

Gordon Lightfoot and J.R.R. Tolkein: Being a “Sub-Creator”.

I’m sorry I haven’t written a Matt’s Message for so long. I just couldn’t think of anything to say. And let’s be honest: there is A LOT of stuff on the internet that doesn’t really have to be there. Maybe...HALF of it? I’m just kidding, but I didn’t want to write something just for the sake of putting something out there. But recently something happened that gave me something to say.



Gordon Lightfoot died just a few days ago. There’s no need to *rank* Canada’s songwriters. Every songwriter is so different, how can you compare them? But I think, in this case, it might be helpful to say that Lightfoot was possibly the greatest songwriter and lyricist our country has ever known.

I remember the moment I discovered him. It was 2003. I was 24 years old, living in a basement apartment in downtown Toronto. I thought to myself, “I’m a songwriter and I haven’t yet really listened seriously to Gordon Lightfoot. Why not?” So I bought a CD of his Greatest Hits and sat down in my basement to listen to it.

(To understand this article, maybe you should look up *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* and listen to it.)



When I first gave a careful, deep listen to “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” it was an experience I will never ever ever forget! It was like the waves of Lake Superior were crashing over me. I was chilled by the cold shivers that were rushing through me, as Lightfoot sang of the huge lake freighter that sank during a November gale on Superior. I literally could not believe what I was hearing. I jumped up and stood in the middle of my room and said out loud, “How can a song be so good? How can a song be this good?” This was a local, small town Ontario guy and he was telling the stories of my land. I honestly thought, “Am I dreaming or does this man really exist?”

I’ve always both loved and hated “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.” I’ve loved it for obvious reasons: it takes me away in time and space like no other song and makes me feel the absolute power of Canada’s nature and makes me understand humanity’s precarious position at the mercy of the earth’s forces. But I hate it because I know that even if I lived a million years, I could never write a song that would be one-tenth as good as that one. It’s like Lightfoot established a whole new, higher order of songwriting with that song, and no-one else has joined him on that height. I really feel like God opened up a door in the secrets of the universe and allowed Lightfoot to look in, as Lightfoot was writing that song. The words and music combine so perfectly that they really transport the careful listener to that place and time and you feel the terror of a human facing death at the hands of the power of nature. But you are also strangely uplifted by that power. Tragedy is strangely attractive sometimes.



In the 1970's, the huge, modern ships of the Great Lakes were not supposed to sink. Everyone felt like the era of shipwrecks was long, long in the past. The *Edmund Fitzgerald* really was the pride of the Great Lakes, setting records for how much cargo it could haul between the great cities. It drew crowds as it would pass through the locks. It wasn't just big, but it was a beautiful design. People loved it.

222 meters long and capable of carrying 26,000 tons of cargo, it was broken into two pieces by Lake Superior in just a few minutes of violent destruction and went to the bottom with all of its crew on the night of November 11th, 1975. Another ship, the Arthur M. Anderson, was traveling not far from the Edmund Fitzgerald in the same direction. They were both trying to reach the shelter of Whitefish Bay. A sudden snow squall leapt up and the Captain of Arthur M. Anderson lost sight of the Edmund Fitzgerald. A few minutes later, when the snow squall died down, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* had disappeared.



Lightfoot's song was released in the following year. No mere verbal re-telling or historical description can bring back other times and places the way a song can. You can learn all about the shipwreck: all the stats and the timeline and the people. It's really good to do this. But to really bring the event back into our experience, you need ***an act of creative imagination***. A rational, scientific understanding of the event isn't enough. There

needed to be a poet or songwriter who could somehow feel the events happening and then make us feel them, through music and words.

There were no survivors of the shipwreck. But I say there was actually one survivor: Gordon Lightfoot. It really seems like he was on that ship in the middle of that storm! He even knew what the cook was saying to the men as the waves were getting bigger and bigger:

“When supertime came, the old cook came on deck saying, Fellas it’s too rough to feed ya. At 7pm, it grew dark, it was then he said, Fellas it’s been good to know ya.”

This line really touches us because it seems true. I think that’s exactly how they would have been interacting, not dramatically crying out, but stoically making understatements or even dark jokes, trying to keep each other’s spirits up. Somehow Lightfoot was able to see and feel what was happening on that ship. We lack that power, but when we hear his description, we immediately understand and think, “Yes, that’s exactly how it would’ve been...”

There is really something powerful and mysterious going on when a songwriter of Lightfoot’s supreme ability re-tells such a fascinating event. This is similar to how ancient bards and poets would work; they would re-tell true (or mythological – which is a different kind of “true”) events, but not just in everyday speech like a modern historian, or like someone telling a story about what happened to them the other day. The ancient bards would make their stories rhyme, which gives the stories a *hypnotic, enchanting* effect.

Read these words out loud; you might feel a strange, pleasant, tragic power inside you:

*They might have split up or they might have cap-sized,
They may have broke deep and took water,
But all that remains is the faces and the names
Of the wives and the sons and the daughters.*

Did you experience some kind of rush or shiver? Maybe it needs to be accompanied by the music. But what I’m saying is: rhyming, rhythmic words have a power of their own and when they’re combined with strange and true events, the effect is powerful.

Many words that rhyme are often connected in a strange way. Think of the rhymes: “womb” and “tomb” or “breath” and “death.”

And what Lightfoot does is almost scandalously powerful: rhyming “water” with “daughter” in this song makes us think of the little girls in houses that will no longer have dads while at the same time making us think of the huge elemental power that broke apart not just a ship, but 29 families. You almost want to say: “How dare you rhyme those two words?” But that rhyme literally brings the tragedy *home*: from the second largest lake on the earth to the homes that will never be the same again. See what I mean? This is not just a

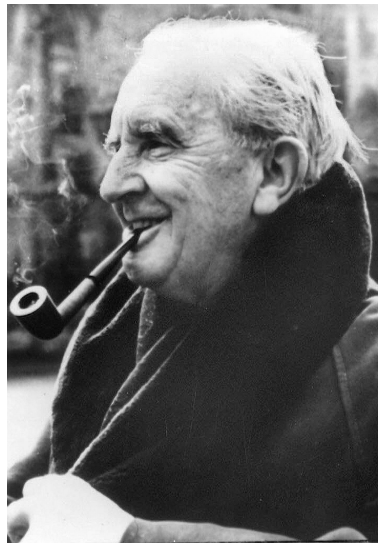
guy writing a song. Something truly mysterious and special happened when this man wrote this song.

(Note - I just looked up “world’s largest lakes” to see where Superior ranked and saw that 7 of the earth’s largest 13 lakes are in Canada. I love this country! Our familiar old Lake Ontario is the 13th largest lake on the globe.)

I could write pages and pages about this song. I could write about how an old friend of mine (who scuba-dives down among the Great Lakes shipwrecks) and I played and sang the song just a few feet away from the waves of Lake Huron many summers ago. Singing the words “Lake Huron rolls...” as you look out over the endless waves of that lake is a great feeling. I could write about how I sang the song for a pub full of people in Scotland. They were loud and drunk and they weren’t listening to me, but I brought Lightfoot to Scotland.

I could write endlessly about the song, but I do actually have a point that I’m heading towards.

As I think of Lightfoot’s supreme ability as an artist, I’m remembering an idea of J.R.R. Tolkein, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.



He says that God is the Creator and we are “*sub-creators.*” By “sub-creator”, I don’t mean making sandwiches at Subway or Mr. Sub – though it’s not totally unrelated to any creative activity.

Even though we are not God, or gods, Tolkein says that we are supposed to imitate God in his role as Creator. God created the universe out of nothing. We also – sort of – create things out of nothing. We don’t create matter, but we bring things into being. There are many forms of sub-creation (making subs is just one of them), but for Tolkein, there is no higher calling than the ability to tell stories. As we tell stories about events that may be historical or mythological (or perhaps the line between these two things is not so solid!), we are creating little worlds for people to inhabit. The story-teller creates a fascinating

place for people to wander around in, allowing them to leave behind their “real” world for a while.



And isn't this exactly how we experience a song like *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*? We leave behind our lives and even our bodies for 6 or 7 minutes and are taken to a different time and place. When the song is over, we are different because of the journey we have made. We are wiser and more experienced. The story-teller is a creator of little worlds, imitating the Great Creator. And the more little worlds there are, the more interesting this large world becomes.

Another amazing word Tolkien uses is: *effoliation*, ie, leaves coming out on trees. Our world without stories and songs is like a tree with no leaves. A world full of stories and songs is a tree full of leaves, singing and dancing in the wind, and providing shade and visual beauty and even the air we breathe.

Gordon Lightfoot created so many beautiful new leaves on our Canadian Tree that it's as big and leafy and lively as any tree in the world.

When a songwriter dies, it's different from a normal death. He's gone, but (thanks to modern recording techniques) we can still hear his voice and experience his emotions and thoughts when-ever we listen to his music.

*In a musty old hall in Detroit they prayed,
In the Maritime Sailors' Cathedral.
The church bell chimed till it rang 29 times,
For each man on the Edmund Fitzgerald.*

Now the singer of those mournful lines has also passed away. His funeral was at St. Paul's United Church, Orillia, where he grew up as a choirboy. He is to be buried beside his parents in the nearby Presbyterian/Anglican Cemetery of St. Andrew and St. James, also in Orillia. Let the bell chime one last time, for the thirtieth man on the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Thank you, Gordon Lightfoot. Rest in Peace.

