

This is a minor revision of an essay I wrote as part of a creative project in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Master's Degree in Humanistic Psychology in 1976 at Sonoma State College, California.

Bob Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited: **Imagery of Alienation in Music**

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Bob Dylan's album *Highway 61 Revisited* is a classic piece of 60's music. It speaks poignantly to the theme of alienation felt by many during that turbulent period. This archetypal theme is relevant to the youth of any period and by everyone at other points in their lives. Examination of the album becomes a study of the use of the imagery of alienation in music--alienation from our culture, ourselves and our souls--and hence a call to rediscover our souls and revitalize our culture.

Much of the album's appeal arises from Dylan's skillful use of imagery. The impression created by a good image via pictures, metaphors, stories, etc., transcends the limitations of a straightforward, factual account of a situation. Studying Dylan's songs sharpens one's eye for symbols and reveals Dylan's masterful use of imagery to communicate.

Dylan made some of the most poignant statements about the feelings of the rebellious youth of the sixties. These were expressions of strong, often bitter, alienation from the middle class values of their parents and society concerning the Vietnam War, racism, drugs, feminism, environmental contamination, "Big Brother" government and sexual mores. The sense of alienation was accompanied by states of confusion, desolation, loneliness and anxiety about how to confront the problems and what to create in the wasteland left by discarded values. The chaos and anxiety of Dylan's life independent of broader societal issues contributed a deeper

personal touch to his music (Scarduto 1971).

Dylan communicated through the mass medium of the sixties - music -- something everyone heard and most young people understood in the Woodstock generation. His message was simultaneously conveyed through several modes; the melody, the squeaky, somewhat irritating harmonica, the feelings and attitudes felt in Dylan's voice, and his descriptive, often surreal images. Frequently the pace of the music was fast, anxious, and chaotic, complimented by Dylan's whining, often sarcastic, tone of voice.

Dylan described his feelings and his attempt to convey them on the album jacket notes of *Bringing It All Back Home*. While watching a parade, a fascist disguised as a hippy,

starts screaming at me you're the one, you're the one that's been causing all them riots over in vietnam. immediately turns t'a bunch of people an' says if elected, he'll have me electrocuted publicly on the next fourth of July. i look around an' all these people he's talking to are carrying blow torches/needless t'say, i split fast & go back t' the nice quiet country. am standing there writing WHAAAT? on my favorite wall when who should pass by in a jet plane but my recording engineer "i'm here t' pick up you and your latest works of art."

Dylan later answers, "yes. well I could use some help in getting this wall in the plane." He sings about his outrage and confusion ("WHAAAT?") in a manner as uninhibited as writing graffiti on a wall: "a poem is a naked person...some people say I am a poet. I accept chaos. I am not sure whether it accepts me."

He says of his music, "...my songs are written with the kettle drums in mind/a touch of any anxious color. unmentionable. obvious." The road hazards on Highway 61 are products of unmentionable experiences in life:

*I am about t' sketch you a picture of what goes on around here sometimes.
Though I don't understand too well myself what's really*

happening.

Dylan said his songs were written “with a melodic purring line of descriptive hollowness.” “Descriptive hollowness” is apropos of the theme of the first song on the album. *Like a Rolling Stone* is about a woman fallen from middle class society to that of a street person, the likes of whom roam Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. Dylan sneers in the chorus:

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a Rolling Stone*

A rolling stone suggests something dislodged from a secure place and careening down to a lower level--an appropriate metaphor for a fall from one's society and value system.

Tombstone Blues is Dylan's depiction of a world gone crazy. Things are the opposite of what they appear to be or have been; a new world of confusion, ugliness, alienation and strangeness. Two stanzas play on the incongruous Christian support of the parade of atrocities that was the Vietnam War. Dylan develops a ghastly, crazy image of a 20th century Christian soldier a la Sgt. William Calley with Christ as a heroic, power-mad Commander-in-Chief whose disciple engages in acts of torture:

*Well, John the Baptist after torturing a thief
Looks up at his hero the Commander-in-Chief
Saying, “Tell me great hero, but please make it brief
Is there a hole for me to get sick in?”*

*The Commander-in-Chief answers while chasing a fly
Saying, “Death to all those who would whimper and cry”
And dropping a barbell he points to the sky
Saying, “The sun's not yellow it's chicken.”*

The last line suggests the blessed-are-the-meek attitude of God as the sun or Christ as son is a cowardly, “chicken” philosophy.

Dylan sounds prophetic with respect to President George W. Bush. Bush considered himself to be a decider, his biggest decision being to start a war in Iraq so he could be a war president. This evangelical Commander-in-Chief thought he was a tough guy, seeing the world in good-and-evil terms, with Abu Ghraib occurring on his watch. This shallow individual prided himself on being in good physical shape, exercising religiously.

Dylan’s played with another religious motif in the first stanza of the title song *Highway 61 Revisited*. Here Dylan presents a “hip” version of the philosophical dilemma of human's freedom of choice before their God:

*Oh God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son”
Abe says, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on”
God said, “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.”*

Highway 61 is one of the highways connecting Dylan's home town of Hibbing, Minnesota, a northern mining town, to the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolis.

The title *Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues* congers up the image of one who is feeling lowly and small. The third stanza of that song offers an example of Dylan’s not infrequent use of anima figures in songs:

*Sweet Melinda
The peasants call her the goddess of gloom
She speaks good English
And she invites you up into her room
And you’re so kind
And careful not to go to her too soon
And she takes your voice*

And leaves you howling at the moon.

An interpretation is that one tries to delay the escape from unpleasant realities by falling victim to the unconscious, here presented as neurotic gloominess. The appeal of the unconscious is its seductive, enveloping fantasy realm. The invitation to enter one's unconscious, often symbolized by a woman in a man's psyche, can be as appealing to a man as the lure of a woman to come up to her room. The result is to be removed from consciousness (losing your voice, your ability to speak and communicate as a conscious human) and to be turned over to the animal, "inhuman" elements in the psyche. The moon is a symbol of the feminine, and appearing at night it symbolizes the darkness of the unconscious as well. Animals howling at the moon suggest a connection, a communication, between our animal nature and the deep, archetypal dimensions of the unconscious.

The association of the feminine with flight into the unconscious in the face of adversity also occurs in the song *Queen Jane Approximately*. "Queen Jane" refers to marijuana, also known as "Mary Jane." Dylan appears to be referring to a lady, but the title suggests it is only "approximately" a lady, reinforcing the reference to marijuana. The drug state is a particular experience of the unconscious for which Dylan uses a female name. She seems to be an important figure as indicated by her regal title. The song is about the disappointments in life that causes Dylan to beg in the refrain:

*Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?
Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?*

The theme in *The Ballad of a Thin Man* is that strange, unsettling feeling of knowing something is wrong without a clue as to what it is. Everyone ("Jones") has this feeling at many points in their lives. Things seem unusual, illogical, and unexplainable from one's personal viewpoint and system of logic/reasoning/meaning. Such is the feeling conveyed with the images in the seventh stanza where Dylan played with a children's verse, "How now, brown cow?":

Now you see this one eyed midget

*Shouting the word "NOW"
And you say, "For what reason?"
And he says, "How?"
And you say, "What does this mean?"
And he screams back, "You're a cow
Give me some milk
Or else go home."*

*Because something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mr. Jones?*

The last song of the album, *Desolation Row*, abounds with "descriptive hollowness." Every line bespeaks of a world turned upside down or people's weak, shadowy sides. The images are not unlike dream imagery that would convey similar feelings. The impact of the song is overwhelming, starting with the opening line, "*They're selling post cards of the hanging.*" Post cards are usually of mountain scenery or bright spots in the city. "*They're painting the passports brown.*" Drab colors in dreams denote dreary feeling states. "*The beauty parlor is filled with sailors.*" Women usually go to beauty parlors: have men lost their masculinity? "*The circus is in town.*" A circus presents the bizarre extremes of life--the midgets and giants, fat ladies and clowns. "*Here comes the blind commissioner.*" Commissioners serve as executives and arbitrators. The image of a commissioner unable to see suggests things cannot be conducted with justice and fairness; conscious discretion and moral values have been lost:

*They've got him in a trance
One hand is tied to the tight rope walker
The other is in his pants*

The commissioner is under the influence of others. His precarious position with life-or-death consequences is indicated by being attached to a tight rope walker:

*And the riot squad they're restless
They need somewhere to go*

*As Lady and I look out tonight
From Desolation Row.*

The image of a restless riot squad is one of brute force about to be unleashed, whose effects were felt by many civil rights marchers and anti-war protestors in the '60's. Dylan's anima ("Lady"), his soul-mate, is in Desolation Row:

*Cinderella, she seems so easy
It takes one to know one, she smiles
And puts her hands in her back pockets
Bette Davis style*

Here Dylan plays with the Cinderella story, turning Cinderella's "good girl" image into is an "easy lay":

*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 better leave"
And the only sound that's left
After the ambulances go
Is Cinderella sweeping up
On Desolation Row*

Dylan turned an icon of the romantic, masculine lover into an unsure, insecure man who is completely demolished (sent to the hospital). Romeo moans and "believes," unable to even act like Cinderella is his great love:

A dark, foreboding feeling is conveyed in the next few lines:

*Now the moon is almost hidden,
The stars are beginning to hide
The fortune telling lady
Has even taken all her things inside.*

People who should be at ease with the strange and unusual, such as fortunetellers, are vacating the streets:

*All except for Cain and Abel
And the hunchback of Notre Dame
Everybody is making love
Or else expecting rain.*

Killers and freaks are right at home with what's happening. Others are diverted by sex or have gloomy expectations of a storm:

*And the Good Samaritan, he's dressing
He's getting ready for the show
He's going to the carnival tonight
On Desolation Row*

Dylan again changes a familiar Biblical, positive image into its dark side--the Good Samaritan is getting ready for Desolation Row.

More desolate characters frequent Desolation Row : Hamlet's Ophelia is an ambitious career woman "whose sin is her lifelessness"; Einstein, architect of modern physics, is behaving very strangely; Dr. Filth's nurse is,

*...some local loser
She's in charge of the cyanide hole
And she also keeps the cards that read
"Have Mercy on His Soul"*

A meal (communion?) becomes a feast presided over by "*the Phantom of the Opera/ A perfect image of a priest.*"

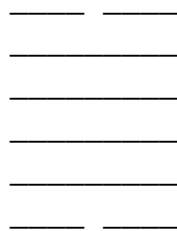
This is a sampling of Dylan's genius at generating strong images and feelings that force us to view life from a different perspective, unsightly and true as it may be. Others who listen to the album will have different impressions and interpretations. The power of images in communication and music can be clearly appreciated by

revisiting *Highway 61*.

PS. I carried a poster in the last big anti-war march before the 2003 Iraq invasion that said "'...the rovin' gambler..." Bob Dylan, *Highway 61 Revisited*." This referenced the last stanza of that song:

*Now the rovin' gambler he was very bored
He was tryin' to create a next world war
He found a promoter who nearly fell off the floor
He said I never engaged in this kind of thing before
But yes I think it can be very easily done
We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun
And have it on Highway 61.*

The futility of the war was foretold in a hexagram I got from the *I Ching* on July 28, 2002, as Bush was beginning to bang the drums of war. I asked the *I Ching* for "Wisdom to guide us post September 11th." The *I Ching* is an ancient Chinese book of wisdom that can answer questions put to it (see Menu). It was vitally important to the Chinese emperors for making political decisions and questions about starting and conducting wars. The answer I got was hexagram 28: **Preponderance of the Great**.



The Chinese sages imagined this as "a beam that is thick and heavy in the middle but too weak at the ends...The weight of the great is excessive... Extraordinary measures are demanded. It is necessary to find a way of transition as quickly as possible...Nothing is to be achieved by forcible measures. The problem must be solved by gentle penetration to the meaning of the situation...then the

change-over to other conditions will be successful. It demands real superiority; therefore the time when the great preponderates is a momentous time." (Wilhelm 1967, pp. 111-112) I wrote letters to Bush and Colin Powell explaining the answer but got no reply.

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