

Simile



DEFINITION

What is simile? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A simile is a [figure of speech](#) that directly compares two unlike things. To make the comparison, similes most often use the connecting words "like" or "as," but can also use other words that indicate an explicit comparison. Eleanor Roosevelt's line, "A woman is like a teabag—you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water," is an example of simile. Roosevelt compares two unlike things, women and teabags, to describe how women reveal the full extent of their strength in tough situations.

Some additional key details about simile:

- Because the comparison established by a simile is not literal (a woman isn't literally like a teabag), similes are a form of [figurative language](#).
- While most similes use the connecting words "like" or "as" to establish the comparison they're making, similes can use other words that create a direct comparison, including other connecting words (such as, "so" or "than") or verbs of comparison (such as, "compare" and "resemble").
- Some similes have become such a common part of everyday speech that we barely notice them, for instance, when we say "I slept like a log" or "The news hit me like a ton of bricks."

How to Pronounce Simile

Here's how to pronounce simile: **sim**-ih-lee

Simile vs. Metaphor

Similes and metaphors are both figures of speech that involve the comparison of unlike things. They are also both types of figurative language, because they both create meaning beyond the literal sense of their words. However, simile and metaphor do not make a comparison in the same way. Some people may explain the difference between simile and metaphor by discussing the structure of the language used in each one:

- **Similes** use the words "like" or "as" to establish their comparison: "The world is *like* your oyster."
- **Metaphors** state the comparison without such connecting words: "The world is your oyster."

While the presence of a connecting word, such as "like" or "as," *is* generally a good rule of thumb to identify similes versus metaphors, it doesn't really get at the root of the difference between the two figures

of speech. A deeper way to understand the difference is through the nature of the comparison each one makes:

- **A simile makes an explicit comparison by asserting that two different things are *similar*.** A simile sets thing A and thing B *side by side* to compare them. In the sentence "The world is like your oyster," the listener is asked to mentally visualize and compare "the world" and "an oyster"—as though he or she were holding one in each hand—and draw a comparison between the two.
- **A metaphor asserts an implicit comparison by stating that one thing *is* the other thing.** Instead of setting two entities A and B side by side through the use of connecting words, metaphor *superimposes* them. The metaphor "The world is your oyster" asks the reader to imagine his or her relationship to the world as *being* the relationship of an oyster to the space inside its shell.

This isn't to say that either a simile or metaphor is stronger or better than the other, just that they are subtly different in the sort of comparison they create, and this difference affects how a reader imaginatively interacts with the text.

Is a Simile a Type of Metaphor?

There is also some debate about whether similes and metaphors are similar but different things, or whether simile is actually a specialized form of metaphor. Arguments on the topic can become surprisingly heated, but all you need to know is that there are competing definitions of metaphor, and whether a simile is a type of metaphor depends on the definition of metaphor you're using. For instance, the [Oxford Companion to English Language](#) gives two definitions of metaphor:

1. **Metaphor:** All figures of speech that achieve their effect through association, comparison, and resemblance. Figures like antithesis, hyperbole, metonymy, simile are all species of metaphor.
2. **Metaphor:** A figure of speech which concisely compares two things by saying that one is the other.

Under the first, broad definition of a metaphor, a simile is a type of metaphor. Under the second, narrower definition, it isn't.



EXAMPLES

Similes appear in all sorts of writing, from prose literature, to poetry, to music lyrics, and beyond.

Examples of Simile in Literature

Writers use simile to add color and feeling to their writing and to allow readers to see something in a new way through the comparison that the simile creates. Simile can be used to render the familiar strange and unusual, to make the strange seem familiar, or to draw a surprising association between things that don't seem to belong together.

Simile in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

In this example from *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway describes Tom and Daisy Buchanan's mansion in Long Island. Nick is from the midwest and has never encountered the level of luxury he discovers on his first visit to the Buchanans' home:

A breeze blew through the room, **blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags**, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling—and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, **making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea**.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which **two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon**. They were both in white and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.

Not only does Fitzgerald's use of simile convey Nick's astonishment at the extent of the Buchanans' wealth, but it also enlivens what might otherwise have been an unremarkable description. Without simile, the passage would read something like, "The wind blew through the room. It ruffled the women's clothing. Tom shut the window and the wind stopped." Fitzgerald's similes bring the room to life.

Simile in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Sonnet 97, and Sonnet 130

No discussion of simile would be complete without a reference to Shakespeare's sonnets. One of his most well-known similes is the opening line of Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (That simile is also a good example of a simile that contains a word *other* than "like" or "as" to establish its comparison.)

In Sonnet 97, the narrator compares his separation from his beloved to a barren winter, even though the couple was actually separated during the summer. (The narrator admits this in the line, "And yet this time removed was summer's time"):

**How like a winter hath my absence been
From thee**, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
What freezings have a I felt, what dark days seen!

What old December's bareness everywhere!
And yet this time removed was summer's time
The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease.

In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare challenges the traditional function of similes and the conventions of love poetry:

**My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.**
I have seen roses damasked, red and white
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare

In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare actually comments on the way similes function within conventional sonnets about love by turning all of the would-be similes into *negative similes*. Instead of writing that his mistress' eyes are like the sun, that her lips are red as coral, her breasts as white as snow, and so on, Shakespeare says that her eyes are "nothing like the sun," and that, "coral is far more red" than her lips. It's as though he's acknowledging the fact that many similes have become hackneyed or clichéd, and he's instead proposing to pay a more meaningful tribute to his love by *inverting* those similes and treating her like a real-life woman.

Simile in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*

"Hands," one of the short stories in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, tells the tale of Winesburg resident Wing Biddlebaum. Biddlebaum is a shy old man who keeps to himself, yet becomes animated and talkative in the presence of his only friend, a reporter named George Willard:

The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. **Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird**, had given him his name. Some obscure poet of the town had thought of it. The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads.

The "obscure poet's" simile, which likens the "restless activity" of Wing's hands "unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird" is

also the source of the character's nickname. Further, Wing Biddlebaum's social role in the community is similar to that of an imprisoned bird, in the sense that he lives apart from the rest of the town, shut off from companionship.

Simile in Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

In [Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#), the narrator undertakes a cross-country motorcycle trip with his son Chris, his friend Sylvia, and her husband John. The motorists pride themselves on taking scenic backroads that prolong their journey, but better suit their solitary, contemplative style of traveling. When they cross a main road one Monday morning, Sylvia makes the following observation about the grim-looking commuters:

"It was all those people in the cars coming the other way...The first one looked so sad. And then the next one looked exactly the same way, and then the next one and the next one, they were all the same...Its just that they looked so *lost*...Like they were all dead. [Like a funeral procession.](#)"

Sylvia compares the drivers to members of a funeral procession because she feels that, in rushing from point A to point B, the commuters are missing out the pleasure of life and travel.

Simile in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In this example from [Slaughterhouse-Five](#), Billy Pilgrim emerges from an underground slaughterhouse where he has been held prisoner by the Germans during the deadly World War II firebombing of Dresden:

It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. [Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals.](#) The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead.

Vonnegut compares the bombed city of Dresden to the moon in order to capture the totality of the devastation—the city is so lifeless that it is like the barren moon.

Note that Vonnegut also emphasizes the destruction of the city by exaggerating the air pollution created by the bombs ("the sky was black with smoke"). This type of exaggeration for literary or rhetorical purposes is called *hyperbole*, which can sometimes overlap with simile. To read more about the relationship between the two figures of speech, please see our page on [hyperbole](#).

Examples of Simile in Music

Simile can create vivid images, making language more memorable and emotional. For this reason, musicians across genres regularly use simile in their song lyrics.

Simile in "Gone" by Kanye West

In "Gone," Kanye west compares disloyal aspiring MCs to Anakin Skywalker of *Star Wars*, who went bad and became Darth Vader.

I'ma open up a store for aspiring MCs
Won't sell em no dream, but the inspiration is free
[But if they ever flip sides like Anakin](#)
You'll sell everything including the mannequin

Simile in "Candle in the Wind" by Elton John

"Candle in the Wind" is Elton John's tribute to Marilyn Monroe. In referring to Marilyn as a "candle in the wind," John portrays her as a vulnerable and fragile person who was often preyed upon by those who made her famous.

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
And I would have liked to have known you
But I was just a kid
Your candle burned out long before
Your legend ever did

Simile in "Like a Rolling Stone" by Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan is many great things but "nice" is not one of them. In his most commercially successful release of all time, Dylan compares the song's addressee—presumably, an ex-girlfriend who is going through tough times—to a rolling stone:

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
People call say 'beware doll, you're bound to fall'
You thought they were all kidding you
You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hanging out
Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging your next meal
How does it feel, how does it feel?
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown, [like a rolling stone](#)



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers, and people in general, use simile to create memorable images with language, which allow them to vividly recount experiences and emotions. Poets often use simile to make concepts or ideas that are difficult to grasp more concrete, as in Langston Hughes' "A Dream Deferred":

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

"A Dream Deferred" was published in Langston Hughes' collection *Harlem*, in which Hughes meditates on the experience of black Americans. Through the use of simile in this particular poem, Hughes gives physical heft to the dreams of black people living in Harlem and across the country—dreams which are often destroyed, postponed and ignored as a result of racial prejudice. By comparing dreams to material things, such as "raisins" and "rotten meat," Hughes implies that dreams are a concrete part of *reality* not to be brushed aside, and that there are very real consequences to not pursuing them.

In addition, by using similes to compare one thing or idea to a completely different thing, writers can make readers see the world in a new way. Put another way, writers can use the comparison created by a simile to reveal a figurative truth beyond the literal truth.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Simile:** A very brief [explanation](#) of the term.
- **The Dictionary Definition of simile:** A basic [definition](#) and etymology of the term, which comes from Latin word for "image, likeness, or comparison."
- **Simile vs. Metaphor:** An interesting [compendium](#) of thoughts on the differences between simile and metaphor.
- **Simile on Youtube:**
 - A [video](#) in which "Old Spice Guy" Isaiah Mustafa shares a simile with his followers.
 - A [scene](#) built around simile from Disney's *Shrek*.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Scopa, Sally. "Simile." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Scopa, Sally. "Simile." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/simile>.