

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

CRYSTAL, MUD, OR JELLO: The Meaning of Meaning in a Song

by Bill Pere

Part I: METAPHOR AND THE LYRICAL LAYER CAKE

In talking over the years with hundreds of songwriters, both amateur and professional, it is clear that the major goal of a writer in presenting a song for public consumption is to have the listeners understand the message, thought, or feeling that the song embodies. This can be accomplished by finding a balance between clarity and color.

If there is a story to be told, or a message to be stated, or an emotion to be evoked, the words must be clearly directed toward that single goal. It has also been emphasized here that lyrics must be colorful and creative in their use of language and imagery. One of the most delicate of the many tasks that a lyricist faces is balancing these two opposing factors. Language which is absolutely direct and to the point is too drab to hold the interest of a potential listener for three minutes. (To verify this, try listening to a scientific lecture on the properties of the sweat glands of tropical natives' eyebrows). On the other hand, if the language is too highly laced with images without enough concrete references or common threads to keep the message in focus, then a listener will have to work too hard to "figure it out", and at best could only come up with a guess as to what you really mean. (Try a lecture on the existential significance of the pitted prune in metaphysical mantras). Consider the example "Your lucid eyes are a plane apart from the spires to which my song aspires..." While one can acknowledge that this is neither bland nor unpleasant in sound, it really has no clear meaning and would probably take more than three minutes of additional lyrics just to remove its openness to interpretation. Leaving something 'open to interpretation' directly conflicts with the goal of trying to make a clear, concise point.

There are a number of tools to help you achieve a good balance. Before using these techniques, however, it is necessary that you be familiar with the basic language coloring tools like simile, metaphor, alliteration, oxymoron, etc. If you are not, then refer to other Songcrafters Coloring Book chapters that describe these tools.

Let's start with the concept of conceit. This does not refer to the undesirable trait whereby a lyricist thinks that his or her lyrics are the greatest examples of wordsmithing since the dawn of man. A 'conceit' in creative writing, whose root meaning is 'something conceived', refers to an implied metaphor which is conceived in the author's mind, and not directly stated, but which may act as a "controlling image" for the piece, around which all other imagery may revolve. That is to say, it is an analogy which equates two apparently unrelated things, but may never directly state in the lyric that "A" IS "B". The unstated metaphor serves as a unifying idea for the lyric, helping to keep it focused on making the point or conveying the message. In some cases, the analogy may be stated directly, early in the lyric and serve as the controlling image, or it may be stated at the end, with everything leading to it. Let's look at some examples. Assume we have a metaphor which says "life is a book". If the lyric says

My life is a book and I'm in Chapter 11

the metaphor is directly stated in the lyric. Whether or not the book becomes the controlling image depends on how the rest of the lyric is developed. If the lyricist picks up on the "Chapter 11" idea and uses images that stem from the equation "life without love = bankruptcy", then bankruptcy becomes the controlling image and the life = book metaphor simply becomes one of the supporting images in the lyric. If we have a lyric which states:

*Tho' the binding shows its age
When I read the story of our lives
There's love on every page*

There is a "life = book" controlling image in this case because the equivalence between the two is clear, not directly stated, and each of the other references (binding, page) in some way relates to that central equation. Consider another example:

*As I tiptoe through the graveyard in the evening mist, alone
I look at all the dates that frame the dashes set in stone
One date marks the ending, one date marks the start
But the dash contained the laugh, the love, the joy, the soul, the heart.*

These lines clearly convey without directly stating that the content of a life is being equated to a punctuation mark i.e., a dash.

There are two kinds of conceits: a Petrarchan conceit and a Metaphysical conceit. The former, often seen in sonnets and love poems, usually compares the subject of the poem to a concrete object like a flower, a garden, a raindrop, etc. The metaphysical conceit is usually a much more complex analogy where the comparison is very unexpected and intellectually clever. Some examples from poetry:

The Italian poet Giambattista Marino in the 17th century used the equation 'stars = coins' to generate the phrase "Blazing half-dimes from the celestial mint". Edward Taylor built a poem around the equation "me = cloth", which contains lines such as:

*Make me thy loom then, knit therein this twine
Make thy Holy Spirit Lord wind quills
Then weave the web thyself, the yarn is fine...*

In contemporary song lyrics, conceits are frequently at work. The Petrarchan analogy "me = a bird" gives us "You are the Wind Beneath My Wings." The metaphor "you = wind" is directly stated, but the equivalence of "me = bird" is not. Jimmy Webb's conceit "a park = a cake", where the park is in turn symbolic of a love relationship became "MacArthur Park". If a metaphysical conceit is supposed to be startling, Harry Chapin was right on target when he equated "psychotic mass murder" with "a conversation" to serve as the controlling image for "Sniper", which is one of his most outstanding works (a supporting image is the metaphor "bullets = pointed questions"). Another metaphysical conceit is the equation "seekers of material success = travelers on the road to Oz". This relationship, under the pen of lyricist Bernie Taupin, yielded the Elton John song "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road". In another Elton John song, "Empty Garden", which is a beautiful tribute to John Lennon, lyricist Bernie Taupin equates Lennon's songs to a lush garden crop. Every image in the

song is garden-related, even to the point of referring to Lennon's killer as an insect who destroyed so much grain.

Insuring that all the images relate back the controlling image is called "tone constancy" and this is a requirement for the effective use of conceit. If only some of the images relate to the conceit, while others don't, it becomes hard for the idea to stay in focus, and the listener becomes confused. This kind of sloppy writing leads to 'mixed metaphors', which is the term given to a metaphor about apples in a song full of oranges. For example:

*Lovin' you is a grand slam but you made a double-play
Two balls and a strike won't make you balk
You appeal to my base instincts like a chocolate soufflee
It's my turn at bat and I'm goin' for a walk.*

In this beautifully moving lyric, every image relates to the equation "physical love = a baseball game", except for the chocolate soufflee, which sticks out like a bad note. It creates a mixed metaphor. Something about a hot dog might have been better.

The importance of tone constancy cannot be overstated, because without it the effectiveness of a controlling image is negated. Another fine example is the standard by George David Weiss, "What A Wonderful World". Here, the conceit is "colors of nature = races of mankind", and every image in the lyric relates to this unstated analogy. Not a single reference to chocolate soufflee.

This leads to an important question: "What about all the great songs that do not have all of the images centered around a single metaphor?" There is nothing that requires a song to use a conceit or controlling image. It is only one of the many tools available to a lyricist. There are songs called "list songs", which do not have a controlling image, thus are not 'tone constant' in the use of imagery. Dan Fogelberg's song "Longer", uses many images, but none of them relate semantically to each other. The lyric states that the singer's love for the singee is longer than the age of the heavens, higher than mountains, deeper than forests, higher than birds in flight, etc. The two important elements here are that ALL of the metaphors are semantically mixed so that no single one stands out as an oddball, and ALL of the images do relate to and reinforce the central MESSAGE of the song i.e. "my love for you is of great magnitude".

It is important here to note that although a song does not necessarily have to have a controlling image a song MUST have a focus, i.e., a central, easy to state idea which embodies the main point or message of the lyric. Note also that even though the metaphors in "Longer" do not relate to a central image, they all are about natural things of great magnitude and are thus consistent in concept, and also parallel in construction (Longer than, Higher than, Deeper than, Truer than...) Even story songs are not required to use conceit. The classic "Coward of the County" is a story which employs many colorful devices like alliterations and foreshadowing, but it does not have a controlling image. It relates the tale in a very direct yet cinematic fashion, which is why it works. Its focus is crystal clear.

To summarize thus far: All lyrics must have a focus, which is a well defined central idea or message. A lyric may or may not use a controlling image i.e., a conceit to express this central idea. If your lyric has a conceit, then it becomes necessary for the images to be tone constant, i.e., to all relate back to the controlling image, otherwise, mixed metaphors result.

This brings us now to the discussion of balancing color and clarity. The balance lies in consistency. Tone consistency is one way of being colorful while staying sharply focused (note that 'consistency' is synonymous with 'consistency'). In songs which do not employ a controlling image, the images used cannot be tone constant, but they can and must all serve to reinforce the primary point or message of the song. Any single simile or metaphor which does not do this will detract from the overall clarity by making the listener momentarily uncertain of what is being conveyed, and in that moment of uncertainty, the song rolls on by, leaving the listener to play 'catch up' (or if it's a publisher, they'll play 'eject and reject').

ASCENDING TO THE SECOND STORY...Allegory:

There is another entire facet in the area of lyrical metaphors that merits discussion. Many lyricists have important messages to convey or social statements to make, or artistically intellectual experiments to try. One could do so by taking the 'direct' approach and leaving no doubt about the meaning, but the result would probably, at best, be a topical, novelty or protest song which despite any merits it might have, would only appeal to a limited audience (i.e., those who agree with the position taken), and would stand little chance of ever becoming a 'standard' (a cult favorite, perhaps). If it is the songwriters intent to appeal to and thus communicate with the broadest possible audience, then yet another variation of metaphor can be employed...the allegory.

Let's first take a look at how information is conveyed by language. Based on the work of linguist Noam Chomsky, all language has a grammar which carries with it at least two levels of meaning. The surface level deals only with the direct, literal meaning of the words and usually only conveys a small part of the information contained in the sentence(s). The deep structure contains much additional information and connotations, which an active listener will perceive, while a casual listener may not. (For any serious lyricist, I would highly recommend reading some of the work of Noam Chomsky on linguistics, grammar, and how information is communicated. It is somewhat like reading about tropical sweat glands, but it is of direct significance to the craft of lyric writing. Look in any library under the author's name.)

An allegory extends the use of metaphor to pervade this entire second level of meaning. A lyric may tell a story, complete unto itself on the surface, but in reality, the writer is using the persons, objects and actions to represent things outside the narrative. Thus, there are multiple analogies at work, which relate to form an entire second message, all beneath the surface level of the lyric. This allows casual listeners to hear the song and even though they may not be aware of its 'real' message, they still get a satisfying lyric, and thus will not be averse to hearing it again. And the more times they listen, the better the chance is that they will finally 'get it'. An allegorical lyric is very difficult to write because in addition to the fact that the surface meaning must follow the basic principles of good lyric writing, everything portrayed in the lyric must be metaphorically equated to something else to weave an entirely different tale. In the Bernie Taupin/Elton John example mentioned above, John Lennon is a gardener and his assassin is an insect, yet even if the listener is unaware of this, there is still a complete and thus satisfying lyric about a gardener who is now gone. Consider this example written by Terry Kirkman and recorded by The Association in the 1960's.

REQUIEM FOR THE MASSES

Requiem Aeternum

Mama, mama, forget your pies,

Have faith they won't get cold
Then turn your eyes to the bloodshot skies,
Your flag is flying full
At half mast for the matadors
Who turned their backs to please the crowd
And all fell before the bull

Red was the color of his blood flowing thin
Pallid white was the color of his lifeless skin
Blue was the color of the morning sky
He saw looking up from the ground where he died
It was the last thing ever seen by him

Kyrie Eleison

Mama, mama, forget your pies,
Have faith they won't get cold
Then turn your eyes to the bloodshot skies,
Your flag is flying full
At half mast for the matadors
Who turned their backs to please the crowd
And all fell before the bull

Black and white were the figures that recorded him
Black and white was the newsprint he was mentioned in
Black and white was the question that so bothered him
He never asked, he was taught not to ask
But was on his lips as they buried him

Looking only at the surface, this is a lyric which pays tribute to fallen bullfighters. Its imagery is tone constant toward that end, well supported by the music, with Latin phrases, majestically rendered in sacred choral style, snare drum dirges, and a flamenco-sounding guitar. The fact that Catholicism is a predominant religion in Spain and Mexico is totally consistent with the religious meaning of 'Masses' in the title. The song could stand completely on its own, on its surface meaning alone. But the underlying allegory is present right in the title, when one considers the that 'masses' also refers to the general population of a country. If we take the unstated metaphors to be "bull = racism" and "matadors = civil rights leaders" then the song takes on a whole second meaning, underscored by the 'black and white' references of the second verse. The hidden 'second story' is a direct outgrowth of the turbulent events of the late 1960's. Let's take a look at another example by Harry Chapin:

DANCE BAND ON THE TITANIC

(Chorus): *Dance Band on the Titanic*
Sing 'Nearer My God to Thee'
The iceberg's on the starboard bow
Won't you dance with me?

Mama stood cryin' at the dockside
Saying "Please son, don't take this trip"
I said "Mama, sweet mama, don't you worry none,
Even God couldn't sink this ship..."

Well, the whistle blew and they turned the screws
It churned the water into foam
Destination -- Sweet Salvation,
Goodbye home sweet home...

There was a trombone and a saxophone
The bass and drums were cookin' on the bandstand
I was strummin' in the middle with this dude on the fiddle
We were three days out from land

Now the foghorn's jammed and moaning
Hear it groaning through the misty night
I heard the lookout shout down "There's icebergs all around,
But stil everything's all right"

(Chorus)

They were burning all the flares for candles
In the banquet they were throwing in First Class
And we were blowing waltzes in the ballroom
When the universe went 'Crash'

"There's no way this could happen!"
I could hear the old captain curse.
He ordered "Lifeboats away". That's when I heard the chaplain say
"Women, children and chaplains first!"

Well they soon used up all of the lifeboats
But there were alot of us left on board
I heard the drummer saying "Boys, just keep playing,
Now we're doing this date for the Lord..."

(Chorus)

There's a wild-eyed boy in the radio shack
He's the last remaining guest
He was tapping in a Morse code frenzy
Tapping "Please God...S.O.S.!"

Jesus Christ can walk on water,
Where a music man will drown
They say Nero fiddled while Rome burned up,
Well, I'll be strumming as the ship goes down.

Again, there is a totally self-contained story in the surface meaning of the words, which is enough to make the song clear and complete with no further interpretation needed. However, for those who like to find that second story, the conceit is "Titanic = planet Earth". With this in mind, the song takes on a whole new perspective: The passengers and their behavior reflect our Western society and the song carries the social message "If we ignore the warnings (icebergs) and don't show more concern for our environment and our fellow human beings, we'll destroy the planet". If this social message were stated directly, the song would be a typical protest song and not have the much broader appeal it has by also providing a look at a well known historical event.

If a song is allegorical and well crafted, then it doesn't take much to understand that second meaning, once the main conceit is known. If you find yourself having to do a lot of guessing and speculating, then either the song is not well crafted or you're "reading too much into it", i.e., it doesn't really have a second meaning.

Alternate Viewpoints and Contexts:

Allegory is not the only way to convey dual messages. Another technique, which also requires fine crafting, is to have a dual context. That is, you the writer, intentionally allow two or more equally valid interpretations of your words. For example, in the modern standard "You Light Up My Life", the "you" can refer to either a special loved one, or to God, making the song either a sensitive secular love song, or a song of praise and thanks to God, depending only on how you, the listener, choose to view it. Unlike the allegory, no lyrics require alternate interpretation to arrive at a hidden second meaning. The lyrics are taken only at their surface meaning. What shifts is the interpretation of who the singee (the "you" in the title) is. To further illustrate the point, one could also shift the context so that the singee is a pet, like a dog or cat bringing joy to a lonely person, and the song still makes perfect sense at face value. This is why the song is a standard. It is totally universal at its surface level, and does not exclude any listener from identifying with it by allowing shifting viewpoints. Note that a viewpoint is external to the song itself. It is something a listener imposes on the way he or she perceives the lyrical content. Is Barry Manilow's song "Mandy" about a girl or a dog? More importantly, does that make a difference to the interpretation of the lyric? A lyric which can stand on its own from many different listener viewpoints, all intended by the writer, is a well crafted piece of work.

At a well attended song critique session, a beautifully produced song was played by a new member of the group. The lyric spoke about memories that were fading and the sadness of the singer about not being able to retrieve them as clearly as he once could. It was not clear exactly who the singer was, and I recall as I listened to this piece that after a verse and chorus of interpreting the singer as a typical male in a typical love song, I felt that I liked the production but really couldn't get a handle on the meaning of the lyric. Through many years of critiquing, I have learned that if a lyric seems unclear, it helps to try to view it a different way. So I then shifted my internal viewpoint to think of the singer as being an elderly person with Alzheimer's Disease. All of a sudden, the entire lyric took on a new meaning, and in fact was very moving, almost to the point of evoking tears. This element was echoed by some other listeners as well in the course of the critique. The writer then revealed that the song was in fact supposed to be from the point of view of an elderly person. This clearly points out what can happen if a song is written in a way that works only from a specific viewpoint, yet leaves elements open to interpretation. If I had

not internally shifted my perception, or if the writer was not there to explain the song, I would have missed out on appreciating its power. This then is a song which is context-dependent, such that if the point of view is not correctly interpreted, the lyrics do not make the intended impact on the listener. Context-dependent songs can work in movies or shows, where the story has clearly set up the situation, but because most casual listeners are not analytic and do not expend effort to extract an intended meaning, such songs can rarely stand alone.

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