

Listen Like Thieves:  
Using Pop Music to help teach Literary Analysis and Build Positive Relationships with Students

By Dr. William Visco  
The University of Akron

**Abstract:** It has been said that teachers are some of the greatest thieves in the world, stealing ideas and altering them to fit their classes. A resource that is being "stolen from" and increasingly used in classrooms is that of pop culture. I have found that one of the most easily accessible forms of pop culture to use effectively and efficiently is that of popular music. Popular music spans generations and connects millions. This article discusses the benefits of connecting curriculum to pop music in order to enrich classroom lessons, enhance student's ability to do literary analysis, and actively engage students while simultaneously building positive relationships. In the end the hope is to see the value of using this medium to help students not only in the classroom, but to provide them an ability to analyze pop culture and their world through a different lens.

## **All Eyes On Me: An Introduction to Pop Culture in My Life**

Growing up in New York in the 1980's I could not have asked for a more perfect place for my pop culture fascination to take root. My family was one of the first to have an Atari on the block and we were lucky enough to get a few new stations being offered on cable television as well. The first was Home Box Office (H.B.O.), a channel that showed movies all day. The second, and more influential of the two, was Music Television (MTV). Having older siblings who loved music, MTV was on frequently in my house. My brothers and sisters would quiz each other on the videos, the artists, and even the director of the videos as the popped-on screen. Not wanting to be left out I would watch tirelessly to try and remember as much as my older siblings. What I came away with was a love for music and a realization later in life that listening to those songs actually made a difference in the way I addressed my schoolwork.

It was not until high school where I used my pop culture music knowledge in the classroom. My freshman English teacher having us read *Lord of the Flies* and had suggested an extra credit assignment where we could bring in a song that tied to one of the themes in the story. Of course, it wasn't that easy. Students had to have all the lyrics printed out (one for each student), we had to have the song via tape or cd to play in class, and we had to give our backing for why we chose the song and how it related to the story. I could not wait to get home and start on this assignment. I quickly flipped through my cassette tapes and found the song I was going to use, "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N' Roses. The next day in class I was surprised to find that nearly every student had been equally excited about the assignment and had brought in their own songs as well. It was one of the most fun English classes I had that year listening to music and hearing others explain their songs and choices. Plus, it led to some deep discussions about the book, society, and the connection between the two. My teacher seemed to know that,

“understanding how youths integrate pop culture texts into discussions about academic ones can help teachers more effectively use them to deepen students’ reading comprehension and curriculum knowledge” (Hall, 2011, p. 296). Other teachers in the school were also atune to using popular culture in the classes, connecting movies to books or history, having us create our own movie posters for historical events, and of course using music to relate to themes or ideas within works being read.

When I went to college, I expected much the same kind of teaching but was surprised to find it not nearly as progressive. Not only that, but my peers that I was taking classes with had not experienced anything like I had in the past. Their English classroom experiences had been the drill and kill method of so many public schools who rely on standardized testing for funding and prestige. In a lot of ways that held many of the students I was in class with back because they couldn’t see the various possibilities for expression available to them. I recall my final exam in Intro to Education where we had to do a non-verbal representation of what we had learned throughout the semester. Most students took a very standardized approach showing off a posterboard collage or mobile that reflected their learning. Me, I played different songs and did an interpretive dance using pop culture dance moves like the butterfly and the running man. My professor and the students loved it and commented on how unique it was, but to me it seemed like something very obvious. Having classmates who had not had that pop culture experience in their educational journey made me that it was imperative for me to use pop culture, especially music, to help my students learn in the future.

### **Three Little Birds: Pop Music Making Every Little Thing All Right**

My classroom when I taught high school was covered with pop culture paraphernalia. Posters of *Star Wars*, Shakespeare action figures, and a zombie survival guide were just a few of

me decorations all with words by them connecting to themes or ideas that would relate to what we would be reading in class. These were things to catch the eyes of students and reinforce what I was hoping they would take away from the lessons. However, I was struggling to find ways to get music into the classroom. I often had music playing here and there but was not using it as effectively as my former teachers has with me. That all changed one Monday morning in October.

Coming into school on a rather cold Monday morning in the early part of October is one of the worst feelings for teachers and students. You aren't close enough to Thanksgiving to be excited for a break and the new school year has lost its shine for many. Most kids, and adults for that matter, just seem to stick with that mantra of hating Monday's. My colleagues were no different, however this Monday I overheard someone in the front office talking about how they wished they were still on vacation in the Caribbean like they had been that summer. They reflected on the fact that you don't even know what day it is, you are too relaxed and happy enjoying the beach and sounds of the ocean. It was like a light switch flipped in my brain and I ran up to my classroom and made a quick play list. This was the birth of "Marley Monday's."

From that Monday on I played Bob Marley songs between my classes. After about the third week one of the students asked me why we are always listening to Bob Marley on Monday for and I told him, you can't have a bad day listening to Bob Marley. The student laughed and told me I was right and then suggested some other reggae bands that I might like. It was the first time this student had talked in class all year. I quickly realized that I had made a connection with this student that I didn't even intend to happen. What was even better was that this student started to perform much better in my class, turning in assignments and actually using his knowledge of music to help him make connections to the work we were reading. The thing is,

when this positive connection is made with students their performance in class usually goes up, which creates a more creative learning environment (Manta and Enache, 2021).

Oberle et al. (2014) pointed to positive relationships as the strongest predictor of emotional well-being for students, superseding even that of familial support. It was only after I started using pop culture in my classrooms more and more that I realized how valuable this medium could be. Forget the content area learning that was taking place, the social-emotional learning that was taking place was even greater. The best part was my students were enjoying it and so was I. Each day my students came to class ready to learn and I was excited to find new ways to teach them. The relationships that formed were meaningful and did lead to greater student achievement.

Lack of interest in the content that is being taught in the classroom is the number one factor for students showing low reading comprehension (Considine, Horton, and Moorman, 2009). So why not use things that they can relate to (pop culture) and help build a connection to students while we are at it? John Dewey (1913) expressed his belief that interest in something helps with learning, would increase interest as well as understanding, and actually provoke effort. It is imperative that teachers provide culturally relevant texts for students to read that allow them to engage in discussion and elicit high order thinking (Morrell, 2013). One fantastic way to do this is using popular music in the classroom. By teachers taking the time and effort to use the students pop culture it shows not only innovative teaching but caring and understanding.

### **Let's Get It On: Using Pop Culture Music with Literary Analysis**

I have recounted before in *English in Texas Journal* how it was one of my students that connected the song "Somebody's Watching Me", by Rockwell that I had been playing in my classroom to the novel *1984*, which we had just started reading (Visco, 2018). This instance was

important because it was another time where something so simple had for one reason or another not been a part of my teaching. What I started doing was playing songs, as the students came into my classroom, that related to the work that we were about to read (see Figure 1). I would have the lyrics on the board and sometimes add a prompt for them to write about asking them to analyze certain lyrics and relate them to something we had read in the past. Having students give me more modern examples was even better, because I know that I could then use them with my next class or even the next year. This allowed me to keep my lessons more relevant to the students, which is extremely important (Visco, 2020). Plus, as Hall (2011) states, students are more appropriately motivated when the content is relevant to them, making connections with their outside interests, such as pop culture.

Artist	Song	Theme	Classroom Text
Al Green Michael Andrews Audioslave	“Tired of Being Alone” “Mad World” “Show Me How to Live”	Loneliness  Being Lost in the World	<i>Frankenstein</i>
Macklemore Fall Out Boy Imagine Dragons Foo Fighters	“Glorious” “Centuries” “Bleeding Out” “There Goes My Hero”	Fame  Destiny Heroism	<i>Beowulf</i> <i>or</i> <i>Ulysses</i> (poem):
Drake  The Flying Lizards  Adele  John Mayer  Celeste	“Started from the Bottom”  “Money, That’s What I Want”  “When We Were Young”  “Slow Dancing in a Burning Room”  “Strange”	American Dream  Money/Materialism  Trying to Relive Love  Ill fated Love  Mutability of Relationships	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
Duran Duran Guns N’ Roses  INXS	“Wild Boys” “Welcome to the Jungle”  “Devil Inside”	De-civilization  Man’s Inherent Evil	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>
One Republic Eminem The Flaming Lips	“I Lived” “Lose yourself” “Do You Realize”	Seize the Day	<i>Care Diem Poetry</i>
The Police  Rockwell	“Every Breath you Take”  “Somebody’s Watching Me”	Government Surveillance	<i>1984</i>

Figure 1: Teachers and Students select thematically related songs to connect with classic texts

The chart above shows just some of the music I have used in class and the connections to the works or themes that were made. What I must express is how often my students were the ones that gave those suggestions. They gave me these suggestions, not because I asked for me, but because they felt that their voices were valued and would be heard if they did have a suggestion. Why is this? Well, it is interesting because it is cyclical. My students were open to expressing themselves because they had a connection with me. They had this connection with me because I used popular culture in the classroom. So, the students, seeing my use of pop culture, wanted to teach me more about their pop culture, which I then in turn used, which made them feel like their voices were heard and valued. Emdin (2016) points out that creating authentic connections with students can lead to positive relationships no matter the cultural difference. This is in turn supported by a 2009 study by Deci, who states that the feeling of relatedness fulfills a psychological need in students that helps with their well-being and motivation.

Another fun activity with pop culture music and literary analysis is using “Pop Sonnets.” These can easily be found online and are essentially pop songs turned into Shakespearean sonnets. There are songs by Adele, Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande, and Queen (among others) that teachers can use. I print them out and cut off the part that says who the artist is and give a different one to groups of 4 students asking them to analyze the “classic” sonnets. Eventually I ask the groups what famous poet wrote their sonnet. Most say Shakespeare or Spenser pointing to the rhyme scheme as their reasoning. Their surprise and then understanding when I tell them the famous pop artist is always funny. However, it gets them interested in the concept of sonnets and the discussion quickly turns to other songs that could be turned into sonnets which is perfect because that is what I then ask each group to do. They are to turn a modern song into a sonnet

(rhyme scheme of their choosing). The students enjoy the process, and it is always a fun experience having the class try to guess what song each group chose from reading their sonnets.

Sticking with poetry, using pop music to connect to Carpe Diem poems was always something the students enjoyed. Reading “To His Coy Mistress” and linking it to “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye always got the kids attention. However, if the students are then asked in groups to connect another Carpe Diem poem to a song of their choosing, they have immediate interest because they are getting to choose what they use as a connective piece. Of course, students will have to create a presentation discussing how the song links to the concept of carpe diem, the poem they chose, and point out multiple examples of figurative language in both, but they are so excited they get right to work. Plus, they have already seen an example with the Andrew Marvell poem and the Marvin Gaye song, so they understand the expectations for their presentation.

There are other pop music centric assignments that have been used since I was in high school like making pop culture soundtracks to novels or plays. Taking the play *Macbeth* and having students create a modern soundtrack that goes with 10 parts of the play is an excellent way to make sure they are understanding the themes inherent in the play and to see if they can draw connections between the play’s themes and a modern text like pop music. Students are required to write a paragraph explaining why they chose this song for this scene. Within that paragraph they must quote a lyric from the song and link it to a line from the play and discuss how the two relate to one another. It is an excellent way to help students understand the motivations of characters, dig into the plot deeper, and practice their ability to analyze different texts to one another.

**Lean on Me: Pop Music, Literary Analysis, and Social-Emotional Learning**



The impact of using pop culture in the classroom cannot be understated. As seen in the examples and studies referenced above, the connections made with pop culture allow for greater active engagement, student success, and positive relationships. Doing this though is not as easy as throwing on a song or playing a movie. Figure 1 above does give a few examples of how to link music to themes or works of literature. However, it isn't enough to have a list. You must know why those songs work and know if they will work with your students. Part of that is getting to know students and the lives they lead, and music can get you there. Where this becomes even more important is with at-risk student as studies find that they are more likely to actively read pop culture related texts or things they consider relevant to their lives (Alvermann et al., 2007). In addition, these same at-risk students show gains in achievement and engagement when pop culture is implemented correctly (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014).

In a study by Visco (2020) it was found that the “effort” put forth by the teachers in using pop culture made students more likely to actively engage in the classwork and want to bond with that teacher. Furthermore, that bond that forms between the teacher and student should lead greater student achievement and more positive outcomes for the student (Rooda et al., 2011). While teachers use pop culture to help teach the content, the residual effect is that the students see them as someone who cares. So, using pop culture is not only good for helping students learn, but also for their well-being too.

An assignment to start the school year for any teacher (no matter the grade) is The Soundtrack to Your Life assignment. In this, students are asked to create a soundtrack to their lives for you the teacher. They are to choose songs that connect to major or meaningful moments in their lives. I recommend making them choose at least 5 and no more than 10 (I usually ask for at least half to be about their life in academia). After the students choose their songs, they need to

write a paragraph about each song. In the paragraph students are to explain why the song was chosen, connect lyrics from the song to the explanation, and cite the song correctly. For a bonus they can also turn in some cover art for their soundtrack if they please. There is one caveat, the teacher must share their soundtrack with the students before the students start working. Why? Well, because that is part of the social-emotional learning process. By sharing and opening up themselves, teachers are letting students know that this is a safe place and one in which it is okay to share your thoughts and ideas openly. Plus, it is a great way to share your pop culture music with them.

This assignment is simple but works on many levels. First, the students are forced to reflect on their lives and think about events that have made them who they are today. Next, it makes them write and defend their selections while also analyzing the text of the song via lyrical inclusion. Lastly, the students must show their knowledge of citations by having to cite the song correctly within each paragraph. So as an assessment tool for a teacher this is fantastic. Teachers can see how they write, how well do they analyze, and if they know citations. There is a deeper layer here though. Teachers will get to know their students and their lives through this assignment. In addition, teachers will learn about important events (or at least what they deem important) in their lives, find out about their taste in music, and maybe see some connections that can be made between their students' lives and those of the characters and works they will be reading this school year.

The social-emotional aspect of using pop music in the classroom works seamlessly. Its use allows students to express their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs through the lens of someone else and using someone else's words. This provides them safety and as such they will be more open to sharing and opening up within the class. An example of this is a project I do with *Beowulf*.

Now, I do it with this story, but it can be done with any hero-based story. The concept is for the students to pick who their hero is in their own life (it must be someone they know personally). Now, there are questions for the students to answer about why they chose this person and so forth. However, I also make them choose a song that talks about a hero and highlight those specific hero lyrics within the song for the class to see. Then, the students must explain why and how those lyrics relate to their hero. Again, it behooves the teacher to go first in this kind of assignment and to share their hero, song, and lyrics with the class to again build that relationship with the class. I have been so moved by how open my students have been with sharing their heroes with me and amazed at how powerful the lyrics they choose are to support their hero.

### **End of the Road: Conclusion**

There are many ways that pop culture music can help students in the classroom. From active engagement, to help with analysis, to dealing with trauma, pop music can bridge a lot of gaps both with literacy and social-emotional learning. However, it is up to the teachers to make this a reality in more classes. Sure, it is fun to play music in-between classes or while the kids are supposed to be quietly reading or writing. Those teachers are building relationships with their students as well. Wouldn't it be better to be using music with a purpose though? Having music playing in the background is fine, but having music playing in the background that links to the content and the learning taking place is better.

This kind of teaching is not for everyone. It takes time, it takes practice, and it takes being humble and asking your students for help. Students are a teacher's greatest resource when it comes to pop culture (Visco, 2020). The best part about it is, they want to help and are eager to do so. Teachers just need to be willing to ask. By asking for help, teachers are showing they care,

that students' voices are valued, and that their suggestions are appreciated. That my friends,  
more than any pop song, is music to their ears.

## REFERENCES

- Alvermann, D. E., Hagood, M. C., Heron-Hruby, A., Hughes, P., Williams, K. B., & Yoon, J. (2007). Telling themselves who they are: What one out-of-school time study revealed about underachieving readers. *Reading Psychology, 28*, 31-50.
- Considine, D., Horton, J., & Moorman, G. (2009). Teaching and reading the millennial generation through media literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 52*(6), 471-481.
- Darling-Hammond, L., M.B. Zieleszinski and S. Goldman (2014). *Using technology to support at-risk students' learning*. Washington DC: Alliance for Excellent Education
- Deci, E. L. (2009). Large-scale school reform as viewed from the self-determination theory perspective. *Theory and Research in Education, 7*, 244-252.
- Dewey, J. (1913). *Interest and effort in education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hall, L. (2011). How popular culture texts inform and shape students discussions of social studies texts. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 55* (4), 296-305.
- Manta, O. C., & Enache, R. G. (2021). Online learning of socio-emotional behaviors in primary education during the COVID 19 pandemic. Case study. *Technium Social Sciences Journal, 16*(1), 92–98.
- Morrell, E., Duenas, R., Garcia, V., & Lopez, J. (2013). *Critical media pedagogy: Teaching for achievement in city schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Guhn, M., Zumbo, B. D., & Hertzman, C. (2014). The role of supportive adults in promoting positive development in middle childhood: A population-based study. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 29*(4), 296-316.

- Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 493-529.
- Visco, W. (2018). School of rock: Using music to engage students, connect curriculum, and enhance literary analysis. *English in Texas Journal*, 48(2), 8-10.
- Visco, W. (2020). Teacher and Student Perceptions of Pop Culture in the English Classroom, dissertation; Denton, Texas. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, <https://digital.library.unt.edu>.