



An Analysis of Similes in Taylor Swift's Selected Songs: Pedagogical Implications for English Literature Teaching

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-16 Revised: 2026-06-26 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: English literature teaching; figurative language; simile; stylistic analysis; Taylor Swift songs DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11988 Corresponding Author: Asti Gumartifa asti.gumartifa.lecture@gmail.com English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang, Palembang, Indonesia	<i>This study analyzes the types and meanings of similes in sixteen selected Taylor Swift songs and explains their pedagogical implications for English literature teaching. It addresses the need to connect stylistic analysis of popular song lyrics with figurative-language instruction, literary interpretation, vocabulary development, and critical reading in English education. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design using stylistic, document-analysis, and text-oriented procedures. Thirty-eight simile units were identified through repeated reading and recorded in a coding sheet. The units were classified as open or closed similes, interpreted contextually, and organized into semantic categories through qualitative content and thematic analysis. The analysis identified thirty-eight similes. Closed similes dominated with thirty-three occurrences, whereas open similes occurred five times. Eleven semantic categories emerged: love, admiration, disappointment, surprise, memory, confusion, satisfaction, frustration, sincerity, social positioning, and enjoyment. The comparisons construct emotional imagery, narrative intimacy, evaluation, identity, and reflective meaning. The findings can support English literature, stylistics, figurative-language, reading, and vocabulary courses. Teachers may use selected lyrics as authentic literary materials for identifying comparative markers, distinguishing simile types, inferring shared features, interpreting emotional effects, discussing themes, and producing original figurative expressions through structured classroom activities. This study advances previous song-lyric research by integrating structural classification, semantic interpretation, and pedagogical application in one analytical framework. Rather than merely listing figurative-language types, it demonstrates how similes function as meaning-making devices and translates the findings into a scaffolded approach for teaching literary interpretation through culturally familiar popular texts.</i>

1. Introduction

Women often do not receive justice, which limits their abilities, and they also do not get equal opportunities and protection in various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Wood (2019) states that stereotypes against women can lead to them being perceived as inferior or having limited roles in society. As a result, women often experience discrimination and injustice, so that their opportunities and human rights are hampered or not fulfilled equally. Johri (2023) also said that patriarchy is a social construct that endorses the superiority of men over women. It has been defined differently by sociologists and has been employed extensively by feminists as a tool for analyzing gender relations. Being a supremacist ideology, patriarchy promotes male supremacy in the spiritual and physical realms as well as in social and personal spheres (Wood, 2019).

In recent years, the issue of gender equality has increasingly become a central topic of discussion across various domains, including economics, politics, social life, and religion (Murwanti, 2025). The behavior of women towards men, or men towards women, or the imbalance of rights that women or men have is a sensitive matter in this era. We need to gain a better understanding of this gender issue. It is not only related to the differences between men and women, but also to the social constructs that determine their prescribed roles and responsibilities in society (Sarjawan et al, 2025).

This article is based on a novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, by Elena Ferrante, published in 2011 and translated from Italian to English by Ann Goldstein in 2012. In *My Brilliant Friend*, silence and ellipses are used as tools for the representation of the unspeakable in women's experiences. The novel's use of silence and ellipses is about representing the unspeakable aspects of women's trauma that derive from gendered violence and sexual threat (Basha & Azardeen, 2025). It is a novel about the lives of two women, Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo, on the outskirts of Naples, Italy. In the story, the characters Elena Greco, called Lenu, and Raffaella Cerullo, called Lina or Lila by Elena, recount their lives from the 1950s through their twilight years in the 2000s. Not only talking about their friendship from childhood through adulthood, but also the struggles of being a woman that they faced from their closest people and environment.

The idea of Elena's narrative is not that, as her life progresses, her consciousness moves towards integration and develops into a stable identity, but that traumatic events continue to have the capacity to intervene in her understanding of herself and to cause her to change. In this way, it is proposed that for women subjected to the experience of patriarchal violence, psychological development may have to take a different form, which may not necessarily follow the usual expectations of growth (Basha & Azardeen, 2025). As the protagonist Elena seeks to emulate the courage of her strong-willed friend Lila, she realizes that she can only leave her Neapolitan neighborhood by gaining access to education and learning standard Italian from her teacher (Dempsey, 2025). The characters experience it, they struggle against it, and the younger generation wants to be free from the fears and ways of the older generation.

We must stop that destructive tide and tell the world once again that women are more than just "mattress dressing." (Kensicki, 2018). As Tanja (2024) states, tracing the development of feminism reveals a complex journey, filled with achievements, obstacles, and ongoing struggles. This reflects the ongoing effort to achieve gender equality in society. The topic of feminist inequality is crucial because it allows us to examine this world of patriarchal and male-dominated civilizations in depth (Suhag, 2023; Surtinawati, 2025). This article uses a feminist approach through the lens of Betty Friedan, drawing on the writer's reading of the novel, as feminism aims for equal rights and opportunities for all genders. It is about honoring the many identities, experiences, skills, and talents of women and working to enable all of them to achieve their full potential.

Betty Friedan is one of the most influential feminist figures in United States history, best known for her monumental work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This book is often considered the catalyst for the second wave of feminism in America, a movement that focused on women's rights outside the traditional sphere of the home and domestic roles (Erlangga, 2024). Friedan's central focus was that women suffered under a pervasive system of delusions and false values under which they were urged to find personal fulfillment, even identity, vicariously through the husbands and children to whom they were expected cheerfully to devote their lives (Pal, 2021). The thinker concept aligns with the writer's article, as the novel also discusses women's inequality in making decisions about their lives, speaking, patriarchy, and domestic work.

Although previous research has discussed trauma, silence, and women's struggles in the novel, there is still limited analysis focusing specifically on gender inequality and patriarchal oppression through the feminist perspective of Betty Friedan. Friedan, through her influential work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), criticized the social expectations that confined women to domestic roles and denied them opportunities for self-fulfillment outside the household. Her feminist perspective is relevant to the experiences of Lina and Lenu, who struggle against restrictive gender norms imposed by their families and society.

So, the purpose of this article is to portray how the inequality and patriarchal issues experienced by the characters in the novel, but mostly from the main character named Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo, stemmed from their family and environment in their daily life inside the novel *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, which was analyzed using feminist theory with the thinker Betty Friedan. In addition, this analysis also shows how the two figures try to face and respond to various forms of oppression, so that it can provide an overview of women's struggle to seek freedom, equality, and fairer opportunities in society. However, feminist scholars have long argued that silence is not merely a sign of oppression but can also be an intentional and strategic form of resistance (Rorintul, S. A., & Lontaan, 2025).

Review of Literature

The writer's topic of inequality and patriarchy uses the theory of feminism with the thinker Betty Friedan. That's why, in analyzing this article, the writer focuses primarily on Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The book focuses on gender and the women's movement. Thus, I began to hunt down the origins of the feminine mystique and its effect on women who lived by it or grew up under it (Friedan, 1963, p. 7).

Previous studies have explored Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* through feminist and patriarchal perspectives. Maria Clara Calheiros, in her article entitled *Elena Ferrante and Patriarchy: Lessons from L'Amica Geniale (My Brilliant Friend)*, studied how patriarchal systems shape the lives and identities of women in the novel. Drawing on feminist theory and the law-and-literature approach, she argues that Ferrante portrays women's experiences as deeply influenced by social oppression, gender inequality, and male domination within both family and society. Her study highlights that the friendship between Elena and Lila reflects women's struggle to gain autonomy and self-expression in a patriarchal environment. Furthermore, Calheiros emphasizes that the novel presents a complex representation of womanhood, showing how female characters negotiate power, violence, education, and social expectations throughout their lives.

Several scholars also discussed *My Brilliant Friend* by applying different literary and theoretical perspectives. Novi Dwi Lestari and Devi Pratiwy, through their article entitled *Female Rivalry in Elena Ferrante's My Brilliant Friend: A Sociological Approach*, explore the competitive relationship between Elena Greco and Lila Cerullo within the context of society

and gender expectations. By employing a sociological approach, they reveal that rivalry between women is influenced by social class, education, beauty standards, and patriarchal values that pressure women to compete with one another. Their findings suggest that friendship in the novel is deeply intertwined with social ambition and personal insecurity.

In addition, Ali Hamada and Ahmad Jasim Mohammed investigate the novel through a psychoanalytic lens in their study *Envy and Jealousy in Elena Ferrante's My Brilliant Friend: A Psychoanalytic Study*. They explain that feelings of jealousy and envy become central emotional forces that shape the relationship between the two female protagonists. The study highlights how admiration gradually transforms into emotional tension and rivalry, reflecting the psychological struggles experienced by women in a restrictive social environment.

2. Method

3.1 Research Design and Data Sources

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a stylistic and text-oriented approach. The design was selected because the data consisted of words, phrases, and meaning relations found in song lyrics. The samples were sixteen selected songs by Taylor Swift from the albums *Lover*, *Folklore*, *Evermore*, *Red*, and *Midnights*. Purposively, the songs were selected because they contain simile expressions and represent different themes of emotional and narrative. The unit of analysis was the simile unit, defined as a lyrical expression that explicitly compares two different entities through a comparative marker or comparative structure. A total of thirty-eight simile units were identified in the selected songs.

3.2 Instrument and Data Collection Procedure

The main research instrument was a coding sheet developed to document the song title, album, simile unit, comparative marker, type of simile, interpreted meaning, and pedagogical implication. The procedure consisted of four stages. First, the selected lyrics were documented and read repeatedly to identify expressions containing explicit comparison. Second, each potential simile was checked to ensure that it compared two different entities and did not merely indicate literal similarity. Third, the confirmed simile units were classified as open or closed similes. Fourth, the meanings were interpreted based on lyrical context, emotional tone, and the narrative situation in each song. The procedure follows the logic of document analysis because the data were taken from existing textual materials and interpreted systematically (Bowen, 2009).

3.3 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

First, the researcher organized all simile units in a coding table. Second, each unit was classified into open simile or closed simile. Open similes were defined as comparisons that do not explicitly state the shared feature, while closed similes were defined as comparisons that include a clearer attribute, quality, action, or condition through which the compared items are related. Third, the meanings of similes were grouped into semantic categories. This step followed qualitative content analysis principles in which codes are grouped into categories and interpreted in relation to the research questions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In order to strengthen trustworthiness, the categories were checked repeatedly against the song context, and to find out the interpretation of consistency between textual evidence and thematic meaning, as recommended in qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Since song lyrics are copyrighted materials, this article reports the data through coded descriptions and short paraphrased comparative labels rather than reproducing long lyric excerpts.

3. Result

The analysis identified thirty-eight simile units across sixteen selected songs. The number of similes varied by song. Some songs contained only one simile unit, while others contained several. The distribution shows that similes are not employed at random but rather frequently happen when the lyrical voice dramatizes an experience, assesses a connection, amplifies emotional imagery, or recalls an event. A distribution of simile units among the chosen songs is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected songs and number of simile units

No.	Song Title	Album	Simile Units
1	Cruel Summer	Lover	2
2	The Archer	Lover	1
3	Paper Rings	Lover	2
4	London Boy	Lover	2
5	Afterglow	Lover	2
6	Daylight	Lover	1
7	Cardigan	Folklore	4
8	August	Folklore	1
9	Willow	Evermore	5
10	All Too Well	Red	4
11	Snow on the Beach	Midnights	3
12	Midnight Rain	Midnights	2
13	Anti-Hero	Midnights	2
14	Gold Rush	Evermore	3
15	Run	Red	1
16	Long Story Short	Evermore	3
	Total		38

The distribution in Table 1 shows that Willow contained the highest number of simile units, followed by Cardigan and All Too Well. These songs are strongly narrative and reflective, which may explain why figurative comparison becomes a prominent device. In literary terms, simile allows the songwriter to compress a complex emotional condition into a familiar image. This bolsters the claim that figurative language serves not only as adornment but also as a discourse strategy for meaning formation (Steen, 2017; Semino et al., 2018). This distribution can be used to assist students compare how various songs use similes for various narrative objectives when teaching English literature.

Types of Simile

The first research question concerns the types of simile found in the selected songs. The analysis classified the thirty-eight simile units into open and closed similes. Table 2 summarizes the frequency and percentage of each type.

Table 2. Types of similes found in the selected songs

No.	Type of Simile	Frequency	Percentage
1	Open simile	5	13.16%
2	Closed simile	33	86.84%
	Total	38	100.00%

With 33 instances, or 86.84% of the data, closed similes predominated. There were five instances of open similes, or 13.16%. This result suggests that comparisons with reasonably explicit shared traits are frequently used in the chosen songs. In closed similes, the lyric frequently directs the listener toward a more precise interpretation by offering an action, quality, state, or descriptive cue. Students can be assisted in more confidently identifying the shared trait and the compared objects, which makes this pedagogically beneficial. On the other hand, because the likeness is not explicitly stated, open similes necessitate more extensive inferential work. Because it enables teachers to create varying degrees of interpretative tasks, this distinction is crucial in the classroom. This distinction is important in the classroom because it helps teachers design different levels of interpretive tasks. Closed similes can be used for introductory analysis, while open similes can be used for advanced discussion of ambiguity and multiple interpretations.

The dominance of closed similes also reflects the communicative function of popular song lyrics. Because songs are heard in real time and often consumed by wide audiences, a clearer comparative cue can help listeners grasp the emotional image quickly. However, this does not mean that closed similes are simple. Even when the shared feature is more visible, the emotional implication still depends on context. For instance, a comparison involving home can imply comfort, safety, belonging, and emotional stability, while a comparison involving a wound-like mark can imply persistence, pain, and memory. This supports cognitive and pragmatic studies arguing that figurative interpretation depends on contextual elaboration rather than connector words alone (Carston & Wearing, 2011; Roncero et al., 2021; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibanez, 2023).

Meaning Categories of Simile

The second research question concerns the meanings constructed through simile. The thirty-eight simile units were grouped into eleven meaning categories: love, impress, disappointment, startled feeling, memory, confusion, satisfaction, frustration, sincerity, social positioning, and enjoyment. Table 3 summarizes the result.

Table 3. Meaning categories of simile in the selected songs

No	Meaning Category	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Interpretation
1	Love	5	13.16%	Affection, intimacy, emotional attraction, and the ambivalence of romantic experience
2	Impress	7	18.42%	Admiration, awe, perceived beauty, preciousness, or extraordinary presence
3	Disappointment	5	13.16%	Rejection, betrayal, loneliness, concealment, or emotional injury
4	Startled	3	7.89%	Sudden arrival, unexpected reaction, mysterious presence, or surprising event
5	Memory	3	7.89%	Persistence of memory, traces of the past, or time passing intensely
6	Confusion	2	5.26%	Restlessness, uncertainty, transformation, or emotional disorientation
7	Satisfied	2	5.26%	Emotional gratification, strategic distance, or pleasure in response

No	Meaning Category	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Interpretation
8	Frustration	3	7.89%	Overwhelming sadness, conflict, crying, and emotional disturbance
9	Sincerity	1	2.63%	Commitment, loyalty, trust, and careful protection of a relationship
10	Social	2	5.26%	Power, prestige, public persona, social status, and self-positioning
11	Enjoyment	1	2.63%	Relaxed pleasure, casualness, and comfort in a social moment
	Total	38	100%	

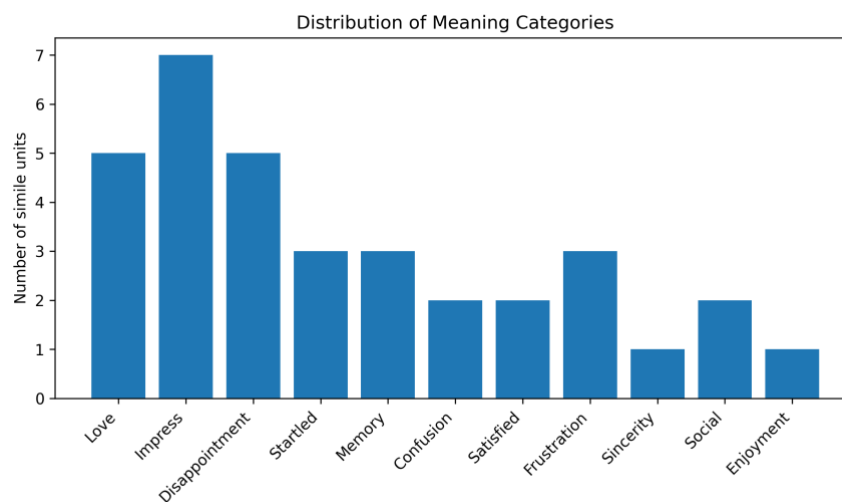


Figure 1. Distribution of meaning categories in Taylor Swift's selected songs

With seven instances, admiration was the most frequent category. Comparisons that inspire admiration, attractiveness, rarity, prestige, and interest fall under this category. In these instances, the simile turns a person, place, or instant into an amazing image, like a priceless item, a celestial event, or an eye-catching circumstance. The category demonstrates the use of simile as an aesthetic intensification technique. It presents the speaker as emotionally impacted by what is seen in addition to describing what is seen. Such examples can teach students to talk about how metaphorical comparison impacts evaluative stance and point of view in the classroom.

Love and disappointment appeared five times each. The love category includes comparisons that construct intimacy, warmth, attraction, and emotional vulnerability. These similes show that love is represented not as a single stable feeling but as a range of affective states, including comfort, excitement, risk, and enchantment. The disappointment category, by contrast, includes comparisons that represent concealment, abandonment, betrayal, and hurt. The balance between love and disappointment is significant because it reveals a recurring lyrical pattern: simile is used to dramatize both the attraction and the injury produced by relationships. This pattern can support literary discussion about contrast, emotional progression, and thematic tension.

The categories of surprise, memory, and frustration each appeared three times. The surprise category represents sudden presence, unexpected reaction, or mysterious arrival. The memory category represents traces of the past that remain difficult to erase or moments that pass intensely. The frustration category represents crying, conflict, and overwhelming emotion. These categories show that simile is especially effective for

interpreting the internal states into sensory images. This finding is consistent with research on figurative cognition, which suggests that figurative comparison helps speakers reason about abstract experiences by mapping them onto more concrete domains (Holyoak & Stamenkovic, 2018).

Furthermore, the categories of confusion, satisfaction and social positioning appeared twice each. Images of restless movement and metamorphosis are used to depict confusion. Calculated distance or emotional gratification are two ways that satisfaction is constructed. Similes that link the lyrical self to public roles, authority, prestige, or social standing exemplify social positioning. These meanings show that simile in the selected songs is not limited to romance; it also constructs identity, self-awareness, and social image. This is important for English literature teaching because students can be invited to see song lyrics as texts that engage personal and social meaning at the same time.

Furthermore, sincerity and enjoyment each appeared once. Although they are less frequent, they are meaningful because they show the range of simile functions. Sincerity is connected to commitment and trust, while enjoyment is connected to casual happiness and relaxed interaction. These minor categories remind some readers that a low-frequency expression does not have low interpretive value. In qualitative literary analysis, a single figurative expression can be important if it reveals a key emotional or thematic moment.

4. Discussion

Pedagogical Implications for English Literature Teaching

The third research question concerns how the analysis can contribute to the English literature or figurative language learning. The findings suggest that there should be at least three pedagogical implications. First, Taylor Swift's selected songs can be used as authentic literary materials for teaching simile. Students begin by identifying comparative markers and distinguishing literal comparison from figurative comparison. This activity can help students to understand that the presence of "like" or "as" is not sufficient; they must examine whether two different conceptual domains are being related. This task supports figurative awareness and aligns with the view that metaphor and simile competence contribute to communicative language ability (Littlemore & Low, 2006; Zibin, 2016).

Second, the distinction between open and closed similes can scaffold interpretation. Teachers can begin with closed similes because the shared feature is more explicit. Students can identify the topic, and shared attribute, then paraphrase the implied meaning. Furthermore, open similes can be introduced to encourage or enhance students' deeper inference and discussion. This sequence reflects the idea that figurative language learning should move from recognition to interpretation and evaluation. It can also improve students' motivation to practice close reading, a skill that is essential in literary study.

Third, the meaning categories support thematic discussion and creative response. Students can group similes into categories such as love, memory, frustration, or social positioning, then they discuss how each category contributes to the song's emotional narrative. Then they compare simile use across songs and write short interpretive paragraphs explaining how a specific comparison builds imagery. This activity connects literary analysis with writing development. Research on literature in foreign language education suggests that literary texts can develop not only language knowledge but also interpretive, cultural, and affective learning (Paran, 2008; Bloemert et al., 2019; Tsang et al., 2023).

The findings also support the use of popular culture in English literature classes. When carefully selected and academically framed, popular songs can make literary concepts accessible without reducing academic rigor. Songs can encourage repeated

reading and listening, increase learner motivation, and create opportunities for vocabulary and interpretation tasks (Abbott, 2002; Tegge, 2018; Kumar et al., 2022). However, teachers should not use songs only for entertainment. The materials should be accompanied by structured worksheets, guiding questions, and reflective tasks so that students learn to interpret figurative meaning critically. This point is important because systematic reviews caution that positive claims about songs require careful instructional design and stronger evidence (Hamilton et al., 2024). Therefore, the pedagogical contribution of this study lies not in claiming that songs automatically improve learning, but in showing how a specific literary feature in songs can be transformed into teachable material.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that simile in Taylor Swift's selected songs functions as a significant figurative device for constructing emotional imagery, narrative meaning, and interpretive depth. Thirty-eight simile units were found in sixteen selected songs. Closed similes were dominant, with thirty-three occurrences, while open similes appeared five times. The dominance of closed similes suggests that the selected lyrics often guide listeners toward relatively specific shared features while still allowing contextual interpretation. The meanings of the similes were grouped into eleven categories: love, impress, disappointment, startled feeling, memory, confusion, satisfaction, frustration, sincerity, social positioning, and enjoyment. These categories show that similes are used to represent not only romantic feeling but also memory, identity, social power, emotional disturbance, and reflective experience.

The value of this analysis lies in its contribution to English literature teaching. Furthermore, the findings can help teachers to design the lessons on figurative language by using authentic and culturally familiar materials. Besides, students can be guided to identify simile structures, between open and closed similes, infer shared meanings, and discuss how figurative comparisons construct theme and emotion. The study also shows that popular songs can be used academically when they are framed through clear analytical procedures and literary objectives.

This study has limitations. It focuses only on similes in sixteen selected songs and does not analyze other types of figurative language such as metaphor, hyperbole, personification, or symbolism. It also does not test the classroom effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical implications. Future studies could study how students react to song-based figurative language education, contrast simile and metaphor among albums, or create instructional tools based on the results and assess how they affect students' vocabulary growth and literary interpretation.

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