Wisdom in Song: Analyzing Stoic Metaphors in Imagine Dragons' Music
(*Kebijaksanaan dalam Lagu: Represemtasi Nilai-Nilai Stoik melalui Metafora Konseptual dalam Lirik Lagu Album Evolve Karya Imagine Dragons*)

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Article Info	Abstract

This research examines the integration of Stoic philosophy and metaphor in the lyrics of Imagine Dragons' Evolve album, focusing on the songs "Believer," "Thunder," and "Whatever It Takes." Using a qualitative descriptive method within a structuralism framework, this study explores how conceptual metaphors serve as vehicles for conveying Stoic principles such as emotional resilience, self-discipline, and growth through adversity. The analysis reveals that metaphors like "pain," "chains," "lightning," and "sail" are not just stylistic devices, but cognitive structures that articulate key Stoic ideas. For instance, "pain" is portrayed not as suffering to be avoided, but as a catalyst for inner strength and transformation, reflecting the Stoic view that adversity is necessary for personal growth. Similarly, images of "chains" symbolize psychological constraints, while "lightning" and "sail" represent dynamic energy and purposeful direction in life. These metaphors map abstract philosophical concepts onto concrete, emotionally resonant imagery, allowing listeners to engage with complex ideas in an intuitive and relatable manner. The study demonstrates that the figurative language in Imagine Dragons' lyrics transforms emotional experiences into philosophical reflections, bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary expression. This suggests that popular music, through metaphor, can function as a modern medium for philosophical discourse, particularly for young audiences. In doing so, this research contributes to the broader field of literary and philosophical studies by illustrating how modern song lyrics can reflect and disseminate classical ideas, fostering a deeper appreciation of Stoic values through the lens of popular culture.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji integrasi filsafat Stoik dan penggunaan metafora dalam lirik lagu album Evolve milik Imagine Dragons, dengan fokus pada lagu "Believer," "Thunder," dan "Whatever It Takes." Menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dalam kerangka strukturalisme, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana metafora konseptual menjadi sarana untuk menyampaikan prinsip-prinsip Stoik seperti ketahanan emosional, disiplin diri, dan pertumbuhan melalui kesulitan. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa metafora seperti "pain" (rasa sakit), "chains" (rantai), "lightning" (petir), dan "sail" (layar) bukan sekadar gaya bahasa, tetapi struktur kognitif yang merepresentasikan gagasan inti Stoik. Misalnya, "pain" tidak dipandang sebagai penderitaan yang harus dihindari, melainkan sebagai pemicu kekuatan batin dan transformasi, sejalan dengan pandangan Stoik bahwa

kesulitan diperlukan untuk pertumbuhan pribadi. Sementara itu, "chains" menggambarkan keterikatan psikologis, dan metafora seperti "lightning" dan "sail" merepresentasikan energi dinamis serta arah hidup yang penuh tujuan. Metafora-metafora ini memetakan konsep filosofis yang abstrak ke dalam citra konkret yang menyentuh emosi, sehingga memudahkan pendengar untuk memahami ide-ide kompleks secara intuitif dan relevan. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa kiasan dalam lirik Imagine Dragons mengubah pengalaman emosional menjadi refleksi filosofis, menjembatani kebijaksanaan kuno dengan ekspresi modern. Hal ini menyiratkan bahwa musik populer, melalui metafora, dapat berfungsi sebagai media kontemporer untuk wacana filosofis, khususnya bagi audiens muda. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian sastra dan filsafat dengan menunjukkan bagaimana lirik lagu modern dapat merefleksikan dan menyebarkan ide-ide klasik, serta menumbuhkan apresiasi terhadap nilai-nilai Stoik melalui budaya populer.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Music has long been an expressive medium for conveying philosophical ideas, emotional experiences, and cultural values. In the modern era, song lyrics are not merely forms of entertainment but also serve as powerful reflective tools that channel complex human experiences into symbolic narratives. Themes such as courage, perseverance, self-discipline, and moral transformation are often embedded in lyrical expressions, allowing music to act as a bridge between emotion and philosophical thought. One philosophical school that has recently gained renewed attention in public discourse is Stoicism, an ancient Greek philosophy that emphasizes virtue, emotional resilience, rationality, and acceptance of what lies beyond one's control (Pigliucci, 2022; Robertson, 2021).

In the context of modern media, Stoic ideals subtly emerge in various forms, including literature, films, and cognitive therapy, but their presence in popular music remains underexplored. Imagine Dragons, an American pop-rock band known for their emotionally charged compositions and introspective lyrics, offers a compelling example of how Stoic principles can manifest in mainstream music. Their 2017 album *Evolve* features songs such as "Believer," "Thunder," and "Whatever It Takes," which thematically revolve around struggle, transformation, and perseverance. Lyrics like "Pain! You made me a, you made me a believer" or "I love how it feels when I break the chains" are not simply artistic flourishes; they metaphorically encapsulate Stoic teachings about enduring hardship, embracing fate (*amor fati*), and cultivating inner strength (*prohairesis*).

While previous studies have examined metaphor use in music (Bamagin et al., 2023; Waruwu et al., 2022), most are limited to structural or stylistic analysis, focusing on metaphor types and their linguistic patterns without delving into the philosophical depth or moral content behind those metaphors. Similarly, although Stoicism has been analyzed in the context of film, literature, and psychological therapy (Irvine, 2020; Sherman, 2022), its interplay with popular song lyrics—particularly through metaphorical language—remains a relatively untapped area of inquiry. This gap highlights the need for an interdisciplinary study that bridges philosophy, metaphor theory, and music analysis to uncover how ancient wisdom continues to resonate in modern cultural texts.

This research therefore seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the conceptual metaphors used in selected Imagine Dragons songs through the lens of Stoic philosophy. Specifically, the study explores how figurative expressions such as "fire," "chains," "lightning," and "sailing" are not only poetic but also embody Stoic concepts like emotional discipline, acceptance of hardship, and moral growth. Employing a qualitative descriptive method within a structuralism framework and guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), this study aims to answer the following questions: *How are Stoic ideas represented through metaphor in Imagine Dragons' lyrics? What values or principles do these metaphors convey? How does the integration of Stoic philosophy in music provide listeners with philosophical insight into life's challenges?*

By addressing these questions, the study contributes a novel perspective on how popular music functions as a medium for philosophical reflection, particularly in fostering resilience and virtue ethics in contemporary society. It demonstrates that beyond aesthetic enjoyment, song lyrics can serve as accessible vessels for timeless philosophical teachings, especially when decoded through the lens of metaphor and moral meaning.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in a structuralism analysis framework and conceptual metaphor theory to examine how Stoic metaphors are embedded in Imagine Dragons' song lyrics. The qualitative method is chosen for its strength in capturing the depth of symbolic meaning and philosophical nuance within lyrical texts. As emphasized by Denzin and Lincoln (2024), qualitative approaches are particularly effective for interpreting human experiences, symbolic expression, and cultural values within their natural context. Rather than quantifying data, this study seeks to interpretively explore how song lyrics function as a medium for communicating Stoic values such as fortitude, emotional self-discipline, and the embrace of suffering (amor fati).

2.2 Data and Sources

The primary data in this research consists of the song lyrics from three selected tracks in the *Evolve* album by Imagine Dragons (2017): "Believer," "Thunder," and "Whatever It Takes." These songs were purposefully selected because of their recurring themes related to personal struggle, self-improvement, and mental resilience—core aspects of Stoic philosophy. The lyrics were obtained from www.lyricfind.com, a licensed and credible source for official song texts, and were cross-verified with other reliable music lyric databases to ensure accuracy. In this context, the subject of the study is not the songs themselves as musical compositions, but rather the metaphorical expressions contained within the lyrics. The researcher serves as the main instrument of analysis, making interpretive judgments based on linguistic sensitivity and familiarity with Stoic thought and metaphor theory.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using documentation techniques, specifically by compiling official lyric texts of the three selected songs. To contextualize and deepen the analysis, the study also includes secondary data from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other scholarly resources related to Stoicism, conceptual metaphors, and music aesthetics. These sources helped construct a robust theoretical foundation and guide the interpretation of metaphorical meanings. Additionally, references to classical and modern Stoic works (e.g., by Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Pigliucci, and Robertson) were consulted to ensure the Stoic concepts discussed in the analysis align with authoritative interpretations.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis was conducted in several stages, following the Miles and Huberman (2014) model of qualitative analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, the researcher conducted data reduction by identifying and selecting lyric segments that contain metaphorical language. Each metaphor was then categorized according to its image schema (e.g., *fire*, *chains*, *thunder*) and its possible philosophical associations. Second, in the data display stage, the metaphors were grouped and organized thematically based on related Stoic concepts such as *prohairesis* (moral agency), *amor fati* (love of fate), and *apatheia* (emotional control). Finally, the interpretative process involved linking these metaphors to Stoic teachings, using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) to uncover how abstract philosophical concepts are grounded in embodied, physical imagery. The analysis sought to illuminate how modern song lyrics reflect and repackage ancient philosophical insights in accessible and emotionally resonant forms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Metaphor as an Instrument of Wisdom in the Lyrics of "Believer"

The song *"Believer"* by Imagine Dragons provides a rich tapestry of metaphors that resonate deeply with Stoic philosophical thought. One of the most powerful recurring metaphors is encapsulated in the line *"Pain! You made me a believer."* At a surface level, this might suggest a cathartic release or transformation through hardship. However, under a deeper Stoic lens, this metaphor aligns closely with the doctrines of Epictetus and Seneca, who viewed suffering not as an obstacle, but as a necessary condition for cultivating virtue. In Stoicism, pain is not to be avoided but embraced as a teacher—a test of one's character and an opportunity for moral development.

Conceptually, this metaphor can be categorized as a causal metaphor, where *pain* (the source domain) is seen as the catalyst that produces *belief* or *resilience* (the target domain). According to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) theory of conceptual metaphors, this mapping translates physical or emotional suffering into a higher-order abstraction of spiritual or personal growth. In this framework, the listener is invited to

reframe their own struggles as meaningful components of inner transformation, rather than random misfortunes. The metaphor thus functions not merely as poetic embellishment but as a cognitive and emotional reframing tool.

Furthermore, the metaphor in *"Believer"* echoes John White's (2022) interpretation that Stoic metaphors serve a dual function: rhetorical and epistemological. That is, metaphor is used not only to express experience but to reconfigure one's understanding of that experience. Through the repetition of "pain" as a creative force, the song mirrors the Stoic practice of *premeditatio malorum*—the reflection on possible suffering in order to develop detachment and resilience. The pain becomes not just endurable but necessary, even welcome, as it shapes a stronger, wiser self.

Ultimately, *"Believer"* can be read as a modern Stoic anthem, using metaphor to turn inward suffering into outward strength. It embodies the Stoic conviction that human beings are not defined by the comfort of their circumstances, but by their response to adversity. In this way, the song serves as a cultural vessel through which timeless philosophical ideas are translated into contemporary emotional language, making Stoicism accessible and personally relevant to today's listeners.

3.2 "Thunder" and the Metaphor of Resistance to Social Conformity

The song *"Thunder"* by Imagine Dragons captures the emotional landscape of an individual breaking free from the constraints of social expectations. Central to the song's narrative is the metaphor in the line *"Fit the box, fit the mold,"* which exemplifies how societal norms can act as restrictive frameworks that attempt to confine individual identity and creativity. This metaphor serves as a striking ontological device— "box" and "mold" represent physical containers that symbolize abstract pressures to conform. The individual is expected to shrink, reshape, or limit themselves to fit external definitions of success, behavior, or acceptance. This is strongly aligned with Stoic doctrine, particularly the teachings of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, who warn against the pull of *doxa* (popular opinion) and emphasize the importance of living in accordance with one's own *logos* (rational nature).

The metaphor *"box"* suggests enclosure—a lack of freedom to expand or move—while *"mold"* implies predetermined structure and lack of individuality. Within Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) framework of conceptual metaphors, these are categorized as ontological metaphors, where intangible experiences (like societal pressure or judgment) are described in terms of physical objects or boundaries. Such metaphors are cognitively powerful because they allow listeners to viscerally imagine the experience of being boxed in or molded by others. Through this figurative language, the song critiques the passive assimilation of social norms and affirms the Stoic imperative to define one's path based on inner reason, not outer validation.

Another significant metaphor is found in the line *"I was lightning before the thunder."* This expression encapsulates a profound Stoic insight: that true strength, brilliance, and transformation begin internally—often in silence—long before they are noticed or celebrated by others. *Lightning* becomes a metaphor for inner power or insight, a sudden surge of energy that symbolizes personal integrity and latent potential. *Thunder*, in contrast, represents the delayed public acknowledgment or external noise that follows. In Stoic terms, this metaphor maps closely to the concept of *prohairesis*—the inner moral will that governs an individual's choices, regardless of external circumstances or recognition. As Čelkytė (2024) explains, the Stoic sage prioritizes internal virtue over public validation, which makes the sequence of lightning preceding thunder a powerful illustration of Stoic ethical structure.

Papadopoulou (2023) further supports this interpretation by emphasizing how contemporary music uses spatial and physical metaphors to resist hegemonic social values. In *"Thunder"*, the metaphors of enclosure (box, mold) are juxtaposed with imagery of force and natural energy (lightning, thunder), creating a cognitive contrast between restriction and liberation. This dynamic serves as a narrative of self-emancipation through inner resolve—a fundamentally Stoic message.

In conclusion, *"Thunder"* functions not just as a rebellious anthem against conformity, but as a metaphorical narrative of Stoic resistance and self-determination. Through its layered metaphors, the song reclaims personal identity as something shaped from within, rather than imposed from without. It celebrates the quiet strength of choosing one's own path, a principle that lies at the heart of Stoic virtue.

3.3 "Whatever It Takes" and the Metaphor of Perseverance in the Path of Life

In *Whatever It Takes*, the metaphor "I do whatever it takes, 'cause I love how it feels when I break the chains" powerfully encapsulates the struggle for self-mastery and the pursuit of inner freedom. The "chains" metaphor functions as a symbol of the invisible constraints that bind the self—be they emotional burdens, self-doubt, societal expectations, or irrational passions. In Stoic philosophy, especially as articulated by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, true freedom is not the absence of external obstacles, but the internal liberation from irrational attachments and reactive emotions. Thus, the act of "breaking the chains" metaphorically represents the Stoic exercise of *prohairesis*—the faculty of rational choice that allows individuals to respond virtuously regardless of circumstances.

This metaphor falls into the category of ontological metaphors, where abstract experiences (e.g., fear, insecurity) are conceptualized as physical objects or entities that can be manipulated or destroyed. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) framework of conceptual metaphor theory, this allows listeners to frame psychological struggle as a tangible and conquerable force. The emotional gratification ("I love how it feels") following the act of breaking free aligns with the Stoic idea that virtue—lived through rational resistance to internal passions—leads to *eudaimonia* (a flourishing life), not through pleasure, but through a sense of integrity and alignment with nature's rational order.

Furthermore, this interpretation resonates with Woodward's (2024) claim that musical metaphors serve as cognitive scaffolds for moral insight, turning internal conflict into an aesthetically accessible and emotionally resonant narrative. The imagery of chains being shattered serves not merely as poetic flourish, but as a cognitive visualization of Stoic resilience in action. Gibbs (2022) further affirms that such metaphors operate within a visual-spatial schema, allowing the audience to "see" internal growth and moral effort. By equating perseverance with breaking psychological chains, the song becomes a vessel for Stoic didacticism—transforming emotional pain into disciplined striving, and passive endurance into active transcendence.

3.4 Relation of Findings to Previous Literature and Theoretical Implications

This research contributes a significant philosophical dimension to the study of metaphors in music—a dimension that remains underexplored in previous literature. While earlier studies such as Bamagin et al. (2023) and Waruwu et al. (2022) have analyzed metaphors largely through a linguistic or cognitive semantic lens, focusing on metaphor types, structures, and mappings, they often overlook the deeper ethical and psychological implications that metaphors can carry. By contrast, the present study shifts the analytical focus from form to function—specifically, to the transformative potential of metaphor when grounded in Stoic philosophy. This shift enables a richer understanding of how metaphor in music can serve not merely as a stylistic device, but as a vehicle for internalizing values such as endurance, rationality, and emotional regulation.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce Hoggan's (2024) concept of "transformational metaphors," which posits that certain metaphors have the capacity to reshape personal meaning and worldview. The metaphors identified in the selected songs—such as "breaking the chains" or "fit the box, fit the mold"—are not passive descriptors; rather, they operate as invitations to reinterpret suffering, social conformity, and personal agency through a more Stoic framework. This resonates with contemporary understandings of metaphor not only as linguistic expression, but as an experiential and pedagogical tool that enables moral reflection and cognitive reframing (Gibbs, 2022; Semino, 2021).

Moreover, the study uncovers an important pedagogical implication. When interpreted through what this paper introduces as the "Stoic Metaphor Lens," song lyrics can become moral texts—resources for character education and mental health development. The Stoic themes embedded in these metaphors—such as self-discipline, resistance to external control, and prioritization of internal virtue—align closely with the goals of modern educational curricula that seek to cultivate resilience, integrity, and emotional intelligence. As Johnson (2023) points out, metaphors in public discourse can act as soft technologies of the self, shaping how individuals conceptualize their agency and ethical priorities. This research extends that premise to the realm of music, arguing that metaphors in popular lyrics can perform similar ethical functions.

In this light, the "Stoic Metaphor Lens" is proposed not only as an analytical framework but as a conceptual innovation that expands the scope of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). While CMT traditionally emphasizes the cognitive structuring of abstract thought through embodied metaphor, this study suggests that metaphor should also be considered a philosophical instrument—one that channels existential insights, promotes psychological resilience, and fosters moral imagination. By integrating philosophical ethics into metaphor theory, this research opens up a new interdisciplinary space between linguistics, education, and moral philosophy. Ultimately, it argues for a rethinking of musical metaphor as a form of everyday moral philosophy, offering both aesthetic pleasure and ethical depth.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION/RECOMMENDATION

4.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that metaphors in music—particularly those influenced by Stoic philosophy—can serve not only as poetic devices but also as meaningful channels for ethical reflection, character formation, and psychological resilience. By examining how Stoic metaphors are embedded in song lyrics, the study reveals the pedagogical and therapeutic potential of popular music when approached through a philosophical lens. These metaphors invite listeners to reframe personal experiences of suffering, success, and identity in ways that align with Stoic virtues such as acceptance, self-control, and inner peace. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how music can act as a modern vessel for ancient wisdom.

The study also advances metaphor theory by introducing the concept of the "Stoic Metaphor Lens," a framework that bridges literary, philosophical, and educational perspectives. This lens opens new

possibilities for future interdisciplinary research that connects metaphorical language with moral discourse and emotional literacy. Furthermore, by advocating for the use of song lyrics in critical literacy and character education, the research emphasizes the practical relevance of integrating philosophy with everyday cultural experiences. Ultimately, this work encourages educators, scholars, and cultural institutions to recognize and harness the ethical dimensions of metaphor in popular media as a tool for nurturing reflective and resilient individuals.

4.2   Suggestion/Recommendation

This research opens several promising avenues for further exploration. First, future researchers are encouraged to broaden the object of study by incorporating a wider range of songs, either from different albums or from other musicians who exhibit similar thematic patterns. A comparative approach that juxtaposes contemporary popular music with classical philosophical texts could yield rich insights into the intersection of modern culture and ancient thought, illuminating how timeless philosophical ideas are reinterpreted in today's media landscape.

Second, the findings of this study offer valuable implications for educational contexts, particularly in the domains of critical literacy and character education. Song lyrics, when analyzed through the lens of metaphor and philosophical wisdom, can serve as engaging learning materials for fostering self-reflection, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking skills among students. By integrating metaphor analysis into classroom practice, educators can provide learners with meaningful tools to interpret both language and life experiences more thoughtfully.

Third, for scholars in philosophy and literature, this research lays the groundwork for developing a new theoretical framework around "ethical metaphors" in popular media. These are metaphors that go beyond aesthetic appeal to encapsulate moral meaning and practical wisdom. The metaphor thus becomes not only a linguistic or cognitive device but a vessel of ethical insight that can shape public discourse and personal development.

Lastly, recognizing the powerful role of popular culture in shaping collective consciousness, this study calls for greater institutional support from educational and cultural bodies. By promoting research that bridges philosophy and popular media, these institutions can contribute to the emotional and intellectual literacy of the younger generation, fostering a deeper engagement with values such as resilience, authenticity, and reflective living.

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