

Excerpt from a thesis accompanying  
a student's original piece of art

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## THE INTERPRETIVE PAINTING OF RHAPSODY IN BLUE

### Introduction

My goal was to develop a pictorial representation of these elements: melody, harmony, consonance, dissonance, rhythm, meter, tempo, dynamics and key from George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, as performed by Morton Gould and re-recorded on a compact disk entitled Historic Gershwin Recordings manufactured by BMG Entertainment in 1998. A definition of each of the elements in music and the visual equivalent of each term is necessary to the actualization of the painting. Even though a knowledge of Gershwin's intentions in composing Rhapsody in Blue helped me to interpret his message from the music, it was not my primary concern to produce imagery that illustrates the music in conventional terms as in cartooning, but to develop a unique visual language dictated by the music elements inherent in Rhapsody in Blue.

### The Origins of Rhapsody in Blue

At the request of Paul Whiteman, George Gershwin composed Rhapsody in Blue in less than a month. Ferde Grofe orchestrated it in ten days. The time crunch was due to the fact that Paul Whiteman was presenting "An Experimentation in Modern Music" at Aeolian Hall February 12, 1924. When Gershwin got the call to get something ready, he was on his way to Boston for rehearsals on the Broadway show "Sweet Little Devil". On the trip to Boston the noise from the rattle-ty-bang and steely rhythms of the train as it rolled down the track set up the environment that inspired the music and its very construction for Rhapsody in Blue. He often heard music in noise. "I heard it as a sort of

musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.”<sup>1</sup>

George Gershwin had unwittingly prepared himself for this project for years. He had already been working on the theme that he would end up using for the Rhapsody. While he was working in Vaudeville, he had visited Harlem in New York to observe the black performers improvising their jazz. Gershwin learned many of these techniques from Luckey Roberts. His ability to handle difficult piano maneuvers with the left hand and the knowledge of arduous jazz techniques gave Gershwin a useful tool for showcasing his work and a way to open doors to higher levels of society.

Even when he was twelve his interest in combining jazz elements like the syncopation found in ragtime with European style elements is evident in an unpublished composition called “Ragging the Traumerie”. “Traumerie” is a famous composition by Robert Schumann. The use of flattened thirds, fifths and sevenths along with polyrhythms or multi-melodic lines gave him new tools to compose music. An example is seen in the song “Somebody Loves Me I Wonder Who . . .” the note for “who” is a flattened third. I visualize this sound as a line changing direction from a steady climb to a plateau. The opening of Rhapsody in Blue is a “blue note” slurred out into a glissando.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kimball and Simon Alford, The Gershwins (New York, Bonanza Books, 1973), 35.

Robert Kimball says that “the Rhapsody has occasional bursts of syncopation, polyrhythms, exotic instrumental effects and even blue notes—flattened thirds, fifths, and sevenths. Yet these are really ornamentations to a work whose audacity, verve, and, above all, gorgeous melodies are akin in spirit and quality to the Russian music George Gershwin heard in his formative years. Even the most cursory examination of the Rhapsody reveals it to be a work of symphonic music that owes far more to the influence of Tchaikovsky and Liszt, both unquestionably skilled syncopators.”<sup>2</sup>

There had been a lot of speculation about the limitations of jazz and even its functions. Many thought jazz had to be written in strict time like dance rhythms where it originated. Gershwin “resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow. Inspired by this aim I set out to work composing with unwonted rapidity.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the speed of his composing for Rhapsody in Blue caused him to stay in a state of improvisation and helps to explain the infinite amount of energy and vigor he infused into Rhapsody in Blue.

After attending the debut of Rhapsody in Blue, Rudy Vallee called the Rhapsody a kind of “symphonized syncopation”. Syncopation is characterized by irregular accents of the melody against an unvarying, relentless articulation of the beat.

Gershwin chose the rhapsody form of music to put the jazz elements into because it gave him a larger structure to work with. He believed that a more serious form of music would be more permanent. In the actual construction of the work, Ira Gershwin suggested that the title be Rhapsody in Blue rather than American Rhapsody, indicating a consideration for the mood and color of the composition as Whistler had used in titles to paintings such as Nocturne in Blue in the exhibit Ira had just seen at the Museum of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>3</sup> David Ewen, George Gershwin: His Journey to Greatness (London, Prentice-Hall, 1970), 75.

Modern Art. George and Ira both enjoyed painting. Neither had any formal training, but George's work shows an above average ability to render a subject with truth and character. His art collection at his death included many of the modern artists of the time including Picasso and Kandinsky.

### Basis for My Interpretation

In interpreting Rhapsody in Blue from sound to visual imagery, I had to set some parameters from which to work. Melody is represented by the main line of the composition whether it is single or multi-linear as in monophonic or polyphonic music. A continuous line is called conjunct, a broken line is called disjunct. The direction of the line is controlled by the pitch or highness or lowness of each note that comprises the melody line. The space in between pitches is called an interval. Phrases are groupings of pitches that end in a cadence much like a sentence ends with a period. The range is the distance between the high and low pitches creating contrasts of varying degrees. The direction and length of the melodic line is determined by the changes in the pitch, the range and the intervals between them.

Harmony is the background in which the melody travels. Musically, it is composed of chords of notes and the intervals between them. Visually, these sounds appear like a "soup" or waves of color and tone depending on how close together the chords are placed.

Another element which adds a dimension of orderly movement is called consonance. Visually, this can be seen as objects occurring at regular intervals in a horizontal or vertical orientation. Disorderly movement in need of resolution is known as dissonance. This element introduced tension into the music. Visually, it presents itself as

forms that come very close together, but do not touch. They may be seen in a diagonal orientation.

Rhythm refers to the orderly movement of musical beats in time. Groupings of beats are called meters and are organized in measures. The movement in visual terms may be a smooth line or objects forming a line. If the beats are regular the line is smooth. If they vary in strength the line may vary from thick to thin, thick being strong, thin being weaker. Objects may vary from large to small.

The tempo or pace of the music also involves meter which is the number of beats in a measure. The more beats in a measure the faster the pace, conversely the fewer beats in a measure the slower the pace. Visually, the more beats the more objects in the space forming the melodic line, the fewer beats the more space between them.

Dynamics is the loudness or softness of the music. Visually, dynamics can be seen in the melody line and harmonic space by the size of the elements, large being loud, small being soft.

A key is the grouping of related tones that revolve around the central tone. Tonality is the basic harmonic principle at work in the Western music written from 1600 to 1900. The major key is composed eight tones, none of which are played on the black keys. The minor key compliments and serves as a contrast to the major key. It differs from the major key primarily in that its third degree is lowered a half step. Visually, the major key can be seen best in the warm colors of the spectrum and the minor key can be seen best in the cooler colors.

Excerpt from a thesis on literary analysis

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## CHAPTER ONE

### COLOR IN LITERATURE

In the classic MGM movie The Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy opens the door of her black-and-white Kansas farmhouse and steps into the Technicolor world of Oz, the contrast between the two worlds is staggering. Dorothy has clearly left the mundane bleakness of her life on the farm and has entered a world of magic and mystery. Truly, no better method existed for the filmmakers to show the contrast between these two worlds than by the use of color. It was simple for them to paint a picture of this new and different world by using color film to reflect its many vibrant hues.

Film is a powerful medium that can communicate a number of ideas with a few simple images. As such, it is relatively easy to illustrate a character or a situation by showing it to the viewer. In most cases, words are not necessary to define physical attributes. However, with literature, words are the medium and the key to understanding the story. For the reader to envision a situation the way the author imagines it, the author must choose words carefully. The author must find a way to convey thoughts, and to do so must be something of a painter, able to paint a picture for the reader.

Authors' styles vary tremendously. Every author has favorite writing tools. While some writers shy away from using many adjectives, many use grandiose words and images to enhance a story, and others employ color as a means of bringing people and places to life. In his book Color Codes, Charles A. Riley discusses the use of color in literature, saying, "color is connection . . . color is consciousness itself, color is feeling" (222). As seen in the world of Oz, color is critical in bringing the story to life.

Writers have used color for centuries for a number of different purposes: as a descriptive method, as a means of symbolism, and as a dramatic element in a story. Color can turn an otherwise boring passage into a vibrant one; it can help the reader to have a clearer mental image of how a character looks; and color can have meaning and power.

Many famous works of literature would be vastly different without the prominent use of color. For example, Hester Prynne's letter A, "in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread" (Hawthorne 53), would have been a simple, colorless letter sewn on a dreary cloak without color. *Moby Dick*, the whale with the "snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidal white hump" which when seen "gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, [left] a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings" (Melville 180), would have just been a whale in the ocean without color. Henry Fleming's desire for tangible proof of his bravery, "a wound, a red badge of courage" (Crane 51), would just have been nothing more than an injury without color. Holden Caulfield's beloved hat, "this red hunting hat, with one of those very, very long peaks" (Salinger 17), would fade into the background without color. Color adds many dimensions—it can turn the ordinary into the colorful, and also introduce a symbolic statement.

What then is color? It has been defined as "a phenomenon of perception not an objective component or characteristic of a substance. Color is an aspect of vision; it is a psychophysical response consisting of the physical reaction of the eye and the automatic interpretive response of the brain to wavelength characteristics of light above a certain brightness level" (Broecker 111). Webster defines color more simply as "a phenomenon of light" (261). Riley believes that "color does not conform to one paradigm, chart, or

episteme” (1). He goes on to explain that the topic of color has been studied and discussed for years, with varying results, saying, “it has attracted and ultimately confounded systematic innovators in philosophy and psychology, as well as writers, painters, and composers” (1).

For our purposes, this topic that has confounded so many people can be explained logically, to some extent. In elementary school, we were taught that there are three primary colors: yellow, blue, and red. These primary colors cannot be made from any other color; however, they make all other colors. Secondary colors—orange, purple, and green—are made from combining the primary colors, and the process goes on. This combining of colors creates an almost endless number of hues, and forms a broad spectrum. Almost every color in this spectrum is associated with a symbolic meaning, and this symbolism can often be seen in works of literature.

In his book Color, Ralph Fabri discusses color symbolism by saying, “In his endless search for causes, reasons, explanations, and in his equally endless hope of finding answers to all questions and meanings in all phenomena, man must have stumbled on meanings of colors at an early date” (62). Fabri believes that for centuries, individual colors have had specific associations, adding “We have ample evidence that colors began to have special meaning a very long time ago, and that those meanings were clear to the entire population” (62). In the earliest days of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Far East, “colors, like all other features of art, were strictly connected with religion. They had to be used in an absolutely prescribed manner without any personal freedom” (Fabri 16). The early Romans used color freely to accent their “magnificent temples, palaces, and luxurious villas” (17). One early illustration of the symbolic importance of colors is

the ancient edifice the Ziggurat of Ur. This four-storey temple, built sometime around 2300 BC, was painted using specific colors. These colors were important and symbolic, and “judging by the use of similar colors elsewhere, there can be no question of an accidental, or whimsical juxtaposing of colors” (62). During the crusades of the Middle Ages, heraldic colors were used as “distinguishing marks for [the oligarchs], their families, vassals, and followers” (64). Clearly, colors have played a critical role in defining civilizations.

In today’s society, color is just as important as it has been throughout history. Fabri says, “The meaning of colors is very great in every walk of life. We are so accustomed to them that we hardly notice them” (64). He cites a number of common color associations, noting it is possible to “recognize the owner of a racehorse, the athletes of a club, or a country, by their colors” (64). Certainly sports teams, racecars, and even holidays have specific color associations that make them instantly recognizable.

Fabri discusses universal color associations, saying, “many colors have several meanings, but these are closely connected with each other” (62). He goes on to discuss several common colors and the symbolic meanings often associated with them. Green “generally means hope, the color of spring, the renewal of life” (63). He adds, “Green also symbolizes jealousy” (63). Blue has a pleasing connotation, as in “sky, heaven, and water” (63). Red is “the color of blood” (63) and symbolizes courage, sacrifice, and passion. Black is “death, mourning, desolation” (63). White most often represents “purity, chastity” (63), and purple is “rank and authority” (63). Yellow has several meanings, including “treachery, cowardice” (63), but Fabri also notes that yellow

“signifies a contagious disease” (63) as displayed by a yellow flag flying from a ship. Gray means “colorless, figuratively as well as literally” (63).

Color symbolism in literature is not an exact science, and as such, each writer represents various aspects of life differently. For instance, Stephen Crane used color in a different way than F. Scott Fitzgerald did. Crane used the color yellow to represent cowardice, while Fitzgerald, as I will show, often used yellow as a harbinger of change. I believe that this use is not merely coincidental, but that it is a consistent element in each text. As in the case of these two men, no two authors use color alike, which gives uniqueness to each person’s work. The same is true in painting. In his book, Riley translates this into artistic terms by saying, “If you begin a painting in a particular shade of red or blue, manufactured by one company at one time, and your supply runs out, you can attempt to replace it with what seems the same tone from the same color chart of another company, but it will never match. Only paints made by the same manufacturer can be matched” (12). Paint may look the same, but it varies slightly based on its manufacturer. Words penned by authors may evoke the same colors, but their symbolism varies based on their writer. That is, colors may mean one thing to one author, and may be used completely differently by another author.

While Fitzgerald used color frequently and fluidly in his works, often to represent a universal symbolic meaning, he also had a talent for using color to illustrate deeper emotions and feelings, and these representations are usually not found on a universal list of color symbolism. Moreover, as his life progressed and his works increased in number, his ability to use color in new and different ways emerged with more clarity, and occurred at an increased rate. Fitzgerald steadily became a talented artist, painting

brilliant murals of life the way he observed and experienced it. Age allowed him to wield his brush with more and more certainty and precision, and his ability to illustrate aspects of everyday life became more natural. Color permeates Fitzgerald's novels, and enlivens them in a way no colorless text could do. Much like the brilliant cinematography of the Land of Oz, Fitzgerald was able to convey the aspects of the scenery of his mind through the wonderful use of colors, participating in a time-old tradition stretching back to the dawn of civilization.

Excerpt from a thesis on research

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## CHAPTER ONE

### FOLKLORE AND CULTURE

While folklore has long been an avidly studied and well-respected field in many European countries, its development as a field of study in the United States did not formally begin until the end of the nineteenth century. The American Folklore Society was founded in 1888 and at first maintained a pattern of support by private scholars. However, folklorist Richard M. Dorson explains in his book *Folklore and Fakelore* that folklore soon became viewed as a subfield of anthropology. It was not until the 1950's and 1960's that it began to "assert its independence as a discipline" (2). Educational institutions were slow to embrace the field of folklore by establishing folklore departments and Master's and Ph.D programs. In 1976 only two American universities had departments of folklore. But today the field holds a secure place in the academic scene of the United States. Eight universities now offer advanced degrees in folklore, and over seventy offer Bachelor's degrees or minors and concentrations in folklore (Folklife Sourcebook website).

Throughout the years, folklore has often been misunderstood and scholars have struggled to define it. Leading anthropological folklorist William R. Bascom provides his definition in an article entitled "Folklore and Anthropology," published in 1953 in the *Journal of American Folklore*. Bascom states that folklore is a part of culture that is orally transmitted. His definition includes "myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads and other songs, and other forms of lesser importance" (285). As oral

transmission is a requirement for this definition, it is much more narrow than that of other scholars. In *The Study of American Folklore*, folklorist and professor Jan Harold Brunvand presents a broader definition that is more commonly held. He states that "Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person" (1). This definition includes not only oral tradition, like Bascom's, but customary tradition as well, such as music, dance, architecture, art, customs, medicine, and beliefs.

Over the years, folklore of all types has interested not only folklorists, but scholars from other fields as well, including anthropology and the humanities. Bascom explains that folklore is universal; all known cultures utilize it to some degree. It has many purposes as it "serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions and to play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another" ("Folklore" 284). Studying the folklore of a certain group facilitates a better understanding of the culture and the people. Folklore can show what is important to a group of people, revealing attitudes, values and cultural goals. As a result, "a substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of a people. It...gives a penetrating picture of their way of life" (qtd. in Bascom, "Four" 337).

While folklore can reveal much about a culture to an outsider, it also serves many purposes within the community. Bascom details these purposes in an article published in the *Journal of American Folklore* entitled "Four Functions of Folklore." The first function he defines is that of amusement, an attribute which is especially true of oral folklore in nonliterate cultures. The importance of folklore as entertainment has

decreased in many societies as alternative forms of entertainment have developed, such as film, radio, television and computers (348). Beyond the basic function of amusement, folklore also serves to validate culture by “justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them” (344). Myths, legends, tales and proverbs are used to explain the culture and its social structure. A third important role that folklore plays is that of education, especially in nonliterate groups. Folklore is used to discipline young children, instill morals, prepare young people for responsibilities of adulthood, and censure misbehavior (345). Bascom believes that the final function, “maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior,” is often an overlooked one in spite of its importance. Although this function is related to the previous functions, it does more than justify or educate. Folklore used in this manner applies social pressure and exercises social control. It is used for people of all ages “who attempt to deviate from social conventions with which they are fully familiar” (346). In this situation a piece of folklore may be told to express public approval or disapproval of a person’s behavior. Bascom lists the many ways in which African proverbs, for example, are employed to exercise social control and says that, “because they express the morals or ethics of the group, they are convenient standards for appraising behavior in terms of the approved norms” (347).

While folklore does reveal information about a culture, Bascom cautions the reader that it is not always a “true and accurate mirror of culture” (“Four” 341). While the events and behavior that take place in folklore often mirror what is acceptable in a community, they sometimes contrast sharply with this acceptable behavior. When used in this manner, folklore has become an outlet for escape. This type of folklore reveals

people's frustrations with various things, including repressions forced on them by society, conditions of their geographical environments, and their limitations as human beings (343). In this way folklore becomes a socially approved outlet for repression, and by doing so "it tends to preserve the institutions from direct attack and change" (349). Bascom states that the four functions detailed above can be joined under "the single function of maintaining the stability of culture" (348).

Folklore does differ from two other forms of cultural expression, literature and fakelore. Although there is a place for creativity in the transmission of folklore, it differs from literature. As Dorson says, "the folklorist sets himself as a primary task separating out the folktales from the literary writings" (11). Word-of-mouth repetition is a "valuable clue" in the determination of folklore. Unlike literature, which is written at a specific point in time by a single author, folklore is distributed by oral repetition that has "occurred over stretches of time, in varying forms" (11). Bascom explains that when studying literature it is possible to answer such questions as "who first invented these themes, how they have been reworked in the past, and how the previous variations have influenced the product of any given storyteller or writer" ("Folklore" 286-7). In contrast, with folklore "one can never hope to find the answers" (287). Due to its nature of dissemination, the history of folklore is much more shadowy and anonymous than that of literature.

A literary product that should not be confused with folklore is that of "fakelore," a term coined by Dorson. He defines fakelore as "a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification" (5). Examples include

the tales about Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill the cowboy and John Henry the Negro steel-driver. These pieces of literature are produced by a specific author. These "rewritten, saccharine versions" of folklore focus on jolly and quaint elements, and they reflect the concepts of American invincibility and Manifest Destiny (5-6). This literary form appeals to the masses, but it is not a product of documented fieldwork and must not be considered an example of actual oral folklore of a particular culture.