

SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

By Bill Pere

THE MEANING OF MEANING -- PART II

Intentional Ambiguity and Irony

We have discussed the significance of clarity in a lyric, emphasizing the importance of not making the listener have to guess what you mean. The task of the lyric crafter is to balance the need for clear, direct language with the need to be colorful and innovative in expressing ideas. The use of tone constant metaphors is a primary tool for achieving a good balance.

While leaving parts of a lyric "open to interpretation" is not recommended, there are times when intentional ambiguity can be very effective. There is a distinct difference between being overly vague as opposed to being intentionally ambiguous: Excessive vagueness means that a hundred listeners would probably arrive a hundred different interpretations of what you mean, with no guarantee that any of them are right. This indicates you have not connected with the listeners. An effective use of ambiguity would result in a hundred listeners coming up with perhaps only two different interpretations, with either of them being perfectly consistent with your intended meaning. Since, with effectively used ambiguity, listeners will be likely to hear both possible meanings, those meanings must somehow reinforce each other and each make logical sense.

Let's look now at some specific tools for effectively using ambiguity, and examples of how and how not to use them. Just as the key words in our discussion of lyrical clarity were "conceit" (a controlling metaphor) and "tone constancy" (consistent supporting images), our key word here is "semantic pivot". As the name implies, a semantic pivot is a word or phrase which can have more than one meaning, thus a listener's interpretation can pivot at that point in a lyric. This is the proverbial double edged sword (Note that "sword" is just "words" turned around). Well used, it significantly enhances your lyric, but improperly used, it can cause an otherwise good lyric to fail. You are probably familiar with all the types of semantic pivots, but might not have thought of them in this way before.

Semantic Pivots: Homonyms and Homomorphs

Semantic pivots include homonyms and homomorphs, and their extensions, puns, and double entendres. Homonyms are words which are spelled differently but sound the same, like "cymbal" and "symbol", and homomorphs are words which have multiple meanings for a single spelling and pronunciation. When you hear a homonym in a lyric, you can't see its spelling, so your interpretation of which version the writer means must be derived from the lines around it. The safest, though most difficult use of a homonym is to make both interpretations equally valid, so that it doesn't matter which version the listener's ear chooses. The line "drums were his heartbeat, and a

shining brass disc was a symbol of his rhythm..." may not be much of a lyric, but it does show that whichever meaning one chooses to hear for symbol/cymbal, it will make enough sense either way so that listeners will not stop in confusion if they hear "cymbal" instead of "symbol". If a song were titled "The Wale of the Ancient Mariner", I would bet that many people, upon hearing and not seeing the title, would think quite logically that it was about a sailor's pet sea mammal (whale). Others might believe, also quite logically, that it was about the mournful cry of an old sailor (wail). Probably very few would, as their first choice, assume it was about ship planks of an old sailor, or about his twilled pants (both are definitions of wale). Thus, the use of 'wale' in a title like this is not a good choice, since the different interpretations do not inherently complement each other. Examine this verse from an 18 year old student writing a humorous lyric:

My stomach growls and gurgles Like clockwork, hear the chime Herbs and spices
make it turn, And always right on time

"Time" is supported by the surrounding context, but if the ears should hear the less common "thyme" (a culinary herb), it's still appropriate. Keep aware of the fact that a high degree degree of being clever with words usually takes a song out of any of the mainstream commercial genres, and into the novelty realm, but it is nonetheless good writing if novelty and humor is your goal.

Thus the key to the use of a homonym is to make sure the surrounding context either: a) makes it absolutely clear which version of the word you mean, or b) supports either interpretation of the word. If your lyric does not lend itself to that, then do not use the homonym, or re-work the lyric. Although a lyric is like a writer's child, it is a child which should be heard and not seen. Always operate under the assumption that your words are being heard and not read.

The word "jack" is a prime homomorph. It has over a dozen meanings, such as a playing card, a tool for changing flat tires, a piece from a children's game, a receptacle for the end of a guitar cable, etc. Another such word is "set", with more than twenty meanings. It is obvious that anytime a word like this is used in a lyric, the intended meaning must be made crystal clear by the words which come immediately before or after. Everything in the preceding discussion about homonyms also applies to homomorphs. If the first line of a song is "It was the final set..." then the next line had better provide the needed context for a listener to know whether the singer is talking about tennis, playing the last part of a club gig, or a toy store owner who sold his last group of chessmen. If you are specific about what meaning the word is supposed to have, then you are locking the semantic pivot, i.e., you are removing its ability to swing to a different interpretation. In many cases, this will be what you want, but suppose you intentionally want to use a homomorph or homonym to infer a double meaning? Remember, simply using a word with two possible meanings does not guarantee a positive effect in a lyric. In fact, more often the opposite. To work positively, you must insure that either interpretation of the word will be consistent with what you intend to convey. For some homonyms or homomorphs, this may occur easily, for example:

I was happy in that hopeful time When the promises of youth's bright (clime/climb)

Gave me wings to touch the sky And hunger to ask how and why...

In this verse, written by two fourteen year old boys, the word actually used is *clime*, meaning climate, but the more commonly known word is *climb*, which is probably what most listeners would interpret. While they have two clearly different meanings, either one is perfectly appropriate in the given context, i.e., the bright climate of youth, or the ascension (*climb*) of youth to adulthood.

Another example of this type occurs in the song we discussed earlier by Terry Kirkman, *Requiem for the Masses*. Here, the semantic pivot is "masses", which can be interpreted to mean either the Catholic church ceremony, or the population of a country. Either interpretation is perfectly in keeping with the lyrics and their intended meaning.

In most cases however, the dual meanings of semantic pivots will cause confusion unless you, the writer, make some sensible connection to both meanings in the nearby parts of your lyric. You can do this two different ways, to achieve two different effects. If you refer to only one of the meanings before using the pivot and then the other meaning after the pivot, you cause the word to act like a hinge which swings the listener through a door. In the phrase "the hard rock bottom of my heart", from the country hit, the pivot is "rock". Preceded by "hard", it causes you to interpret it as rock music, but as soon as we hear the word "bottom", the interpretation swings to the other meaning, as in "solid bottom", as low as it can go. The little 'ping' that this swing causes in your brain is like a shot of stimulant. It keeps your attention and makes you remember the line, because it made you feel something, even if only subconsciously. Another example exactly like this one is the song title "Lone Star State of Mind", by Fred Koller, or "New York State of Mind", by Billy Joel, both pivoting on "state". (Incidentally, CSA critique sessions in 1980 produced "California, You're Just A State of Mind", and in 1983, "New York, You're A Cold State of Mind". I recommend letting this particular semantic pivot get a long, undisturbed rest.) Finally, there is "Heckel and Jeckel and Hyde", which isn't a song yet, but who knows...?

The other method of connecting the pivot to your lyrics is to provide both meanings before you use the key word. This way, when the lyric hits the pivot point, the listener gets a double jolt of stimulant right at that moment instead of the slower process of 'swinging' the meaning across more beats or measures. For example:

*Ten thousand faces, I see only yours
I hear your heartbeat over all the applause
You are my shining sun, though everybody thinks it's me who's the star
It's you who helped me get this far*

In this verse, the semantic pivot is "star" and the dual meanings are both referenced before the word comes up. The first two lines set up the interpretation of "star" as a successful entertainer, and the word "sun" provides the second interpretation. However, even if the listener does not perceive the double meaning, either interpretation by itself is consistent with the information being unfolded in the verse. The listener does not

have to stop in confusion. Watching listeners' faces as this song was presented at two critique sessions showed several smiles right at that point, indicating that the word was achieving its intended purpose.

Another excellent example was presented at a critique session:

*I force the window open
It had been closed for months
I wonder where the time went
I had a handle on it once...*

The semantic pivot is the entire fourth line, keying on the word "handle", a homomorph. The first two lines provide the connection for the literal meaning, that there used to be a handle on the window, and the third line is the connection for the meaning of "being in control of or on top of something", in the sense of "I used to have a handle on where time went". Again, the most important element is the fact that even if a listener does not see both meanings, either one alone is satisfying, because there is a place to which it can logically refer.

Natural extensions of semantic pivots are puns and double entendres. One type of pun results from the humorous use of a dual interpretation, usually playing a less expected meaning against a more common one ("She Joined the Choir to Try Out Some New Hims"). A double entendre is any phrase which can have a second meaning, but it does not necessarily have to be humorous and it often has a risqué second meaning ("Little Richard's Getting Bigger All the Time").

Country songs frequently use semantic pivots as puns. The phrase "I'm in a Country Club" uses the dual nature of "country" to contrast the rich connotations of a country club with the grassroots images of being country folk. The line "We live in a two story house" uses the homomorph "story" to pivot between the literal meaning of a house with two floors, and the figurative meaning of someone not telling the truth. The title "Undercover Angel" uses a double entendre, where undercover means "secret", and also refers to "under the bed covers". In all cases, the rest of the lyrics support both meanings.

Let's analyze this verse from "At the End of the Day", with lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, from the musical "Les Miserables":

*Have you seen how the foreman is fuming today
With his terrible breath and his wandering hands?
It's because little Fantine won't give him his way
Take a look at his trousers, you'll see where he stands.*

This short verse utilizes many of the principles discussed thus far. In terms of its content, it is context-dependent, in that it presupposes certain knowledge by the listener, but this is natural for a show tune. This is a song sung by the poor workers at the end of a workday, and Fantine is a woman fancied by the foreman. The title itself is a double entendre, with a literal and a colloquial meaning. "At the end of the day" is exactly what the song depicts at its surface level, but "at the end of the day" is also a

British conversational expression equivalent to our term "bottom line", that is, "when all is said and done". Both meanings are fully supported by the song.

In line one, the word "fuming" is a semantic pivot, a homomorph, where line two provides a reference to reeking breath, and line three is a reference to anger, the other sense of "fuming". If the listener picks only one meaning, there is no confusion, since both are supported. Finally, the triple entendre in line four is priceless. "You'll see where he stands" pivots between the (a) meaning referenced by lines 1-3 about the foreman's anger at being rejected, (b) the literal meaning that where a person's legs are determines where he is standing, and (c) the risqué meaning made clear by the reference to his lust and his trousers. All this in only four lines.

Semantic pivots can also occur on words which are neither homonyms nor homomorphs. It is possible to set up situation where a word can refer to either of two situations which are different enough so that what it makes the listener think of can differ, even though actual meaning of the words is the same in either case. Consider this verse-chorus example:

*Sunlight shines of my face, I feel your hand, O Lord
Moonglow lights up this place, the feeling's grand, O Lord
Raindrops, falling from space to feed the land, O lord
This world spins by your grace, I understand, O Lord*

*Worlds spin through creation and birth
Children shall Inherit the Earth
Help us leave a legacy worth what they deserve...*

Look at the words "creation and birth". Do they refer to the biological act of procreation, or do they refer to the Biblical book of Genesis? Preceding the phrase and throughout the verse, are references to "worlds" and "space", which support the Genesis interpretation, and immediately following is the reference to "children", which supports the procreation interpretation. Since both are supported, there is logical sense either way. Remember, the goal is duality without confusion.

Klang Association

A common trap in lyric writing is to create a semantic pivot when you really don't want one. That is to say, you wish to convey one specific meaning, but something is unintentionally left open to an alternate interpretation. An memorable example from a critique session was a song called "You Have the Right to Remain". The writer intended the song to support the face value meaning of the title, with no intention of referring to the common phrase "you have the right to remain silent..." The lyrics supported only the first meaning, with absolutely no reference to the second. Because the alternate meaning is such a well known phrase, heard on every TV police show, it was virtually impossible for some listeners not to be confused or let down when the meaning they expected was not supported. This is an example of klang association, where certain words are so closely connected with certain other words or ideas, that to hear one automatically triggers the association with the other. Hence the name klang, like the sound of a bell going off. The key here is not just the fact that only one

meaning was supported, but that it was the meaning less likely to be interpreted by a listener and the song was intending to be serious. Supporting only a less common interpretation is fine, and even encouraged as a humorous device, since this is a major element of a good pun. However, if done in a serious lyric, it takes a great deal of crafting skill to avoid confusion. The major point to remember is that in a serious song, it is lyrical suicide to use any kind of word or phrase that has dual meaning, unless you are going to either (a) support both interpretations in the lyric, (b) support the more common interpretation if one is clearly a primary meaning over the other. Support of only the less common interpretation may be used for a humorous effect.

Another example from a critique session: A song called "Switch Hitter" was about a cheating husband (switching between two women). The song used baseball images, throughout which is good, since that is what most commonly springs to mind when the phrase "switch hitter" is heard (klang association). To have tried to build this lyric with no reference to baseball would have probably doomed it to failure. However, the song could have been about an angry electrician who assaults light switches, and in that case, the lyric could succeed while never even mentioning a baseball image. This of course is a humorous situation, employing both "switch" and "hitter" as two semantic pivots.

Some other examples of klang associations from the critique archives: The song "Peonies Envy", about a woman who covets the flowers in the singer's flower "bed" has delighted many audiences. It totally supports both, the literal meaning, and the risqué double entendre. Another lyric, entitled "The Star-Spangled Bandana" was a country-western tune about a cowboy going away who gives his love a star-spangled bandana to remember him. The lyric made no acknowledgement of the fact that the phrase inevitably conjures up thoughts of our national anthem. Although the lyric was structurally good, the unsupported klang association was too strong, and thus distracted and disappointed many listeners. The lyric kind of cried out "Oh, say can't you see what I'm about?"

What happens in situations where a phrase has dual meaning, but neither one is greatly predominant over the other? In that case, it is fine to support only one, provided the support is clear enough so as to preclude the listener from hearing the other meaning. This may occur with words that have both figurative and literal meanings. A lyric can refer to a corporate figurehead or the figurehead of a ship. There is little chance for confusion if the supporting words reinforce only one interpretation. Neither meaning is greatly predominant over the other.

Like any of the other tools described here, klang association can be a very positive device when employed at the right time in the right way.

Irony

Highly desirable in a lyric is the use of irony; the 'ping' that occurs when a tale takes an unexpected yet entirely fitting turn of events. There are three paths to creating irony:

(1) Support one of two equal interpretations during the first part of a lyric, then switch to the other at the end, for an unanticipated twist. Often, this is done by starting off

with a figurative meaning and then switching to a literal one. Consider the following:

Tatterdemalion

*She sat and sewed the sails that swept him out to sea
She wove a dream that was never meant to be
She loved the captain, the captain loved his ship
Her arms were just a place to rest between each trip
As her needle sailed the waves of canvas cloth, she'd often dream
Of a wedding dress of fine embroidered lace
An ocean windstorm dashed her dream, for as the crippled ship came home
Her captain's bunk was just an empty space...*

*In the tavern you'll still hear them tell the tale
Of the ship that met the talons of the ocean's autumn gale
How the ropes and masts came tumblin' down
How that ship still wears those battered sails like a tatterdemalion gown...*

*Each night she'd walk the waterfront, she'd stand awhile and stare
At that ship's shell floating out beyond the pier
The needlepointed starlit sky shone on shredded sails
She'd dream about her wedding dress and shed a tear
Her friends told her not to cling to threads of a love whose time was past
And to forget the maelstrom in her mind
She said she could sew so many things but she could not mend her heart
Though the tapestry is faded, it once hung rich and fine...*

*In the tavern you'll still hear them tell the tale
Of the ship that met the talons of the ocean's autumn gale
How the ropes and masts came tumblin' down
How that ship still wears those battered sails like a tatterdemalion gown...*

*One restless night she took a boat out to that wreck beyond the pier
She snatched a shred of sailcloth from a broken mast
The townsfolk searched for many days, but it seemed she disappeared
No one was quite sure who saw her last
But in the ocean's mist of memories and tears of yesterday's rain
If you look real close and maybe take a guess
Amidst the rippling remnants of the sails, wrapped 'round the mast
Is what seems to be a fine embroidered dress...*

*In the tavern you'll still hear them tell the tale
Of the ship that met the talons of the ocean's autumn gale
How the ropes and masts came tumblin' down
How that ship still wears those battered sails like a tatterdemalion gown...*

In the first two choruses, the last line is obviously figurative, in that a ship can't literally wear its sails like a gown. But in the third chorus, that same line now does have the literal meaning, as the ship is in fact wearing its sails as a gown on the mast. Since the

choruses are exactly identical all three times, it is the supporting context of the verses which effects the switch in perception between the two meanings. This achieves the desired irony, as has been repeatedly demonstrated by watching audience reaction in live performance.

A similar use of this technique can be seen in the unforgettable lyric of Jim Morgan, "Higher Than She's Ever Been Before". In the first three verses, the title refers to the euphoric "high" that comes first from lofty expectations, and then from drugs. As the drugs kill her, in verse four, the shift in meaning occurs as the lyric says

*If God is great and good and really truly understanding
Then she's higher than she's ever been before*

(2) Set up a situation in the song involving persons or objects, and then reverse them at the end. A classic example of this in the realm of short stories is O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi", where a husband sells his watch to buy his wife a comb while she is selling her hair to buy him a watch chain. For a lyrical example of this type of irony, see Harry Chapin's "Mercenaries".

(3) Create an illustration of the principle "what goes around comes around". For well crafted examples of this method of achieving irony in lyrics, see "Laspatch", by Jimmy Webb, "Sell the Car", by John McCutcheon, and "Odd-Job Man", by Harry Chapin.

Phonetic Ambiguity

In addition to what we have discussed so far, there are also phonetic ambiguities, which can introduce unwanted misinterpretations into your lyrics. A phonetic duality occurs when some combination of sounds in an uncommon word or phrase sounds similar to a more common word or phrase. Again, in a serious song, it is usually undesirable, but it is frequently employed when puns are intended.

A mishearing only occurs when the intended phrase is less common than the incorrectly heard one. If you said that you were going to Lun Guyland to see Guylem Bardo, everyone would believe you were going to Long Island to see Guy Lombardo, even if you really meant it the other way. If you were going for drinks at a place called DeBronk's, an Easterner would think you were going to the Bronx, while a Denver native might think you were beating your hooves to the Broncs. People hear what is most common for their own frame of reference. Thus, you as the writer must work very hard to clearly define the frame of reference that you want. The best thing to do with phonetic dualities is to avoid them (again, unless you're trying to be humorous), but if they are there and you can't lead the listener to just one interpretation, then just as with homonyms, support of either interpretation allows the lyric to work. In Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billy Joe", I'm sure many people not from the South had heard of Tallahassee, but not of Tallahatchie. However, all that really matters is that Billy Joe threw something off some bridge, so it doesn't matter how the name is heard. Also, although there are many meanings for "bridge", there is enough supporting context so that no one is going to interpret it as dentures, a card game, or part of a guitar. In Randy Newman's tongue in cheek spoof "Short People", the line "short people ain't got nobody" could also be heard with equal sense as "short people ain't got no body".

The primary causes of phonetic duality are (a) -- incorrect white space as in Guylem Bardo (see the discussion of white space in a separate chapter) (b) -- particular combinations of word end sounds and the following word beginning sound e.g., "the focused ring" "or the focus string", and (c) -- lax enunciation of one of two generally similar words (regimen/regiment, immolate/emulate). There are two ways to avoid phonetic duality: one is to avoid the use of odd phrases like "Where is the chorus strong", heard at a critique session as "where is the chorused wrong", which made no sense. Another instance from a critique session was "Your love incites me", which was inevitably heard as "your love excites me". The second cure for this problem lies with having a top-notch vocalist who knows how to enunciate. Clear pronunciation of words eliminates any confusion, but it is easier said than done. In the "chorus strong" example above, a vocalist would have to double stop the words i.e., "chorus/stop/strong". The phrase "reached to take care" would have to be rendered as "reached/stop/to take-eh-care". This clearly requires an acrobatic mouth, and while it is possible, it is not desirable if your intent is to get the song to a major artist.

It is much easier to consciously introduce semantic pivots into your lyrics than it is to be aware of the fact that one might be there where you don't want it. As the writer, you know what you mean, and it is easy to overlook the fact that a word can be interpreted by a listener in a way other than what you expect. This is perhaps one of the most difficult elements to self-analyze, because it doesn't show up when you examine the structure of the lyrics, and no matter how many times you read over the words, you may never see the unintended interpretation, since you always know what you mean. This is one of the greatest benefits of song critiquing in groups. Unintended semantic pivots always get flushed out when half the room understands the song and the other half doesn't, because of some alternate meaning that was given to a word or phrase. In ten years of monthly critique sessions, hardly one has gone by without some song which harbors an unintended semantic pivot.

There is one final aspect to discuss on the topic of ambiguity. What about a hit song like "American Pie" which caused immense confusion among listeners as it nonetheless climbed the charts?. In a song like this, or in the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus", the ambiguity is totally consistent throughout the song. There are no parts anywhere which are clear. Thus, you as a listener realize the writer's intent is to challenge, to tease, or to provoke speculation. This intentional ambiguity is clearly unclear and if its intentional unclarity is clear then it is not ambiguous. Is that clear?

To rephrase that, like all the other elements of good songwriting we have discussed, the key to effective use is consistency. Either be totally clear, or totally unclear, but do not mix. And I must quickly add here that I don't recommend the deliberate total ambiguity approach for mainstream songwriting. Any song of this type which is successful is a rare exception. Also, it's too easy to try to write this way as an excuse for not being able to develop a clear lyric. Master the art of clear communication first, and then play with trying to develop clearly ambiguous (an oxymoron...) lyrics if you wish. In the psychedelic sixties, it was more the norm, but be aware of the fact that few of those songs have really endured as universal standards.

To summarize: The controlled use of ambiguity in lyrics can greatly add to effectiveness

of your song. A word or phrase which can have more than one interpretation is called a semantic pivot. To avoid any chance of listener confusion, both meanings of key word or phrase should be supported in the lyrics, or one meaning should be supported so as to preclude the other. Because it is difficult to detect unwanted semantic pivots, group critiques of a song are an effective way to flush them out.

Final thoughts: Like any of the other songwriting tools and techniques presented in "Songcrafters Coloring Book", these techniques will, with enough practice, become part of your writing instincts. Just as some people can spontaneously rattle off strings of puns, the instinct for double meanings and associations can be developed and honed. Eventually, you will be able to write a lyric, guided only by your gut feelings, and then analyze it find that you have effectively incorporated many effective double meanings. Also, you'll become much more sensitive to the subtle unwanted words and phrases that sneak in during your creative frenzy, and know how to get rid of them.

If you wonder if that can ever be true, consider this: Charles Dickens had a great ability for choosing memorable names for his characters which seemed to fit them perfectly. When you hear the name "Ebenezer Scrooge", you know it must belong to an undesirable old coot, but did you ever wonder why? Think of all of the words which are suggested by the inherent sound of the name "Ebenezer Scrooge" (klang association): Geezer, Squeezer, Sneezer, Wheezer, Teaser, Ebony, Needer, Beelzebub, Screw, Rude, Grudge, etc... Amazingly, every one of these has a dark or negative connotation, and there do not seem to be many words of positive connotation which spring to mind. I'm sure Dickens did not arrive at the character's name by analyzing associated words. Although he did know that Ebenezer means "heart of stone", the bottom line is that it just sounds right because of all the subconscious 'klangs'. How about the villain from Oliver Twist, "Bill Sykes?" (Spikes, Strikes, Sics, Scythe, Psyche, Pike, Ill, Kill, Bullseye, which clearly overpower the gentler Sigh and Likes). Consider this: If all you knew about a character in a story was that his name was "Laspitch", would you expect him to be a positive or negative character? How does the sound of that name strike you? I'd be willing to bet that you felt a negative 'ping' associated with the sound of that name. Now ask yourself why. Look at all of the closely related words: Asp, Last, Lisp, Lash, Ash, Spit, Pit, Pitch, Itch, Bitch, Rich. A parade of pure evil. When writer Jimmy Webb thought up the name, his expert instinct just knew it was right for a dispicable rich character, without having to analyze it.

So to sum it all up, say what you mean and mean what you say.

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