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Rhyme and Image in Yeats's *A Man Young and Old*

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In W. B. Yeats's work, rhyming has specific implications to the overall meaning of the poem. This paper examines Yeats's "A Man Young and Old" focusing on the rhyming pattern and image selection as well as location while analyzing these functions by using the applied theories of Reuven Tsur. Tsur's chapter entitled "Gestalt Qualities in Poetry and the Reader's Absorption Style" from the work *"Kubla Khan"—Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style: A Study in Mental, Vocal and Critical Performance* (2006), as well as *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance* (1998) both deal with reader response to poetic rhyming patterns. Within "A Man Young and Old," the reader must either perform the process of leveling or sharpening in order to make the diction in the schema fit into a natural pattern. Tsur's work in this area of poetics is stimulating and effectual for understanding the usage of symbols and objects in Yeats's poem. Furthermore, once the rhyming patterns are explored, particular rhymed words in one section seem to be purposefully removed from the rhyming pattern transposed into opposing positions in the poem, demonstrating Yeats's awareness of the influence of rhyme on the reader. The intention of this paper is to explore one possible meaning behind these poetic maneuvers in order to expose the intentional manipulation of poetic rhyming, thereby further developing Yeats's meaning in the poem.

I

I approach "A Man Young and Old" with Tsur's theories in order to further develop the discussion of Yeats's work by turning a critical eye to rhyming patterns. As Helen Vendler, in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (2007) notes, "There exists no general book examining [...] the ideological meaning for [Yeats] of certain rhythms or stanza forms" (2). In terms of Yeatsian scholarship, only recently has this dearth of scholarly research undergone needed consideration. Therefore, this essay addresses Vendler's observation by focusing its discussion on an often neglected poem of Yeats's later work in order to probe the application of rhyming and images, exposing helpful insight for examination of their correlation in Yeats's larger corpus. Implementing Tsur's theories, I believe, advances a foundational starting point for larger discourse of Yeats's meaning behind rhythms and stanzas.

In order to apply Tsur's hypotheses to Yeats's poem, extrapolation of Tsur's theories is requisite. In chapter three of *Kubla Khan*, Tsur investigates Gestalt Qualities by concentrating on reader responses to short stanzas with simple rhyming schemas of *aaba*, *aaaa*, and *aabb*. These patterns are chosen in order to confirm a hypothesis that readers mentally manipulate patterns in order to create a satisfactory level of rhyming completion in a poem. Tsur works with the conjecture that readers enjoy their reading in reliable rhyming patterns, bringing about the argument that the "realization of such poetic effects requires certain kinds of poetic structures and, at the same time, certain kinds of cooperation on the reader's part" (114). In order to reach

any level of “cooperation” the poem must meet definite criteria. Foundational Gestalt requirements in the construction of the poetic rhyming schema are necessary for the reader to enjoy the rhythmic patterns. Proximity of pared line-endings as well as parallelism in diction becomes relevant when attempting to examine the structure of the rhyming pattern. In a couplet, both proximity and similarity are at their closest with the *aa* line-ending pattern; whereas, the quatrain continues with the similarity, but the proximity has become less strong due to the *abab* pattern (Tsur 116). When a rhyming pattern such as *aaaa* occurs, the reader reaches a point of saturation. This arises because there is insufficient deviation in the pattern causing “boredom and fatigue” (120). Rhyming patterns become essential in not only creating proximity and similarity, but also in keeping the reader from losing interest in the poem.

One aspect worth emphasizing is what Tsur considers to be the concept of poetic closure. To define his view on poetic closure, Tsur references portions of Barbara Herrnstein-Smith’s 1968 work *Poetic Closure*, and it is expedient to include the text here for the sake of clarity. Herrnstein-Smith defines this poetic mechanism as follows:

Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader’s experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design. (36)

This definition has particular importance for Tsur, because he is concerned with the reader’s experience in relation to the effect of both the closure and also the poetic rhyming pattern. If the reader does not find this closure, there may be no feeling of completion from the poem and the reader may be left seeking that which is not there. Closure may occur through an interdependency on metre and rhyming pattern; conversely, in the *aaaa* pattern, the sense of saturation overwhelms the sense of closure, or as Tsur notes, “[t]he unchanging sequence of one rhyme in four or more lines is perceived as a homogeneous sequence, without sufficient differentiation” (120). If, however, there is the pattern *aaba*, the reader is more satisfied. It is “the third, ‘deviant’ line, and the fourth line ‘returning’ to the rhyme established at the beginning [that] constitutes a coherent structure, imposing unity upon the sequence” (Tsur 120).

The reader’s mind looks forward to seeing recognized patterns appear in the poetry. If this does not occur, then the artist risks losing his audience: “he does this [maintaining our interest] by sustaining our continuous expectation of further development: that is, by providing constant sources of instability” (Herrnstein-Smith 35). The “instability” Herrnstein-Smith mentions is that “deviant” third line with which Tsur experiments. The repeated pattern of the *aaaa*, on the otherhand, leaves the reader without satisfaction because it does not diversify, intending a return to the pattern. Similarly, I. A. Richards has noted:

Rhythm and its specialized form, metre, depend upon repetition, and expectancy. Equally where what is expected recurs and where it fails, all rhythmical and metrical effects spring from anticipation. As a rule this anticipation is unconscious. Sequences of syllables both as sounds and as images of speech-movements leave the mind ready for certain further sequences rather than for

others. (69)

If, as Richards claims, anticipation is obligatory to achieving the desired effect of rhythm and metre, then the rhyming scheme is crucial to creating the deviation and return which fulfills the “expectancy” of the reader. Richards emphasizes what Tsur reveals in the testing of this hypotheses. Additionally, Richards refers to an unexpected rhyme as one which fails; however, Tsur suggests that this is the time when the leveling and sharpening¹ of the poem become important (and even more so the return of the original rhyme) in helping the reader find a greater sense of reward through a noticeable closure of the poem.

For Tsur, closure acts as a “dynamic principle” which allows it to achieve the required effect on the reader. The results of Tsur’s test elucidate the reactions of a reader to a particular rhyming pattern. For instance, his results revealed that “[t]he more closed the text is perceived to be, the more dynamic, interesting, tense, and emotional it is judged to be. The more open the text is perceived to be, the more static, boring, relaxed and unemotional it is judged to be” (*Kubla Kahn* 128). In this sense then, “[c]losure has an aesthetic effect on readers...” and what becomes most important is that “it highlights the structural factor of the rhyme-scheme (i.e., Gestalt) in determining aesthetic judgment” (128). Such structural factors elucidate Yeats’s rhyme scheme since the contrast between symbols in the schema of the poem, and the closure the reader is looking for, become integrated with the overall meaning of the poem.

When reviewing reader reaction to the various rhyming patterns of *aaaa*, *aaba*, and *aabb*, Tsur notes that if the reader finds the poem to be “symmetrical and is well-articulated into two equal parts” concerning the rhyming pattern, and if additionally “it displays good continuation,” then it “creates good closure” (*Kubla Kahn* 128). If the poetry does not follow these principles of closure, or if the poem does not meet the reader’s expectations, then the reader enacts either “leveling” or “sharpening” of the poem to achieve the desired closure. Leveling or sharpening is implemented to make a mental attempt to fit the poem into a form which matches the high-absorption or low-absorption mental processes of the reader (*Kubla Kahn* 138). When the poem requires leveling or sharpening, the objective of the reader is to create a return to an expected line pattern. This in turn helps create “structural closure and closural allusion” (Tsur, *Kubla Kahn* 139), which corresponds directly to whether a reader is considered either a high- or low-absorption reader.

Tsur refers to the *aaba* scheme as “double-edged” in that it functions differently

¹ Tsur takes his definitions of sharpening and leveling from Rudolph Arnheim’s work, *Art and Visual Perception* (1957) in which Arnheim defines them as follows:

Leveling is characterized by such factors as unification, enhancement of symmetry, repetition, dropping of nonfitting detail, elimination of obliqueness. On the contrary, sharpening makes for subdivision, enhancement of difference, stressing of obliqueness. Sharpening involves simplification when it helps to eliminate ambiguity—but not in other examples, where it occurs although no ambiguity is involved. In the latter there is a tendency against simplification. (Arnheim 57-58)

depending on the response of the reader and also the strength of the context (*Kubla Kahn* 129). When the reader comes across a double-edged scheme, “there may be a (frustrated) attempt to ‘level out’ the deviating line, [...]; or there may be a (successful) attempt to sharpen the disturbance of the deviating line, followed by a highly gratifying return to the initial rhyme, in which case the rating of pleasantness will be high” (Tsur, *Kubla Kahn* 129). The idea of sharpening is essential to investigating the patterns in Yeats’s “A Man Young and Old.” As will be revealed, Yeats appears to intentionally force the reader to enact the process of sharpening and leveling in his rhyming schemes. Yeats is playing with “consonantal rhymes” which “can be effective in their suggestiveness (swans/stones, south/both)” (Fox 236). These are not typically words which would be considered “rhyming” in the traditional sense and therefore the reader must work to sharpen or level Yeats’s word selection in order to achieve satisfaction from the poem.

II

Transposing Tsur’s theory onto an analysis of “A Man Young and Old” requires examinations of the rhyming and metrical aspects as they interact with certain symbols² and words of line endings; these symbols and words, such as “moon”, “man”, and in particular, “stone”, are placed strategically in the poem in order to enhance the purposefulness of the poem. A significant focus of my Yeats analysis revolves on the seventh section of the poem, entitled, “The Friends of his Youth.” Yeats enlists his symbols for strategic roles in both the rhyming and form of the poem.³ In section VII, through the use of the ballad stanza, the poet establishes his rhyming pattern in the first three quatrains of the stanza, relying on the traditional effects of rhythm and metre. Yeats uses the fourth quatrain to deviate from the reader’s anticipation and then returns in the fifth quatrain to the original pattern—thus helping the reader achieve the sense of closure.

“The Friends of his Youth” begins with the reworking of the traditional metaphor, TIME IS A DESTROYER. “Falling apart is another kind of change,” argue Lakoff and Turner, and any “agent who makes things fall apart is a destroyer. So time can be a destroyer” (42). Yeats, however, negates this metaphor by making laughter the destroyer:

² The symbolic elements within Yeats’s work are not the directional force of his poetic structure, however. As Gross and McDowell remark, in *Modern Poetry in the Metrical Tradition* (1965, 1996), “[a]lthough Yeats came under strong symbolist influence, especially in the quality of his images, he rarely fails to supply the hard skeleton of logical thought that close syntactical form affords” (48). These forms become essential when looking at Yeats’s poems from a structural perspective since it is not the symbols, but rather the form in which the symbols are delivered which may take precedence in Yeats’s poetry.

³ Form is an essential element in Yeats, as Angela Leighton expounds upon form in *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (2008), noting that “form can signify both the finished object, the art form in its completion, or the parts that make up its technical apparatus. It can signify a visionary apparition in the mind, or the real, physical properties of a work” (3). Form, in Leighton’s definition, is multifarious in its poetic role thereby adding significance to the function it performs in poetry.

Laughter not time destroyed my voice
 And put that crack in it,
 And when the moon's pot-bellied
 I get a laughing fit, (233. 1-4)

The first image is of the poet, now mirthless, recalling the laughter of his younger days. By altering the typical TIME IS A DESTROYER metaphor, the tiredness of his voice is now linked only to the destruction of laughter. However, it is a forced laughter, or an abrasive type of laughter, driven to the point of screeching. The poet begins by taking something traditionally healthy, even desirable, and creates a novel and unexpected outcome. In doing so, Yeats "evoke[s] paradox and deliberate (if implied) contradiction" (Seiden 151). By specifically emphasizing the "crack" with the determiner "that", the poet focuses our mind on the condition of the poet's laughter.

Lines three and four provide an origin for the poet's laughter. The moon image occurs in sections I, II and V; in these sections the moon is linked with a mental state of the mind: "For every hand is lunatic / That travels on the moon" (I.11-12); "Like the moon her kindness is, / ... / So like a bit of stone I lie / Under a broken tree" (II.1, 7-8); "A crazy man that found a cup / ... / Imagining, moon-accursed" (V.1,4). Yeats associates the lunar pull of the full moon with the poet's laughing fits. An interesting parallel exists between "A Man Young and Old" and Yeats's "The Phases of The Moon," first published in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and republished in *A Vision* (1925).

Robartes: When the moon's full those creatures of the full
 Are met on the waste hills by country men
 Who shudder and hurry by: body and soul
 Estranged amid the strangeness of themselves,
 Caught up in contemplation, the mind's eye
 Fixed upon images that once were thought,
 For separate, perfect, and immovable
 Images can break the solitude
 Of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.
And thereupon with aged, high-pitched voice
Aherne laughed, thinking of the man within,
His sleepless candle and laborious pen. (75-86)

The full moon is associated with laughter and the appearance of old Madge and her stone baby in

“A Man Young and Old.” The crack in the laughter is linked with insanity brought on by the full moon. Interestingly, even though the poet claims that time has not been the destroyer, the laughter is brought on by the cyclical pattern of the moon, which, for Yeats, traveled through 28 phases thereby having some association with time. At the end of the above section of “The Phases of the Moon,” Aherne laughs with his “aged, high-pitched voice” as he imagines the poet under the influence of the celestial body. “The Phases of The Moon” reveal the meaning behind events which take place in the first stanza of “The Friends of his Youth” because Robartes’s explains the narrator’s self-revelation.

Yet, “The Friends of his Youth” suddenly disrupts the rhyming schema as Yeats juxtaposes the position of the stone in lines 5-8, since stone becomes a predominant object both physically and symbolically. As with other symbols in the poems of *The Tower*, stone carries more than one defined representation and serves to indicate a varied relationship between man and itself. There is, however, the continued dependence on the rhyming scheme, *abcb*, which plays a critical role in establishing the relationship, or lack of one. In particular, this section of the poem places the stone against sonic images. The stone, lifeless and cold, is quiet compared to the surrounding lines:

For that old Madge comes down the lane,
A stone upon her breast,
And a cloak wrapped about the stone,
And she can get no rest (233.5-8)

The pot-bellied moon brings old Madge out cuddling her stone. The stone acts as the representation of an idea. And amidst the sonic images of the first four lines and the last four lines of the stanza, the stone is silent. “Laughter” and “crack” are both auditory images and are connected with “voice”. The “crack” or shriek of laughter relates to the last line in section VI, where the woman cries out, “Strike me if I shriek.” These shrill sounds, associated with the lunar moon, become fits of uncontrollable laughter, cracking with exhaustion. We can also observe the connection between “strike” and “crack” since, in some cases when something is struck, it creates a loud crack or smack. Placed in the middle of the sonic images, the stone’s presence is a foil to the “shrieks”, “thumps”, “breaking wave”, “laughing” and even old Madge’s apostrophic singing resonates loudly when sung to the mute stone.

As the poem progresses, a new stanza begins after the first 12 lines, as the figure of Peter appears and interacts with sonic images and the silent stone. Peter employs a critical function in the poem because the first quatrain of the second stanza creates Yeats’s primary emphasis between the role of stone and its relationship to man:

And Peter that had great affairs
And was a pushing man
Shrieks, ‘I am King of the Peacocks,’
And perches on a stone; (VII.13-16)

The *abcb* pattern of each quatrain in the remaining stanzas of the poem underscores the rhyming pair. The rhymes of previous three quatrains are easily perceivable; however, here, Yeats places “man” and “stone” in a pattern that requires the reader to use leveling in order to overcome what Tsur refers to as the “unfitting detail.” Yeats has placed these two into the slant rhyme so that there the reader will notice the shapes of “man” and “stone” and how these two deviate from the original rhyme. He does this to draw attention to his thematic rhyme. In section I, Yeats first uses the term “heart of stone,” which is linked with man, and here it is again applied constructing a direct implication to the political figure of Peter, who is now rhymed with stone but with a different stress pattern than the previous quatrains of section VII. Tsur notes in chapter two of *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance*, that “when stress pattern deviates from metre to an extreme degree, the deviant stress pattern may become acceptable within the rhythmical organization if it has a sufficiently strong shape to stand out against the rhythmical background as an articulated figure” (*Poetic Rhythm* 58). The images of “man” and “stone” do diverge from the previous quatrains, but they are both indispensable images for the meaning of the poem, because “[r]hythms are structures symbolic of feelings that evoke representations of things or actions” (Gross and McDowell 46); Yeats is able to sufficiently make them work because the reader can become conscious of the altered rhyming pattern.

Another decisive aspect of the man / stone dichotic rhyme is the prolonged pronunciation of the nasal “n” in both words. In order to make the words have some semblance of following the *abcb* pattern, the reader must level the two words to make them fit into the pattern. In Tsur’s opinion,

Prolongation is, in fact, a double-edged phenomenon, that is, in different contexts it has different, sometimes even opposite, effects. From a perceptual point of view, prolongation indicates lack of forward movement. Therefore, when we have reason to suppose that it occurs at the end of some perceptual unit, it will be perceived as reinforcing the sense of *rest*; when it occurs in the middle of some forward movement, it is perceived as an *arrest*, arousing strong desire for change. (Tsur, “Phonetic Cues”)

In Yeats’s quatrain, the prolongation acts as an arrest to the rhyming pattern of the previous stanza. The reader is expecting, as Richard mentions, the continuation of the pattern. When this does not occur, there is retardation in the forward movement of the poem which may cause the reader to consider the association between man and stone. This also exhibits, as Tsur states, the demand for a return to the original pattern, thus exemplifying Tsur’s claim concerning the double-edged properties of the prolongation of the rhyme.

Comparable to Tsur’s hypothesis that the *aaba* rhyme scheme is double-edged, Yeats’s poem also attempts a much larger version of this in which the concluding four lines of section VII return to the original phonetically rhyming words. As noted, the man / stone slant rhyme does not fit the previously rhymed patterns of it / fit, breast / rest, wild / child. In the final four lines of the poem, Yeats supplies the reader with the “highly gratifying return to the initial rhyme” (Tsur 129). In this we see that “Yeats’s images have [...] meaning peculiar and private; and they must be understood in the context of his mythological philosophy of history” (Gross and McDowell 49). In the rhymed patterns of the initial stanza, there is an advancement for movement from the poet’s laughter to the lunar insanity of old Madge to the pairing of man and stone with the pride of Peter. The closing pattern with side / pride is consistent in that it follows

the strong “i” which the original rhyming begins with. The short “i” sound in “it” and “fit” is returned in the long “i” of “side” and “pride”.

III

Thus far, I have attempted to delineate how the rhyming patterns in section VII of “A Man Young and Old” have emphasized Yeats’s connection between rhymed line-endings and the reader’s exercise in leveling, sharpening, and attaining a sense of closure. My approach has been to focus on how the rhyme scheme highlights these associations. Also, the sonic images in section VII are important in demonstrating how stone acts as a foil to auditory words. The stone has performed as a lifeless mute, a possible cold embodiment of a free Ireland; additionally, Yeats regains the elements of rhyme and auditory images in section X, “His Wildness,” in order to expose how he, unlike old Madge and Peter, has a humane desire to see a new Ireland born, but not through the heart of stone or prideful actions. Overall, as “A Man Young and Old” develops, the poet establishes, in the first sections, how he was seduced into the idea of helping Ireland in its plight for freedom. However, the “heart of stone” that he found made him discern that this effort was not placing human value first. As the poet has aged, he becomes wiser and is more sympathetic towards nursing the young nation.

The second stanza of “His Wildness” returns to the images of section VII. In it we see corresponding actions to those of both Peter and old Madge, but now they are altered activities in that they are recreated by the poet, in private. Again, the stone plays a central image in the poem’s import but also in the rhyming schema as the second stanza illustrates:

Were I but there and none to hear
I’d have a peacock cry,
For that is natural to a man
That lives in memory,
Being all alone I’d nurse a stone
And sing it a lullaby. (X.7-12)

Yeats’s admits that the stone baby is still incapable of hearing or feeling and that there are no human properties to the stone: “none to hear” and “Being all alone” modifies the “I” which then brings an emphasis to the emptiness of the stone’s personified qualities. However, the poet is more interested in the ideas behind the symbol of the stone; he is willing to empathize with the efforts of Peter and old Madge and, if the conditions permitted, he too would nurse a stone and attempt to bring about the life of a new nation. In the sections of the poem which deal with the stone image, the stone represents an idea, and when the young poet discovers the “heart of stone” (I.8) he realizes that it is devoid of human empathy. Nevertheless, nursing the stone mirrors a motherly action with tenderness and affinity involved. In contrast, the slant rhyme scheme of section VII between “man” and “stone” suggests that there is something to this relationship which prohibits the naturalness of their joining.

There is a key in the rhyming pattern of the second stanza of “His Wildness,” however,

which aids the reader in relating to the poet's change of heart toward the symbol of the stone. Both stanzas of section X have an *abcbdb* pattern and in both there is no deviation from the rhyme established. All three rhyming line-endings of the second stanza, "cry", "memory", and "lullaby" gratify the reader's expectations. What is of singular consequence is the positioning of "man" and "stone" in the second stanza. Unlike section VII, they do not conflict with the rhyming schema because now they are on unrhymed line-endings. Yeats has removed the demand for the reader to sharpen the rhyme in order to achieve the anticipated pattern. Now, "man" and "stone" are not placed together, signifying Yeats's distinction between human qualities and those embodied in the stone; yet, the poet is inclined to nurse the stone baby if he were concealed from the public eye. The primary variance between the actions of old Madge and Peter and the mature poet of section X is the publicity of the stone-related activity in section VII. Both old Madge and Peter are attempting to reveal their involvement with the stone: "old Madge comes down the lane," "she can get no rest," "Peter that had great affairs," "perches on a stone"—all these events occur in the public arena. Furthermore, section VII contains louder sonic images, which contrast against the silence of the stone: "laughter," "breaking wave," "shrieks," and "thumps." In section X, there is a significant change in the location. Now, the poet seeks to be alone where no one can hear. He still clasps the national pride of the peacock—because a man who thinks on the past ("memory") of his country should be proud—but in the reclusive setting the poet would quietly nurse, with human kindness, the idea of a new nation.

In isolating "man" and "stone", the section achieves a degree of leveling because the slant rhyme is no longer present to cause the reader trouble. Through this separation, the contrast between the rhyme in section VII, and the final stone reference in section X, creates a feeling of closure. The rhyme ending allows the reader to gain discernment for the poet's resolve to consider nursing the stone. For lyrical closure, the poet employs "lullaby", which associates sleep with the close of the poem, thereby revealing the departure or losing of consciousness. As Herrnstein-Smith discloses, "it is not the described experience of the poet that must be 'resolved,' but the actual experience of the reader. Although we apparently demand resolution, equilibrium, or stability of a work of art, we object when a poem or play is static: we want... 'development' in poems" (34-35). There is identifiable and considerable development through "A Man Young and Old," indicating the maturing of the poet, but also the recognition that human empathy and compassion mean profoundly more to him than sacrificing himself to the cold stone.

Closure is an integral part of creating a poem, for it supplies readers with a concluding resolution. Tsur's main hypotheses have revealed that the reader, whether through high- or low-absorption, applies their particular method to provide themselves with closure, whether it be strong or weak. One of the primary means by which the poet develops this is the use of the rhyming pattern which may depart, but then must return, allowing for structural closure. In "A Man Young and Old" Yeats has built a poem which evolves through stages. In particular, section VII, "The Friends of his Youth," conveys how the poet uses his rhyming pattern to create sequences through which the mute stone is placed in the midst of sonic images. A stone within a sonic image creates a contrast but also depicts how "moon", "man", and "stone" hold different properties. Tsur's efforts to analyze the properties and functions of rhyming patterns in relation to reader satisfaction creates a multitude of possibilities for applying these theories to poets such as Yeats. What rhyming pattern and closure reveal in Yeats is that he was very conscious of their specific role within the construction of his poetry. Undoubtedly, that further exploration of

rhyming patterns and stanza construction in Yeats's poetry will foster exposure in similar correlations between the poet and his poetry as I have attempted to depict in "A Man Young and Old."

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