“The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald”
by Gordon Lightfoot

The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee
The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead
When the skies of November turn gloomy.

With a load of iron ore - 26,000 tons more
Than the Edmund Fitzgerald weighed empty
That good ship and true was a bone to be chewed
When the gales of November came early

The ship was the pride of the American side
Coming back from some mill in Wisconsin
As the big freighters go it was bigger than most
With a crew and the Captain well seasoned.

Concluding some terms with a couple of steel firms
When they left fully loaded for Cleveland
And later that night when the ships bell rang
Could it be the North Wind they'd been feeling.

The wind in the wires made a tattletale sound
And a wave broke over the railing
And every man knew, as the Captain did, too,
'Twas the witch of November come stealing.

The dawn came late and the breakfast had to wait
When the gales of November came slashing
When afternoon came it was freezing rain
In the face of a hurricane West Wind

When supper time came the old cook came on deck
Saying fellows it's too rough to feed ya
At 7PM a main hatchway caved in
He said fellas it's been good to know ya.

The Captain wired in he had water coming in
And the good ship and crew was in peril
And later that night when its lights went out of sight
Came the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

Does anyone know where the love of God goes
When the waves turn the minutes to hours
The searchers all say they'd have made Whitefish Bay
If they'd fifteen more miles behind her.

They might have split up or they might have capsized
They may have broke deep and took water
And all that remains is the faces and the names
Of the wives and the sons and the daughters.

Lake Huron rolls, Superior sings
In the ruins of her ice water mansion
Old Michigan steams like a young man's dreams,
The islands and bays are for sportsmen.

And farther below Lake Ontario
Takes in what Lake Erie can send her
And the iron boats go as the mariners all know
With the gales of November remembered.

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

The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee
Superior, they say, never gives up her dead
When the gales of November come early.

© 1976 Moose Music, Inc.
Dominant Modes
Between the tragic and comic modes, the poem clearly adheres to the tragic mode. The story is about 29 men who served on the SS Edmund Fitzgerald and lost their lives when the ship was wrecked in a storm on Lake Superior in November, 1975. The autumn storm alone yields a tragic mood. Because the heroes are simple working men (and is based on a true story), the poem tends toward pathos or low mimetic tragedy. The chord of pathos is struck when we first hear of the wreck, then again with the mention of their wives, sons and daughters, and finally when the church bell rang 29 times. Even though the dominant mode is pathos, the poem has echoes of the ironic, elegiac and even suggestions or hints of the dionysiac and high mimetic.

The thematic mode tends toward romance since the poet is a chronicler. Even the use of the ballad form to tell a tale suggests this mode. The poet is remembering the events and keeping them alive for us. The poet is keeping alive the memory of not just those who lost their lives on the Edmund Fitzgerald, but to all Great Lake shipwrecks which provides a line of history and memory for Great Lake townspeople. The chronicler is also warning us of the potential danger of Nature and how it is ultimately “Superior” to anything we create. The poem also echoes any and all shipwrecks and a reminder of the demonic imagery of the sea. (Because it is a tale of a disaster at sea, one cannot help conjuring up the Ancient Mariner as the mad chronicler who must relate his story for the rest of his days.)

Subdominant Modes
Arguably, the power of Lightfoot’s song comes from his blend of tragic modes. Although the dominant may be low mimetic, there is a strong suggestion of the ironic and elegiac. The elegiac is established with the bookend refrains of Chippewa legend. The use of the Native legend of Lake Superior gives an animating force to the lake. There is a suggestion of the divine in the lake itself - although the demonic is strongest. There is also a crossover between the dionysiac and elegiac when it comes to the ship itself. The “Fitz” was a legendary ship (almost reminiscent of the Titanic), and its wreck is almost like a dying god, and there is certainly a sense of melancholy with its loss. The fact that the ship is personified with the name Edmund Fitzgerald helps to reinforce this. There is also an unfulfilled quest, typical of the elegiac, as the crew is unable to deliver its iron ore.

The ironic is evidenced in the fact that the lost crew never did anything to deserve such a horrible death. They are innocent victims, however, they are all guilty in the sense that they dared Lake Superior in November. The mention of the legend reinforces their “fate”. There are other lines that refer to the ironic such as when the cook says, “Fellas, it’s been good to know ya,” also when the searchers all say that they would have been safe if they had just fifteen more miles covered, and when the poet asks, “Does anyone know where the love of God goes?” This last example points to a kind of existence where a merciful and loving God cannot be found and man’s death is an external necessity. One can find a hint of the high mimetic with the special mention of the captain, but for a stronger sense of high mimetic the ballad would need to focus solely on the captain as leader and the social and moral effects of his death.
**Archetypal Imagery**

Most of the symbolism is demonic. The divine representation is man's fate against an animated autumn sea and the water symbolism is strongest with Superior as some kind of leviathan, and the men are ultimately doomed to Superior's "ice water mansion". Perhaps Superior itself comes across as a bit of a tyrant who does not want to be bothered in autumn and summons the demonic sexual symbolism of the "witch of November". However, one could argue that the witch is countered against the apocalyptic band of brothers who consist of "a crew and captain well seasoned" whose only options are to put their faith in the work ethic of experience imagery to try and survive the onslaught. Sadly, they are merely innocent lambs being brought to the slaughter, and there is a hint of high mimetic and romantic fire symbolism with the ship's lights, like the light of its eyes, finally extinguishing.

**Ideological Imagery**

The following is an exploration in "ideological" imagery which I (and I'm guessing Frye) would classify as an extension of archetypal imagery. My intention is not to make fun of this kind of interpretation; as archetypal interpretations go, they are certainly valid. My only criticism would be if one restricted oneself to analyzing literature only with these lenses, because I feel it would result in a limiting interpretation of literature, and would not be what Bloom called "a full reading" of the text. It should be noted that this kind of criticism is congruent with the rise of the ironic age of literature.

**Marxist:** From this viewpoint, the poem becomes another example of capitalist exploitation. These are simple working men who to earn their pay had to tempt disaster on Superior in autumn and who yielded up their lives to the capitalist machine of the steel industry. The profiteers were never in harm's way and one can expect that they were more upset over the monetary loss of so much iron ore and their ship than the lives of the crew. To add insult to injury, the poem points out that the workers and their families can only take solace in religion as represented by the church service at the end of the poem. (Note: the original Coast Guard report placed the blame on the crew, thus preventing a costly lawsuit against the industrialists.) On the positive marxist side, the poem shows solidarity amongst the crew as they try and weather the storm.

**Feminist:** The poem exhibits sexist stereotypes with women as destroyers of men. Superior is referred to in the feminine, so it becomes a demonic goddess wishing to destroy the heroic men. Superior even calls on her sister the wind, defined in the poem as a witch, to aid in the destruction. The men are seen as brave, courageous, and helpless victims. (Mind you, the ironic feminist and/or male chauvinist position might see it as a parody of the monthly cycle and a warning to men to stay away from women during that time if they know what is good for them.) The poem makes a brief mention of the wives and children left behind. Feminist symbolism would see this as the real story, that is, the women are left behind to raise the children alone and how this heroism is never told.

**Post-colonialism:** The use of the Chippewa legend could be seen as an appropriation of Native oral tradition and mythology, and continuing the long tradition of the stereotype of the "noble savage" who is revered but ultimately ignored. On the other hand, the poem could point out the legacy of colonialism and its arrogance against nature as well as its greed for profit.

**Ecocriticism:** Nature and the environment, as represented by the sea and wind, is constructed in hostile feminine terms, while the pursuit of capitalist gain is constructed in sacrificial and courageous masculine terms. This supports a male-constructed economy that has no obligation to care for the environment, since the environment clearly does not care for us.