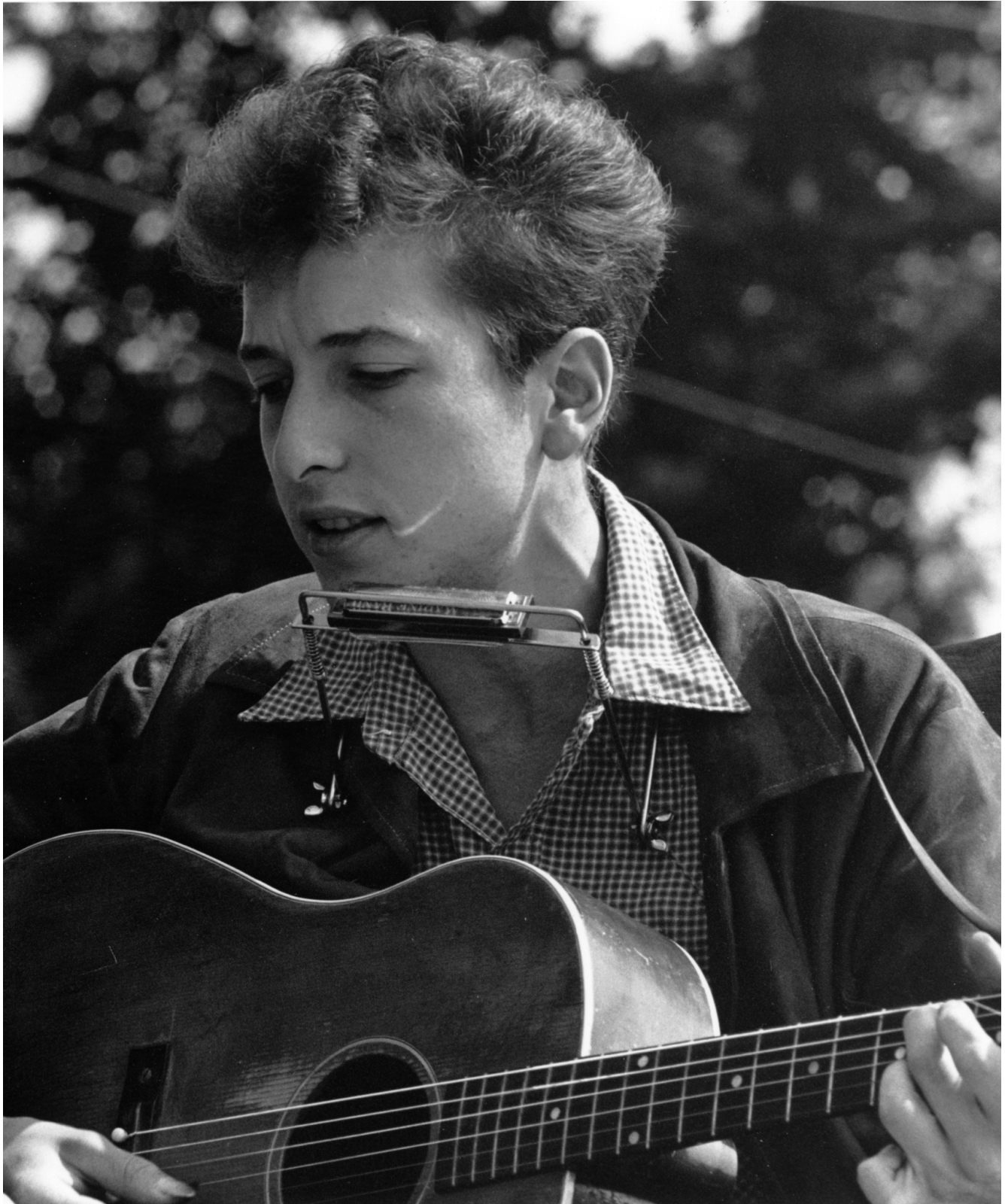
For example, "You're as cold as ice" is a simile in a song that has the same title by the rock group Foreigner:

You're as cold as ice

You're willing to sacrifice our love

In this example, the lyrics are not referring to the weather; instead, these lyrics compare a woman to ice to illustrate her emotional state. There are many classic folk, pop and rock 'n' roll songs from the 1960s-1990s that can be used to teach the concept of simile.

The use of a simile in a title is in the 1965 song by Bob Dylan, who most recently won the Nobel Prize in literature. His song "Like a Rolling Stone" is about a woman who has fallen from wealth to despair:



How does it feel

To be without a home

Like a complete unknown

Like a rolling stone?

Arguably, the song's title may be the most famous simile in all of modern pop and rock music. And now that Dylan is a Nobel Prize Laureate, the song — and the singer — can be a great jumping-off point for a class discussion of similes, the very meaning of literature and more.

Additional songs with the word "like" used as a simile in a title include:

Like a Prayer - Madonna

Man! I Feel Like a Woman! - Shania Twain

Smells Like Teen Spirit - Nirvana

Like a Hurricane - Neil Young

Another classic song lyric with similes that uses "like" as a direct comparison is Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water" (1970). This song uses a simile to describe how friendship is an emotional bridge when there are problems:

I'm on your side

When times get rough

And friends just can't be found

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down



Still another song that has a simile in the title is "Like a Prayer" by Madonna (1989). This song combines religious language and sexual imagery through a number of similes in the lyrics including:

Like a child you whisper softly to me
You're in control just like a child
Now I'm dancing
It's like a dream, no end and no beginning
You're here with me, it's like a dream

Finally, Elton John composed an ode to Marilyn Monroe, "Candle in the Wind" (1973). The song, co-written by Bernie Taupin, uses an extended simile of comparing a life to a candle throughout the song:

And it seems to me you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Never knowing who to cling to
When the rain set in

The song was re-crafted into a slightly altered tune, "Goodbye England's Rose," which John performed at the 1997 funeral of Princess Diana. Even though this was nearly a quarter-century after the original, the similarity of the lyrics — and the popularity of the sequel, which shot to No. 1 in many countries — demonstrates the enduring power of a well-crafted simile.

Students should not confuse a simile with another figure of speech called a metaphor. The difference between the two is that only a simile uses the words "like" and "as" in making a direct comparison. Metaphors make indirect comparisons.

Metaphors and similes are very common in music which provides a high-interest tool to teach students about both concepts. Previewing the song lyrics, however, is critical. Often the reason for figurative language such as a simile is to avoid using more explicit language. Several of the similes in song lyrics — or the other lyrics in the song — can be for mature students only.

A teacher may also want to preview the song's video to make sure that the visual content associated with the song, which could be familiar to the students, is appropriate for the classroom. The list below has been previewed for high school students. If there is questionable material, it is noted.

The following contemporary songs all include similes:

1. "Believer" By Imagine Dragons

In this song, physical pain is compared in a simile to a choking rain of ashes.

In an interview, lead vocalist Dan Reynolds of Imagine Dragons explained that the song "Believer," "... is about overcoming emotional and physical pain to arrive at a place of peace and self-confidence." He had suffered a serious form of arthritis in 2015:



*I was choking in the crowd
Living my brain up in the cloud
Falling like ashes to the ground
Hoping my feelings, they would drown
But they never did, ever lived, ebbing and flowing
Inhibited, limited
Till it broke up and it rained down
It rained down, like
[Chorus]
Pain!*

Songwriters (Imagine Dragon): Ben McKee, Daniel Platzman, Dan Reynolds, Wayne Sermon, Justin Tranter, Mattias Larsson, Robin Fredriksson.

2. "Body Like a Back Road" By Sam Hunt

Originally released in country music becoming his second crossover single promoted to a pop music format.

The lyrics are for mature students only as they make a direct comparison of a woman's body to the curves in a back road.

*Body like a back road, drivin' with my eyes closed
I know every curve like the back of my hand
Doin' 15 in a 30, I ain't in no hurry
I'mma take it slow just as fast as I can...*

These lyrics could be paired with the E.E. Cummings poem, "She Being Brand." In this poem, Cummings indirectly compares the driving of a new car to a clunky sexual experience.

Songwriters: Sam Hunt, Zach Crowell, Shane McAnally, Josh Osborne.

3. "Unforgettable" By Thomas Rhett

This is the title song of Thomas Rhett's new album "Unforgettable." According to Rhett, the song lyrics describe those details of the first encounter with his future wife that remain in his memory:

*And I bet right now you're probably thinkin'
That it's crazy I remember every detail, but I do
From your blue jeans to your shoes
Girl, that night was just like you
Unforgettable*

This first meeting is compared to an experience that is described as unforgettable, which also describes how he feels about his wife. Rhett noted that, "Lauren [his wife] approved the song."

4. "Stitches" By Shawn Mendes

This song began its ascent onto the charts in June 2015. Shawn Mendes is quoted as explaining, "The whole video is me getting beaten up by this thing that you can't see..."



Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

*Just like a moth drawn to a flame
Oh, you lured me in, I couldn't sense the pain
Your bitter heart cold to the touch
Now I'm gonna reap what I sow
I'm left seeing red on my own*

The end of the video reveals that the violence in the song lyrics was all part of his imagination, a creative comparison between physical hurt and emotional pain.

5. "Dangerous Woman" By Ariana Grande

This R&B track song offers a self-empowerment message. In an interview with Billboard Magazine, Grande explained, "I'll never be able to swallow the fact that people feel the need to attach a successful woman to a man when they say her name."

Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

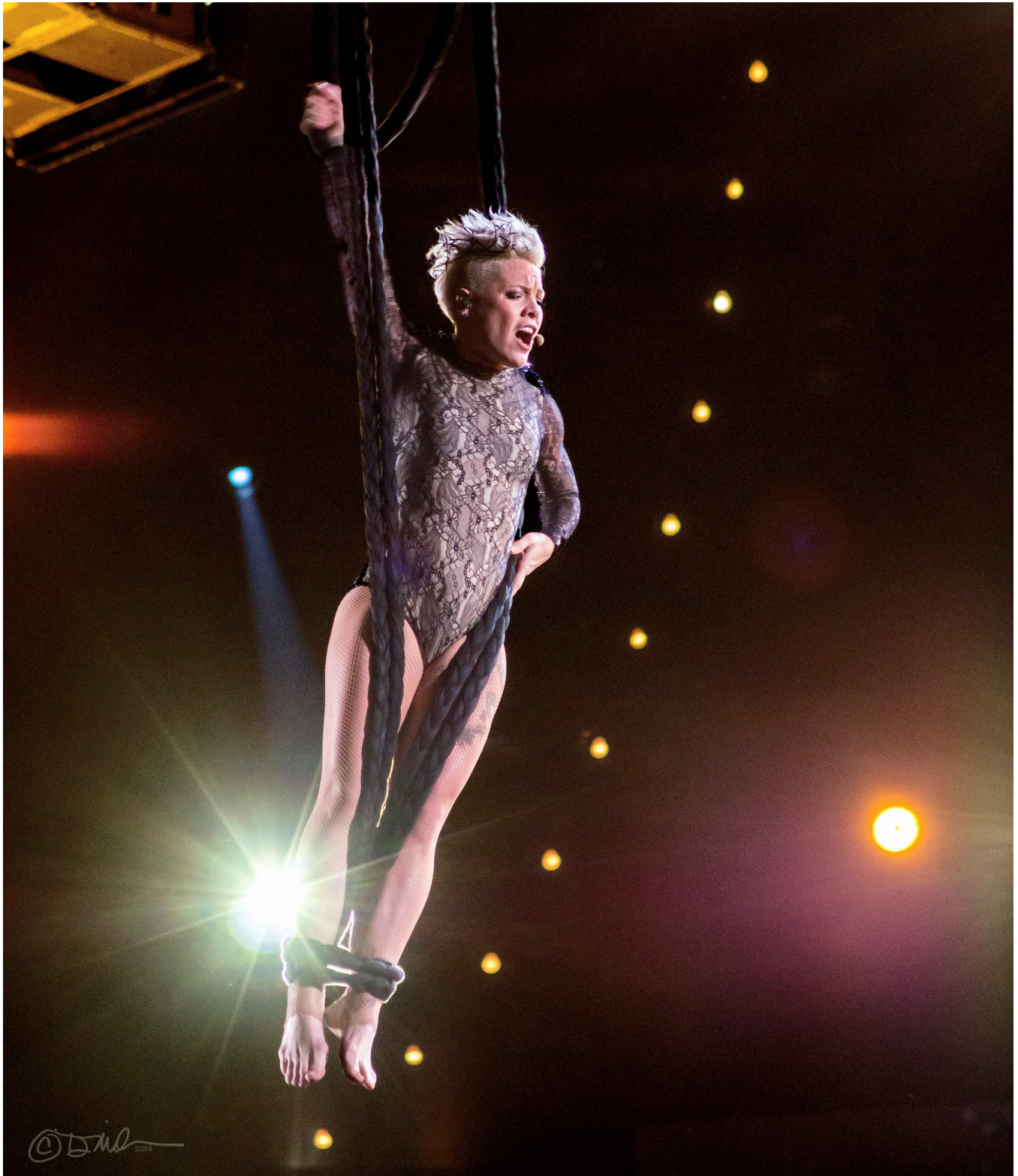
Somethin' 'bout you makes me feel like a dangerous woman

Somethin' 'bout, somethin' 'bout, somethin' 'bout you

In the Billboard interview, Grande also noted, "I'm much better at making songs than telling people things."

6. "Just Like Fire" By Pink

Pink is a modern artist known for her in-your-face lyrics. "Just Like Fire" is an empowering song about Pink's own value as a person and as an artist, as her lyrics demonstrate.



Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

*Just like fire, burning out the way
If I can light the world up for just one day
Watch this madness, colorful charade
No one can be just like me any way
Just like magic, I'll be flying free
I'mma disappear when they come for me*

The song also hints at how important it is to Pink that she continues to make and bring light to the world through music. The song could serve as a starting point for a lesson or paper on how each student can serve as a light — a shining example — to others through words and deeds.

7. "H.O.L.Y." By Florida Georgia Line

From the Dig Your Roots album, by the pop-country group, Florida Georgia Line, the song H.O.L.Y. uses religious imagery to suggest that there is something very special about a woman.

Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

*I don't need these stars 'cause you shine for me
Like fire in my veins, you're my ecstasy
You're my ecstasy*

The love being described here suggests that the woman may be better than actual religion.

8. "Gold" By Kiiara

In an August 2016 interview, with Noisy: Vice, Kiiara explained how this song was written during a time when she was trying to learn how to write better. "I just thought, 'Oh, whatever, it's just another song.'"

Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

*Gold up in my, gold up in my teeth (gold up, gold up in my teeth)
Taste like money when I speak (gold up, gold up in my teeth)*

"You don't have to answer to anyone," says Kiiara, "so it was [written in] more of a defiant mood."

9. "Ex's & Oh's" By Elle King



In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, King explained how the song came to life when co-writer Dave Bassett asked her about her love life, and she started talking about her past relationships. "Well, this guy's mad at me, and I was really mean to this guy, and this guy's a loser but he still calls me," she said.

Lyrics using the comparison keyword "like":

Ex's and the oh, oh, oh's they haunt me

Like ghosts they want me to make 'em all

They won't let go

King and Bassett started writing the song as a joke, but when King's label (RCA) heard it, they pegged it as the hit single.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-11].

Often the reason for figurative language such as a simile is to avoid using more explicit language. Several of the similes in song lyrics — or the other lyrics in the song — can be for mature students only.

What does the word "explicit" convey in the selection?

- (A) It conveys a sense of impropriety.
 - (B) It conveys a sense of directness.
 - (C) It conveys a sense of honesty.
 - (D) It conveys a sense of clarity.
- 2 Read the following lyrics from the section "Just Like Fire By Pink."

*Just like fire, burning out the way
If I can light the world up for just one day
Watch this madness, colorful charade
No one can be just like me any way
Just like magic, I'll be flying free*

What does the line "Watch this madness, colorful charade" suggest about the writer?

- (A) that her real identity is private; the act is a disguise
- (B) that her spirit is strong; the act is her testimony
- (C) that the act is not real; it conceals her madness
- (D) that the act is like a circus; she is the star

- 3 What is the author's MAIN reason for including examples of similes used in pop songs in the article?
- (A) to persuade teachers that pop songs offer an engaging way to help students understand similes
 - (B) to explain how pop music has used similes throughout history to make effective comparisons
 - (C) to illustrate how writers use similes to communicate their ideas and engage their audience
 - (D) to show teachers how pop music makes frequent use of easily understood similes
- 4 Read the following lyrics from the section "Believer By Imagine Dragons."

*I was choking in the crowd
Living my brain up in the cloud
Falling like ashes to the ground
Hoping my feelings, they would drown
But they never did, ever lived, ebbing and flowing
Inhibited, limited
Till it broke up and it rained down
It rained down, like
[Chorus]
Pain!*

Which of the following provides the BEST analysis of the selection?

- (A) The writer illustrates how pain is like a river that flows without end.
- (B) The writer compares his pain to a storm that breaks inside his body.
- (C) The writer shows how pain circulates through his whole body.
- (D) The writer makes a connection between his emotions and pain.