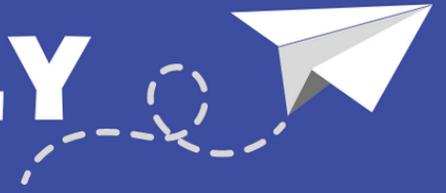




# LESSONS ON THE FLY

Curated resources from your friends at WGUV & PBS Learning Media.



**Lesson Title:** Tension in Country Music: Analyzing Lyrics

**Subject:** Music

**Grade:** 9-10

**Standards:** [bit.ly/3zdz5GN](https://bit.ly/3zdz5GN)

Examine the history of the “Saturday night/Sunday morning” tension that runs through country music’s history; and consider and discuss how the genre can simultaneously celebrate a raucous, “sinful” Saturday night alongside a reverent, pious Sunday morning. Students will listen to and analyze songs by Hank Williams, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Carter Family, gaining an appreciation for the early decades of commercial country music. Close reading and lyrical analysis activities will introduce and demonstrate paradox as a literary device.

## Directions:

### Background Reading

Hank Williams was born in Alabama on September 17, 1923. He learned to sing and play the guitar from Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne, an African American blues musician. At age 16, Williams dropped out of school to pursue music full time with his band, the Drifting Cowboys. By 1946 he joined the Louisiana Hayride radio program, where he was so successful that he was invited to join the Grand Ole Opry soon after. But Williams was addicted to painkillers (initially prescribed for his back pain) and alcohol, and was fired from the Opry due to habitual drunkenness and no-shows. Despite this, Williams’ fame soared and he wrote, recorded, and performed prolifically. At just 29 years old, Williams died of drug- and alcohol-induced causes.

Hank Williams was one of country music’s first superstars, and he remains one of its most influential figures. His biggest hits include “Cold, Cold Heart,” “Hey Good Lookin’,” “Jambalaya,” and “Your Cheatin’ Heart.”

## Materials:

1. [Lyrics sheet](https://bit.ly/3PnJMyc): [bit.ly/3PnJMyc](https://bit.ly/3PnJMyc)
2. Hank Williams as “Light and Dark” [video clip](https://bit.ly/3IQDpkt): [bit.ly/3IQDpkt](https://bit.ly/3IQDpkt)
3. Saturday Night/Sunday Morning [video clip](https://bit.ly/3ofdWb0): [bit.ly/3ofdWb0](https://bit.ly/3ofdWb0)
4. Note-taking materials

Posthumously inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Williams has been recognized by organizations like the Pulitzer Committee for his contributions to American culture. His songs have been covered by artists as diverse as James Brown, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Tony Bennett, and Ray Charles. In the decades since his untimely death, dozens of singers and songwriters from all genres have referenced Williams as their inspiration and artistic mentor. He has been called “the Hillbilly Shakespeare” for his ability to evoke strong emotions and paint heartbreaking scenes with just a few carefully chosen, plainspoken images and phrases.

1. Watch clip: Hank Williams as “Light and Dark”

In this clip, we see the push-and-pull of the Saturday night/Sunday morning paradox. When used as a literary device, paradox is the juxtaposition of a set of concepts that seem contradictory, but together reveal a hidden or unexpected truth. Songwriter Rodney Crowell articulates the paradox this way: “You go howling at the moon on Friday and Saturday night...but then Sunday morning you face the music ‘cause somebody’s mama and somebody’s favorite aunt is gonna grab you by the ear and drag you outta that bed and take you to church.” Holly Williams, the granddaughter of Hank Williams and an artist herself, puts it even more simply when she says that her grandfather constantly battled “light and dark.” Let’s listen to two Hank Williams songs to see how this “battle” played out in his music. Follow along on the lyrics sheet.

2. Distribute the lyric sheet and listen, following along with the song lyrics and marking text that establishes dark or light (or Saturday night/Sunday morning) imagery:

“I Saw the Light” by Hank Williams (Listen)

“Settin’ the Woods on Fire” by Hank Williams (Listen)

3. Discuss:

Divide students into four groups to discuss the “light and dark” tension in Hank Williams’s music. Assign each group one of the following questions, appointing one notetaker to each so the groups can report out to the class after discussing:

- In “I Saw the Light,” Hank Williams claims in the first line that he “wandered so aimless, life filled with sin.” Explain how the lyrics to “Settin the World on Fire” support that claim. How is

Williams demonstrating an “aimless” or “sinful” life in that song?

- The tone of each song is celebratory, but the cause for the celebration is different in each. Compare the joyful lyrics of the two different songs: what is Williams celebrating in “Settin the World On Fire”? In “I Saw the Light”?
- What does it mean to “see the light?” What might this have meant to Hank Williams when he penned the phrase in the American South during the 1940s? Identify lines from “I Saw the Light” to support your claim. How might we interpret the phrase “see the light” today? How might this differ from person to person or community to community?
- Identify other artists or songs (in any genre) that articulate similar sin/redemption (or, as Rodney Crowell says, Saturday night/Sunday morning) tensions. Describe how the artists or songs exemplify these tensions.

### Learning activities

The “Saturday night/Sunday morning” tension is much older than Hank Williams; it stretches back to the earliest days of the genre. Let’s extend our understanding of this opposition by exploring the earlier roots of country music, which, like Hank Williams, embody elements of both “Saturday night” and “Sunday morning.”

### Background Reading

In 1927, music producer Ralph Peer found and recorded two acts who would lay the foundation for country music in the 20th and 21st centuries: the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

The Carter Family, comprised of A.P., Sara, and Maybelle Carter, played traditional mountain music on guitar and autoharp, with Sara singing lead. Their songs focused on themes of love, family, faith, and heartbreak, drawing from their experiences in the church, as well as from the music of their friends and neighbors. Throughout the many iterations of the Carter Family band, they developed a reputation for being hardworking, clean-cut, and family-oriented.

Jimmie Rodgers, born in Mississippi in 1897, had already established a career as a railroad worker when he was discovered by Peer. Rodgers wrote and recorded prolifically, and became well known for his distinctive yodel. His songs explore themes such as rambling, carousing, drinking, and violence.

### 1. Listen

Listen to the following songs: “Keep On the Sunny Side” by the Carter Family and “In the Jailhouse Now” by Jimmie Rodgers. As you follow along on the lyric sheet, consider how the two songs together illustrate the “Saturday night/Sunday morning” tension we identified in Hank Williams’ music. Underline words and phrases that indicate the distinctions.

“Keep On the Sunny Side” by the Carter Family (Listen)

“In the Jailhouse Now” by Jimmie Rodgers (Listen)

- ### 2. Write:
- Ask students to choose a prompt, or assign both as time permits. Once students have had the opportunity to reflect on these questions, offer an opportunity to share answers aloud and discuss as a class.

Prompt 1: Compare Hank Williams’ “Keep on the Sunny Side” to “I Saw the Light,” which we listened to in the introductory activity. What similarities do you hear between these two songs? How does each song illustrate the “Sunday morning” impulse in country music? Identify specific lines from the lyrics sheet to support your claim.

- ### 3. Prompt 2:
- Compare Jimmie Rodgers’ “In the Jailhouse Now” to Hank Williams’s “Settin the Woods on Fire,” which we listened to in the introductory activity. What similarities do you hear between these two songs? How do these songs illustrate the “Saturday night” impulse in country music? Identify specific lines from the lyric sheet to support your claim.

## Culminating activity

Watch clip: Saturday Night/Sunday Morning

1. In this clip, three musicians speak about the “light and dark” tension that runs throughout country music. Choose one of the following quotes from the film, and write a response. Do you agree or disagree

with this quote? How do these quotes exemplify paradox?

- Don Reid: “You’ve got to experience Saturday night sometimes to know what Sunday morning’s all about.”
- Wynton Marsalis: “We put those two things right together: the Saturday night function, and the Sunday morning purification. And you’ve got to get purified on Sunday so you can do the same thing again next Saturday!”
- Betty Johnson: [singing “I’ll Fly Away”] “That makes you feel good. You can have a hip hurting, you can have arthritis, you can have anything wrong with you - but if you can sing that song, you’re going to feel better.”