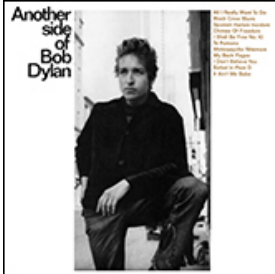


The Bob Dylan Pages

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Busy Burning Bridges Behind

Being the darling of the folk community around Greenwich Village since 1962, Bob Dylan to the disappointment of his audience chose to turn his back on making songs about social criticism from the album *Another Side Of Bob Dylan*, released August 1964, and forth. Dylan refused to follow everybody's expectations. His lyrics are narrowing down from now on, focusing increasingly on the inconceivability of the surrounding world. The folk fundamentalists found this kind of statements superficial, and they detested it, but Dylan was speeding away in his own direction, busy burning the bridges behind him.

My Back Pages

My Back Pages is to a certain extent a program declaration of this new way of writing. The narrator describes himself as younger than he was before when everything was painted in black & white:

Verse 1

*Crimson flames tied through my ears
Rollin' high and mighty traps
Pounced with fire on flaming roads
Using ideas as my maps
"We'll meet on edges, soon," said I
Proud 'neath heated brow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.*

Being younger than you were before is of course a contradiction, and still ... with youngness follows freshness, the ability to experience the world with new unprejudiced eyes, which is exactly what the poet aims to do in contrast to his previous production. As in several other songs from this period the lyrics contain inspiration from the French symbolist poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud.

Verse 4

*A self-ordained professor's tongue
Too serious to fool
Spouted out that liberty
Is just equality in school
"Equality," I spoke the word
As if a wedding vow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.*

That Liberty, Equality, Fraternity are good words no one can deny that. But using that kind of phrases you put yourself in a frame, you're stiffened, old. That's the logic in the apparent contradiction.

Verse 6

*Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect
Good and bad, I define these terms
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.*

The seriousness and morality defined by others and adapted by his previous self is described as a guard preventing him from seeing clearly. Not that good or bad do not exist but he reserves his right to define those notions off of a personal point of view

Maggie's Farm

Distancing himself from his previous production wasn't just materialized in the lyrics. At the Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965 *Maggie's Farm* attracted adverse attention, being the first time Dylan performed with electrical backing. It would be an understatement to assert that the performance was poorly received. The old guard of folk purists booed Dylan out loudly, much to his own surprise and distress. However, other explanations of the booing than dissatisfaction with the electric backing have been heard. Anyway, taking a closer look at the lyrics, the song is a vitriolic attack on contemporary American culture. Actually a more political text than some of the other songs from the period.



The song is a brisk traditional 12 bar blues and it had actually already been released on *Bringing It All Back Home* (March 22, 1965) at the time of the Newport Festival. The lyrics continue in many ways the line from the previous album, but the tone tends to become significantly harder and more direct. They point forward too, and that's more interesting. Dylan's lyrics are on their way to shift into a personal confrontation with a world around him, even the closest. The songwriter is no longer satisfied sitting in his ivory tower commenting - poetically, intelligently - on social dysfunctions; he attacks the entire community. This trend peaks about half a year later with the song, *Like A Rolling Stone*, released 1966 on the album *Highway 61 Revisited*. And likewise performed with electric backing on the Newport Festival.

Maggie and her farm in Maggie's Farm is obviously American society at large, the spirit and attitudes of its people:

Verse 1

*I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.
No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.
Well, I wake up in the morning,
Fold my hands and pray for rain.
I got a head full of ideas
That are drivin' me insane.
It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor.
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.*

The poet has a lot of gems to show, but no one seems to value them. Instead they let him scrub the floor, meaning that he just has got to do his job the way everybody else expects him to do.

Verse 2

*I ain't gonna work for Maggie's brother no more.
No, I ain't gonna work for Maggie's brother no more.
Well, he hands you a nickel,
He hands you a dime,
He asks you with a grin
If you're havin' a good time,
Then he fines you every time you slam the door.
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's brother no more*

Maggie's brother has been seen as Dylan's manager exploiting him financially. I don't know. It may as well be the music industry at large, if anything of that sort. Another nearby interpretation might refer to the folk purists who slap him every time he slams the door, meaning that he just doesn't send the right messages.

Verse 3

*I ain't gonna work for Maggie's pa no more.
No, I ain't gonna work for Maggie's pa no more.
Well, he puts his cigar
Out in your face just for kicks.
His bedroom window
It is made out of bricks.
The National Guard stands around the door.
Ah, I ain't gonna work for Maggie's pa no more*

Maggie's pa is a stud, rude and brutal but also paranoid, letting the authorities stand guard to protect him against ... what? Anti-social elements like our poet? Black people? Poor people? Communists?

Verse 4

*I ain't gonna work for Maggie's ma no more.
No, I ain't gonna work for Maggie's ma no more.
Well, she talks to all the servants
About man and God and law.
Everybody says
She's the brains behind pa.
She's sixty-eight, but she says she's fifty-four.
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's ma no more.*

And here comes the absurdly adored American Mother with a capital M – a distorted representation of the archetypical mother. She uses religion as her own property, and she's the one who determines the rules at home.

Verse 5

*I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.
No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.
Well, I try my best
To be just like I am,
But everybody wants you
To be just like them.
They sing while you slave and I just get bored.
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.*

So the narrator doesn't want to play the game any more, feeling used and exploited. Line 3-6 is programmatic for this period:

*Well, I try my best
To be just like I am,
But everybody wants you
To be just like them.*

Two of the songs from *Another Side Of Bob Dylan* may still be characterized as protest songs, *I Shall Be Free No. 10* and *Motorpsycho Nightmare*, in the sense that they express dissatisfaction with certain conditions in the surrounding society. But they are not uniquely pointing at social disorders. Instead they express a personal feeling of overall absurdity, and they do so with a great sense of humour.

Humour is Dylan's second face or maybe even his first. Indeed humour has from the very first been a true follower in Dylan's poetry. You do find silly lines put in here and there all around his production.

The next two songs are all-the-way-through completely crazy songs. But they are not just noncommittal fun. Basically they are protest songs and the craziness is another, more indirect way to point out the corresponding disorder in the world experienced by the narrator.

I Shall Be Free No. 10

I Shall Be Free No. 10 being such a crazy song, you may none the less find several references to certain social occurrences. The renowned heavyweight world champion, Cassius Clay a.k.a. Muhammed Ali, is there, as is the American-Russian space race and the ultra conservative senator Barry Goldwater mixed up with the Cuba crisis. But the tone is light and skittish, and basically it is great fun.

Maybe he initially went for a glorious career to some extent but if he did, he never fancied it would happen on other premisses than his own. It's occurring to him during this period that there is a diversity between his own goals and a lot of other people's goals with him. Stubbornly, though, he insists on doing what he feels is right for him.

Verse 1

*I'm just average, common too
I'm just like him, the same as you
I'm everybody's brother and son
I ain't different from anyone
It ain't no use a-talking to me
It's just the same as talking to you.*

Verse 2

*I was shadow-boxing earlier in the day
I figured I was ready for Cassius Clay
I said "Fee, fie, fo, fum, Cassius Clay, here I come
26, 27, 28, 29, I'm gonna make your face look just like mine
Five, four, three, two, one, Cassius Clay you'd better run
99, 100, 101, 102, your ma won't even recognize you
14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, gonna knock him clean right out of his spleen."*

Sheer nonsense. In verse 6 the narrator tries to act normal, but he hasn't really grasped the concept:

Verse 6

*I sat with my high-heeled sneakers on
Waiting to play tennis in the noonday sun
I had my white shorts rolled up past my waist
And my wig-hat was falling in my face
But they wouldn't let me on the tennis court.*

Verse 8 comments on the envy that seems to meet the narrator from people in his own social environment:

Verse 8

*Now I gotta friend who spends his life
Stabbing my picture with a bowie-knife
Dreams of strangling me with a scarf
When my name comes up he pretends to barf.
I've got a million friends!*

But he is not above self-irony:

Verse 9

*Now they asked me to read a poem
At the sorority sister's home
I got knocked down and my head was swimmin'
I wound up with the Dean of Women
Yippee! I'm a poet, and I know it.
Hope I don't blow it.*

Having been increasingly exposed to the press and having had to face heavy demands from his audience, presumably there have been times when Dylan would rather be some nursery assistant than famous, but so far he is able to joke about it.

Motorpsycho Nightmare

As in *I Shall Be Free No. 10*, *Motorpsycho Nightmare* Dylan has definitely left social criticism. But then again, they are sort of protest. But protesting against matters not so easily defined. I mean: 'My surroundings have gone crazy. Am I the only normal person around? Am I normal?' Things like that.

In this set of lyrics our poet opens the show, being on the road and encountering a representative of the common people with both legs solidly planted in the soil:

Verse 1

*I pounded on a farmhouse
Lookin' for a place to stay.*

*I was mighty, mighty tired,
I had come a long, long way.
I said, "Hey, hey, in there,
Is there anybody home?"
I was standin' on the steps
Feelin' most alone.
Well, out comes a farmer,
He must have thought that I was nuts.
He immediately looked at me
And stuck a gun into my guts.*

*Verse 2
I fell down
To my bended knees,
Saying, "I dig farmers,
Don't shoot me, please!"
He cocked his rifle
And began to shout,
"You're that travelin' salesman
That I have heard about."
I said, "No! No! No!
I'm a doctor and it's true,
I'm a clean-cut kid
And I been to college, too."*

Things don't work out well, and the narrator has to be gone in a hurry.

*Verse 8
Well, he threw a Reader's Digest
At my head and I did run,
I did a somersault
As I seen him get his gun
And crashed through the window
At a hundred miles an hour,
And landed fully blast
In his garden flowers.
Rita said, "Come back!"
As he started to load
The sun was comin' up
And I was runnin' down the road.*

It's like a painting: the sun is going down behind some distant mountains, red colours in the dusk, a long straight road, and our hero running the best he has ever learned while he's shot at from behind.

Subterranean Homesick Blues

The first song on *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) bears other remarkable features. One may call it the first rap song ever written. One may call it an elaboration of the old talking blues, too, but I think it is neither. The short lines and the driving rhythm makes it something else. It may be the first music video ever made, though, filmed as a part of D.A. Pennebaker's movie picture *Dont Look Back*.

The lyrics are exactly as mad as the society it describes. They go head over heels in a high-spirited fashion loading one crazy story upon the other:

*Verse 1
Johnny's in the basement
Mixing up the medicine
I'm on the pavement
Thinking about the government
The man in the trench coat
Badge out, laid off
Says he's got a bad cough
Wants to get it paid off
Look out kid
It's somethin' you did
God knows when
But you're doin' it again
You better duck down the alley way
Lookin' for a new friend
The man in the coon-skin cap
In the big pen
Wants eleven dollar bills
You only got ten*

*Verse 2
Maggie comes fleet foot
Face full of black soot
Talkin' that the heat put
Plants in the bed but
The phone's tapped anyway
Maggie says that many say
They must bust in early May
Orders from the D. A.
Look out kid
Don't matter what you did
Walk on your tip toes*

*Don't try "No Doz"
Better stay away from those
That carry around a fire hose
Keep a clean nose
Watch the plain clothes
You don't need a weather man
To know which way the wind blows*

The concluding lines of the 2nd verse, "You don't need a weather man, To know which way the wind blows", have obtained a fame of their own when, a few years later, a militant black civil right organization named themselves 'The Weathermen', and used the lines as the title of one of their manifestos.

But let's take a few examples more of these breathtaking rhymes:

*Try hard, get barred
Get back, write braille
Get jailed, jump bail
Join the army, if you fail
...*

*Don't follow leaders
Watch your parkin' meters
...*

*Please her, please him, buy gifts
Don't steal, don't lift
Twenty years of schoolin'
And they put you on the day shift
...*

*The pump don't work
'Cause the vandals took the handles*

Again, listen to the whole song! It's a great song.

On The Road Again

The title makes you think of the famous beat generation novelist, Jack Kerouac, and his novel *On The Road*. I don't know why this specific song has deserved comparison with *On The Road*. I think many of his songs are characterized by the same rootlessness, the same wish to explore something that still needs exploration. But maybe someone just asked him what the name of the song was, and he simply spat something out.

The lyrics to this song are built over a simple scheme. Much like in *Subterranean Homesick Blues* disaster on disaster are piled up before the audience.

*Verse 1
Well, I wake up in the morning
There's frogs inside my socks
Your mama, she's a-hidin'
Inside the icebox
Your daddy walks in wearin'
A Napoleon Bonaparte mask
Then you ask why I don't live here
Hey, do you have to ask?*

Each verse ends with lines like these:

*Then you ask why I don't live here
Hey, do you have to ask?*

Which in the last verse is transformed into:

*Then you ask why I don't live here
Hey, how come you don't move?*

From now on a second person 'you' is occasionally sneaking its way into the protests making them more like personal announcements rather than the previous intellectual social criticism. Seemingly an inferior observation, but knowing now that the direction went towards direct personal confrontation. It's notable, and the use of 'you' is an indicator. This may be the first time the narrator addresses his fiend(s) directly. But not the last.

Another confrontation with previous attitudes is expressed in verse 3:

*Well, I asked for something to eat
I'm hungry as a hog
So I get brown rice, seaweed
And a dirty hot dog
I've got a hole
Where my stomach disappeared*

The 'dirty hot dog' refers, of course, to fast food and American consumerism and will therefore not surprisingly be subject to criticism. But 'brown rice and seaweed'? Those are the accepted healthy nourishments of the sacred few and we are supposed to like it, but that too is leaving the narrator's stomach empty. He's lashing out against the good old enemy as well as former allies.

Bob Dylan's 115th Dream

Let's get it over with: It's a widely known issue that this song, also from *Bringing It All Back Home*, takes off in a different way, widely known, because the first attempt is there on the album: Dylan starts alone, acoustic, while the other musicians seem to be contemplating ... something. Something else. Dylan breaks out in laughter, and they all laugh for a while. Dylan starts again and the band falls in perfectly. Things like that happen during recordings, but it's significant because the misunderstanding was included in the final recording and because it shows that Dylan's way is spontaneity, not perfectionism.

Bob Dylan's 115th Dream is a free-wheeling fable running totally wild. The narrator is aboard nothing less than the Mayflower, the vessel the first English separatists were aboard when they colonized America. They land and find modern America – well, modern America seen with the eyes of the narrator. He leaves – or should we say, escapes – headlong after an incommensurable series of mad events. All these intermediate occurrences are very much similar in madness to what we have seen in the previous songs. It doesn't really give any meaning to emphasize individual lines, they are all hilarious. All the same we take the first and the last verse as samples of Dylan's narrative skills:

Verse 1

*I was riding on the Mayflower
When I thought I spied some land
I yelled for Captain Arab
I have yuh understand
Who came running to the deck
Said, "Boys, forget the whale
Look on over yonder
Cut the engines
Change the sail
Haul on the bowline"
We sang that melody
Like all tough sailors do
When they are far away at sea*

Verse 11

*Well, the last I heard of Arab
He was stuck on a whale
That was married to the deputy
Sheriff of the jail
But the funniest thing was
When I was leavin' the bay
I saw three ships a-sailin'
They were all heading my way
I asked the captain what his name was
And how come he didn't drive a truck
He said his name was Columbus
I just said, "Good luck."*

It can't be said too often: Listen to the songs while reading the lyrics. It pays off.

Outlaw Blues

Outlaw Blues is another 12 bar blues, still from *Bringing It All Back Home*. The song is notable because the lyrics explicitly introduces the outlaw concept in the title and in those lines:

Verse 2

*Ain't gonna hang no picture,
Ain't gonna hang no picture frame.
Ain't gonna hang no picture,
Or hang no picture frame.
Well, I might look like Robert Ford
But I feel just like a Jesse James*

Jesse James, one of the mythological figures of the Wild West, the outlaw, the robber and murderer, was shot in the back of his head by Robert Ford, fellow outlaw, paid by the local governor.

The narrator is siding with the outlaw. This identifying himself with an outlaw is a recurring theme in many songs from now onward.

Tombstone Blues

The next album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, still from 1965, turned out to be one of the most influential rock albums of all times. All songs except the last one, *Desolation Row*, are with electrical backing, and the combination of rock music and highly poetic lyrics was something new in the history of rock. There was electrical backing on some of the songs from *Bringing It All Back Home* but with *Highway 61 Revisited* the transformation was completed. Rock 'n' roll was here to stay but with a new and original appearance.

Tombstone Blues is absurd, it's humorous, and it's totally crazy. We find allusions to historical persons as well as to biblical characters, and none of it makes sense :

Verse 1

*The sweet pretty things are in bed now of course
The city fathers they're trying to endorse
The reincarnation of Paul Revere's horse
But the town has no need to be nervous*

*The ghost of Belle Starr she hands down her wits
To Jezebel the nun she violently knits
A bald wig for Jack the Ripper who sits*

At the head of the chamber of commerce

*Chorus
Mama's in the fact'ry
She ain't got no shoes
Daddy's in the alley
He's lookin' for food
I'm in the kitchen
With the tombstone blues*

Formally the lyrics are built up in six units, each consisting of an A-piece repeated twice, and a B-piece working as chorus.

For those who don't know, Paul Revere's midnight ride became famous when he warned patriots of the American Revolution against the British forces. Belle Starr was a female outlaw in the period of the Civil War, and Jezebel is a biblical person of questionable character. And who doesn't know Jack the Ripper? All in all a nice bunch.

In the chorus the poet leaves all those surrealistic events to their own realization while he himself sits paralyzed in the kitchen without being able to act. In the fourth part the poet replaces *'I'm in the kitchen with the tombstone blues'* with *'I'm in trouble with the tombstone blues'*.

In the last part an old female blues singer has a rendezvous with Beethoven, and the National Bank sells road maps for the soul. Surrealism merges realistic elements in such a way that they are recognizable but they lose their original meaning. Enigmatic. It's up to the listener to decode the message. But then again, don't try. Just take it in and let your subconscious do the job.

*Verse 6
Where Ma Raney and Beethoven once unwrapped their bed roll
Tuba players now rehearse around the flagpole
And the National Bank at a profit sells road maps for the soul
To the old folks home and the college*

*Now I wish I could write you a melody so plain
That could hold you dear lady from going insane
That could ease you and cool you and cease the pain
Of your useless and pointless knowledge*

*Chorus
Mama's in the fact'ry
She ain't got no shoes
Daddy's in the alley
He's lookin' for food
I'm in the kitchen
With the tombstone blues*

This song is basically surrealistic. The lyrics to the two following songs are subject to even another twist. Disillusion, depression, and loathing, are becoming key words.

Highway 61 Revisited

The title song from the album *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965). Still lighthearted, good-humoured if not ragingly funny. But this 'Highway 61', what kind of a place is that? It seems to be a place - though not a geographical one - where all kind of misplaced individuals may seek refuge, where life is hard but freed of illusion.

Well, there is a real-life Highway 61, running from the very north from where Dylan himself is originating, and following the Mississippi River all the way down south to New Orleans and on its way passing St. Louis and Memphis, the roots of the black blues music. Anyway listen to the introductory lyrics:

*Verse 1
Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61."*

A humorous re-telling of the gruesome biblical narrative, told in this certain street lingo he adapted from Woody Guthrie. Non-intellectual and down to earth, but in a philosophical context.

*Verse 2
Well Georgia Sam he had a bloody nose
Welfare Department they wouldn't give him no clothes
He asked poor Howard where can I go
Howard said there's only one place I know
Sam said tell me quick man I got to run
Ol' Howard just pointed with his gun
And said that way down on Highway 61.*

*Verse 3
Well Mack the Finger said to Louie the King
I got forty red white and blue shoe strings
And a thousand telephones that don't ring*

*Do you know where I can get rid of these things
And Louie the King said let me think for a minute son
And he said yes I think it can be easily done
Just take everything down to Highway 61.*

'Highway 61' is used as a symbol. The meaning of this symbol will be elaborated further below.

Desolation Row

'Desolation Row' is by and large another 'Highway 61'. The same place described differently. The colours are darker, though, and the overall impression is sombre. It's probably one of the most important songs from this period.

The form is that of a ballad, slow and quiet, supported by Charlie McCoy's acoustic guitar, but without the coherent narrative that normally characterizes the ballad. Instead the narrator stacks layer upon layer to define the location. One of the tools the narrator uses to approach this objective is to define who belongs in Desolation Row, and who doesn't. Who's 'in' and who's 'out'.

All in all the result is a multidimensional picture that sketches a controversial definition of what's good and what's bad. Being on the bottom and accept this as a fact is good. Having empathy with the scum of the earth is good. Trying to be something you are not is bad ... to boil it down.

Verse 1

*They're selling postcards of the hanging
They're painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors
The circus is in town
Here comes the blind commissioner
They've got him in a trance
One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker
The other is in his pants
And the riot squad they're restless
They need somewhere to go
As Lady and I look out tonight
From Desolation Row*

The mysterious statement in the first line is assumed to refer to a lynching of three black men in 1920. Somebody had taken photographs of the hanging and they were sold as postcards. The three men were employed in a circus, hence the fourth line, 'The circus is in town'.

Why passports are painted brown leaves me blank, but the sailors in the beauty parlor adds a surrealistic flavour to the whole affair.

Next we meet a commissioner deprived of his office. Being blind and in a trance and being tied to a tightrope walker and having his free hand in his pants put him in severe jeopardy. The tightrope walker, by the way, refers back to circus. And in this context circus equals surrealism.

That 'the riot squad' have their home base here is not surprising. Another reference to the outlaw theme?

The poet and his 'Lady' are there as well. She could be some 'Miss Lonely' like the girl from *Like A Rolling Stone*. If so, being worthy of dating our poet she must evidently have learned her lesson (see about 'Miss Lonely' and *Like A Rolling Stone* below). It is noteworthy that the poet and his lady look out from Desolation Row. We normal and well adapted people would say that Desolation Row is 'out' somehow, somewhere, but apparently the poet feels well at home being *inside* Desolation Row.

Verse 2

*Cinderella, she seems so easy
"It takes one to know one," she smiles
And puts her hands in her back pockets
Bette Davis style
And in comes Romeo, he's moaning
"You Belong to Me I Believe"
And someone says, "You 're in the wrong place, my friend
You'd better leave"
And the only sound that's left
After the ambulances go
Is Cinderella sweeping up
On Desolation Row*

Again, who is 'in' and who is 'out'? Well, Romeo with his lovesick manners is obviously out. He should never have entered Desolation Row, and now he's being seen to the door. Apparently it didn't pass off quietly, hence the ambulances.

A bit more puzzling is the Cinderella character. How come she deserves the honour to be included in the good company? Had it been the dirty looked-down-upon kitchen maid from the fairy tale it might have made sense. But then again the girl in the fairy tale ends up being happily married to the prince of her dreams and that kind of babbling happiness does not fit into this part of town.

So what we see is neither a kitchen maid nor a princess. What we see is a complacent young woman with an attitude, and I think the point is that she doesn't care what anyone thinks about her. Cinderella is 'in', doing the job she's destined to. And her job has from the beginning been to tidy up any mess and that's what she's doing at the end of the verse.

Verse 3

*Now the moon is almost hidden
The stars are beginning to hide*

*The fortunetelling lady
Has even taken all her things inside
All except for Cain and Abel
And the hunchback of Notre Dame
Everybody is making love
Or else expecting rain
And the Good Samaritan, he's dressing
He's getting ready for the show
He's going to the carnival tonight
On Desolation Row*

The narrator presents us for a handful of characters who are absolutely 'in'. Slayers and victims, all carriers of doom, are rightful inhabitants as is the Good Samaritan, being the man who unconditionally loved his neighbour.

The fortunetelling lady, a gypsy sort of character, is 'in' like she should be. Call her a cheater, but what counts is honesty. Honesty to one self, that is. Our poet expresses it so smartly in the song *Absolutely Sweet Mary* from the album, *Blonde On Blonde*, released June 1966: 'To live outside the law, you must be honest'.

Big issue. Seriously. Big, big issue.

*Verse 4
Ophelia, she's 'neath the window
For her I feel so afraid
On her twenty-second birthday
She already is an old maid
To her, death is quite romantic
She wears an iron vest
Her profession's her religion
Her sin is her lifelessness
And though her eyes are fixed upon
Noah's great rainbow
She spends her time peeking
Into Desolation Row*

In the middle of the general feeling of hopelessness you will find pieces of imagery painted with compassion. Dylan's poet is always on the side of the misfits. Such as Ophelia. The Shakespearean character who in short got mental and committed suicide. That's her sin: her lifelessness.

Despite all the tragedy she carries in her baggage she is not inside but outside Desolation Row, peeking in, so what's wrong with the girl? Well, to begin with she worships death as an expression of eternal love. But Desolation Row is no playground.

The iron vest I guess is supposed to protect her against intrusive emotions. So much for eternal love. She really can't make her mind up, can she? You don't come far with an attitude like that on Desolation Row.

Also, on one side she's attracted to Desolation Row, on the other she's hoping for something good, represented by the rainbow, the sign of God's covenant with mankind. The narrator's conclusion is the same as ever: She needs to let go her illusions once and for good.

*Verse 5
Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood
With his memories in a trunk
Passed this way an hour ago
With his friend, a jealous monk
Now, he looked so immaculately frightful
As he bummed a cigarette
Then he went off sniffing drainpipes
And reciting the alphabet
You would not think to look at him
But he was famous long ago
For playing the electric violin
On Desolation Row*

This isn't the Einstein you and I know. The present Einstein seems stripped of any memory of science. I guess that having taken human understanding as far as he did he must unavoidable have crossed a limit and once being there, Desolation Row is all there's left.

*Verse 6
Dr. Filth, he keeps his world
Inside of a leather cup
But all his sexless patients
They're trying to blow it up
Now his nurse, some local loser
She's in charge of the cyanide hole
And she also keeps the cards that read
"Have Mercy on His Soul"
They all play on a penny whistle
You can hear them blow
If you lean your head out far enough
From Desolation Row*

Dr. Filth, his nurse, and their patients are far away from Desolation Row. There's no room for that sort of cheaters. I mean, a pick-pocket will be alright; he's doing an honest job. But Dr. Filth et al are

building a fake wall, a dreamtower, around themselves, every one confirming their mutual lie to the other.

The high-pitched penny whistle can be heard over a long distance, but nevertheless you have to lean your head far out to hear it. That's how far away from Desolation Row they are.

Verse 7

*Across the street they've nailed the curtains
They're getting ready for the feast
The Phantom of the Opera
In a perfect image of a priest
They're spoonfeeding Casanova
To get him to feel more assured
Then they'll kill him with self-confidence
After poisoning him with words
And the Phantom's shouting to skinny girls
"Get Outa Here If You Don't Know
Casanova is just being punished for going
To Desolation Row"*

Casanova is another example of a person who isn't worthy of the good company on Desolation Row. He is 'out'. He's the sly womanizer unable to love, hence seducing one woman after the other, enjoying adoration but never being satisfied.

The Phantom is his counterpart, a man who loves despite all odds. A man who sacrifice all for the sake of love. A man who is so uncompromisingly true to his fate that he loses everything. Which consequently is his fate ... and so on. The punchline from *Like A Rolling Stone*, 'When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose' comes to mind. That's the state of mind that qualifies to be accepted on Desolation Row.

Or you could even say that this state of mind *is* Desolation Row.

So The Phantom is an appropriate inhabitant of Desolation Row while Casanova isn't welcome on account of his superficial approach to life. He has assumingly come to seek absolution, but people play tricks on him. He should never have come in the first place.

Or ... maybe he likes being punished.

Verse 8

*At midnight all the agents
And the superhuman crew
Come out and round up everyone
That knows more than they do
Then they bring them to the factory
Where the heart-attack machine
Is strapped across their shoulders
And then the kerosene
Is brought down from the castles
By insurance men who go
Check to see that nobody is escaping
To Desolation Row*

The point in this verse isn't much different from early protest songs. The rulers of society don't want people go to Desolation Row. They want obedient workers. So they – or their helpers – catch people and put them into jobs that eventually will wear them down. The kerosine, I assume, may be fuel for the machines. Their guardians are insurance men and they are 'out'. Inside Desolation Row a thing such as insurance is a pointless notion.

Verse 9

*Praise be to Nero's Neptune
The Titanic sails at dawn
Everybody's shouting
"Which Side Are You On?"
And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
Fighting in the captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers
Between the windows of the sea
Where lovely mermaids flow
And nobody has to think too much About Desolation Row*

There's the god of the seas, Neptune, in his wrath. And there's Titanic. There's Ezra Pound and T. S. Elliot, all going down, still arguing, though, of matters far distanced from what's really going on, which in this case is: We're going down.

And there's calypso singers and fishermen and mermaids who know nothing of Desolation Row. They don't need it. Living simple lives in harmony with their purpose, they ought to be obvious candidates to Desolation Row. Or not. As I said: they don't need it.

Verse 10

*Yes, I received your letter yesterday
(About the time the door knob broke)
When you asked how I was doing
Was that some kind of joke?
All these people that you mention
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame*

*I had to rearrange their faces
And give them all another name
Right now I can't read too good
Don't send me no more letters no
Not unless you mail them
From Desolation Row*

The narrator is out of reach of former friends now. We hear a man who bids farewell for good to the comfort and security of belonging to a community. Any community.

Desolation Row certainly doesn't sound like a nice place and it doesn't pretend to be. It's not about niceness, or cozyness, or security. But there is a definite attraction to it. It's the pride of having taken the necessary final step so that nothing can touch you, nobody can dispute your honesty. In that respect Desolation Row is the ultimate achievement.

When you're out there on Desolation Row you've got nothing left, you need to check out with existence. You need to define yourself because you can't let others do it. Desolation Row like Highway 61 is the only place where you're free to do this, but it's a cold and hazardous place indeed. And you are all on your own.

Naturally Desolation Row isn't a geographical location. It's a state of mind. When Dylan is asked whether the beat poet, Allen Ginsberg, had influenced his poetry he answers:

"I think he did at a certain period. That period of... "Desolation Row", that kind of New York type period, when all the songs were just city songs. His poetry is city poetry. Sounds like the city."

So ... two things: be honest to yourself and don't go looking for Desolation Row in the material world.

Like A Rolling Stone

With songs like *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Desolation Road* Dylan is past declaring his independence. From now on he just lets his poetic and musical creativity run freely. Let people think what they may.

This song, *Like A Rolling Stone*, took it a step further. It's nothing less than a turning point in Dylan's production. Gone was the social commitment, gone was the political engagement, gone was everything. This song was completely different, it was a turning point. It was confrontational and aggressive, with a new direct approach. The lyrics don't talk about something or somebody; it talks directly to a person. That was new.

"I'd literally quit singing and playing," Dylan told a CBC interviewer in 1966, *"and I found myself writing this song, this story, this long piece of vomit about twenty pages long, and out of it I took 'Like A Rolling Stone' and made it as a single".*

Robbie Robertson from Dylan's live performance backing group at the time, The Hawks (later The Band), had this comment to Dylan's lyrics in general and *Like A Rolling Stone* in particular:

"There was a hardness, a toughness, in the way he approached his songs and the characters in them. That was a rebellion, in a certain way, against the purity of folk music. He wasn't pussyfooting around on "Like a Rolling Stone" or "Ballad of a Thin Man." This was the rebel rebelling against the rebellion."

It's one of his most famous songs. The Rolling Stone Magazine has it still today as the number one song of all times before songs like The Rolling Stones's (*I Can't Get No*) *Satisfaction* and John Lennon's *Imagine*.

The person who is the target of the narrator's anger and scorn is a woman whose name we don't know yet. She has obviously fallen from former glory, and now she has nothing left:

Verse 1

*Once upon a time you dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
People'd call, say, "Beware doll, you're bound to fall"
You thought they were all kiddin' you
You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hangin' out
Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging your next meal.*

Chorus

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

This woman is in trouble. She has apparently been subject to a serious downturn, and the poet sneers at her and scorns her for her arrogant attitudes, and for being so confident she could never lose. But she's an outcast now, forsaken by people she believed to be friends, and she'll have to fight her way through - not even to her next meal.

Note the elegant rhymes in line 1 and 2: time-fine-dime-prime, and in line 3 and 4: call-doll-fall-all. He's a rhymester of God's grace, is Dylan.

Verse 2

*You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it*

*Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street
And now you're gonna have to get used to it
You said you'd never compromise
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And say do you want to make a deal?*

Chorus...

It is now revealed that Miss Lonely is the name of the woman. The narrator argues that her education has been unable to prepare her for the challenges of hard times. 'And now you have to get used to it,' he scorns.

A friend she trusted having betrayed her, she stands alone.

There has been all sorts of guesswork as to who Miss Lonely and 'the mystery tramp' would be, but in this respect I must disappoint the readers. I don't find it relevant for the interpretation of the lyrics to determine her identity ... if she's a real persons at all.

Verse 3

*Ah, you never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
When they all did tricks for you
You never understood that it ain't no good
You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you
You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat
Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat
Ain't it hard when you discover that
He really wasn't where it's at
After he took from you everything he could steal.*

Chorus...

Haughtiness and complacency have hindered her realizing that other people frowns at her while she thinks they are just entertaining her. Furthermore she's criticised for letting other people take the blame for her own missteps.

Again the narrator mentions that a person she considered a friend, a diplomat with a chrome horse and a Siamese cat, in the end had just exploited her. Likewise there are no shortage of suggestions as to who he might be

Also verse 3 has some nice rhymes. Line 1: around-frowns-clowns, and line 3: understood-good. Line 2 rhymes line 4: tricks for you - kicks for you.

Vers 4

*Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
They're all drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made
Exchanging all precious gifts
But you'd better take your diamond ring, you'd better pawn it babe
You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse
When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.*

Chorus

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

She has been a member of the high society jetset where nothing is taken seriously and where money is taken for granted. With author Mario Polizzotti's words:

"More than the privileged, the ones targeted here are the oblivious, those who imagine the world exists for their pleasure, who equate life secondhand with life itself."

But Miss Lonely has apparently spent her entire fortune and she has even had to pawn her diamond ring, seemingly the last thing of value she had left.

Now, we have these fictional or real persons: A mystery tramp, a diplomat and an incarnation of Napoleon. As mentioned earlier I'm fully aware of the fact that all kinds of theories on who these persons may have been were in circulation. But what's the relevance? Irrespective of any persons from real life, the narrator may have had in mind - or not, they can all be interpreted as symbols of the former jetset friends who have betrayed her now she's down. Or even in a broader sense the entire lifestyle that is now lost.

Despite Dylan's own words that the lyrics are one long piece of vomit, that they are expressions of hatred or revenge, you will find a touch of compassion and empathy as well. The key to the whole song is the chorus and the significant punchline, '*When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose*'. You can't be so familiar with being '*without a home*', or being '*like a complete unknown*' etc., without having been there yourself. So Miss Lonely is not that alone. The narrator knows about her troubles, he must have known.

He's using grim words, he certainly is. He scorns the lady and with good reason for having been proud and superficial. But he isn't just some self-sufficient prick with a wise guy's manners. He

doesn't scorn her for being at the bottom. He scorns her for not facing reality. And reality is that reality itself is incomprehensible. We are not talking social diseases, or money makers, or war mongers, not any more. We are talking existence. The great big mystery.

But if you have actually hit that existentialistic wall where everything is lost and there's no way to turn it's not the time for pride. I think the narrator loses a little credibility being so complacent with his own achievements. That dark haunted place doesn't leave room for anything but despair.

However, his approach to this hand-wringing situation is probably something slightly different. The outlaw theme has been addressed before in Dylan's production. Already in some of his previous lyrics he has seen himself as someone who has trespassed the limits of commonly accepted social standards. The outlaw theme and the sympathy with the outcast are linked together and both will be repeated again and again in Dylan's production up through the years.

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