“It ain’t the melodies that’re important man, it’s the words”:
Dylan’s use of figurative language in *The Times They Are A-Changin’* and *Highway 61 Revisited*

"Det är inte melodierna som är viktiga, det är orden”:
Dylans användning av figurativt språk i *The Times They Are A-Changin’* och *Highway 61 Revisited*

Jacob Forsberg
Abstract

This essay compares the figurative language of Bob Dylan’s albums *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964) and *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), with a focus on how Dylan remained engaged with societal injustices and human rights as he switched from acoustic to fronting a rock ‘n’ roll band. The essay argues that Dylan kept his critical stance on social issues, and that the poet’s usage of figurative language became more expressive and complex in the later album. In the earlier album Dylan’s critique, as seen in his use of figurative language, is presented in a more obvious manner in comparison to *Highway 61 Revisited*, where the figurative language is more vivid, and with a more embedded critical stance.

In this essay, I analyze the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s two albums *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964), and *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), which are different in terms of style and setting. My focus is primarily on Dylan’s usage of figurative language and how it affects the social criticism presented in the songs. Important participants of the folk movement, such as the likes of Ewan MacColl and Irwin Silber, said at the time that Dylan became less expressive and colorful in his lyrics, as well as less engaged with social issues, as he switched (as can be seen in these two albums) from acoustic to electric guitar, and from playing primarily solo to fronting a rock ’n’ roll band. It was said that Dylan left the folk movement for commercial reasons, and many felt that the author left his roots and made the lyrics less important. Silber even posted an open letter to Dylan, where he criticized him for stepping away from political songwriting (Shelton 313). Dylan’s first electric gig took place at Newport Folk Festival, and Peter Yarrow (of the folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary) who introduced him there said afterwards that plugging in was to large sections of the audience “a breach of faith”. Yarrow goes on to state that the listeners wondered if Dylan had sold out, and if someone had decided for him to “go commercial and let the suits determine what you’re going to sound like” (Associated Press “Billboard”). However, this essay argues that Dylan kept his critical stance on social issues, and that the poet’s usage of figurative language became more expressive and complex in the later album. As Dylan maintained, “I consider myself a poet first and a musician second”, and “It ain’t the melodies that’re important man, it’s the words” (as quoted in Ricks 17). The figurative language that I will analyze are metaphors, similes, metonymies, hyperboles and personifications. I shall also investigate the songwriter’s usage of allegories and allusions, since that also can affect the way that the figurative language is used in these specific examples. The narrative and setting of the songs may affect how the figurative language is presented, and will therefore also be a part of the analysis. The earlier album consists of ten songs and the later of nine, but some of these are a little longer. While I will select my examples from both albums equally, I will not discuss all of the songs.

First some definitions. A metaphor is when a comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something in common. A simile has the same function as a metaphor, but uses the words “as” or “like” to spell out the comparison. Metonymy is when an object is substituted for another object closely associated to it in order to reach a rhetorical effect. Hyperbole is a synonym for exaggeration, and personification is when a writer gives non-human objects human characteristics. Moreover, an allusion is when the author of the text is referring to something presented in another literary work. Allegories are when there are
secondary levels of interpretations beyond the literal level, and the message of these secondary levels is often of a moral or political character. In other words, characters of an allegory become examples of, for instance, moral qualities. The setting is where the story itself takes place, and the settings can be physical, historical, psychological or geographical. I will not discuss the setting, however, if it does not affect the figurative language. Finally, the narrator is the one telling the story. First person narrative is when the story is told from an “I” perspective, while third person narrative is when the story is told from a “he” or “she” perspective. Third person narrative is often omniscient, which means there is an all-knowing narrator using multiple perspectives.

Dylan became the acknowledged “Voice of a Generation” with *The Freewhelin’ Bob Dylan* (1963), an album where seven of thirteen tracks are protest- or political songs. With it, he changed the concept of singing: it was no longer about how pretty the voice is, but how much the audience believes that the voice singing is telling the truth (Lethem). He followed this up with *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, and the consensus was that here was a poet who finally expressed the younger generation’s thoughts on political or social injustice through beautiful imagery (Lethem). *The Times They Are A-Changin’* (1964) is Dylan’s last album (until the 1990s) where he plays folk songs and songs of protest with only his acoustic guitar. In it Dylan told stories as a protest against the world’s injustice, with songs that are critical of societal issues such as discrimination, racism, and murder. Three songs from the album are considered in my analysis: “The Times They Are A-changin’” (1963), “With God on Our Side” (1963) and “When the Ship Comes in” (1963).

The title of the album, *The Times They Are A-Changin’* provides the overarching message that social change is immanent, and the same message is repeated in each stanza of the title song. Its outspoken an explicit criticism of social inequality and authority figures such as politicians, parents, and the cultural elite have made it the prototypical protest song. The lyrics starts with the poet wanting all to gather around him because something important will be said, and it does not matter who you are. Each stanza except the last one is an address in the imperative: “Come gather ‘round people”, “Come writers and critics”, “Come senators, congressmen”, “Come mothers and fathers”, which makes the song easy to follow (Ricks 222). The last verse instead focuses on the fact that “the line it is drawn, the curse it is cast”, metaphors for something final.

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1 The album *The Times They Are A-Changin’* was released on the 13 of January in 1964, but the title songs were written in 1963.
The lyrics go on to use a powerful metaphor of change, the rising tide of powerful waters: “and admit that the waters around you have grown”, admonishing people to wake up and realize that bad things are happening before it is too late (Manzella 31). The metaphor stands for the on-going changes which were taking place in America in the 1960s, especially the civil rights movement. One major event was “the March of Washington”, where Martin Luther King Jr. held the famous “I have a Dream” speech, and where Dylan also got to play live (Euchner). The mistreatment of Afro-Americans and other less privileged people is what the poet refers to through the metaphor of the rising “waters”. The following line, “And accept it that soon or you’ll be drenched to the bone”, continues the metaphor’s theme of a rising flood that signifies an increasing injustice that will soon be unbearable. In addition, the line: if one does not “swim” one will “sink like a stone” hammers home the seriousness of the issue. The criticism of social inequality seen in the first stanza continues throughout the song. For instance, “There is a battle outside and it’s ragin’” in the third stanza contains another metaphor that connects to the social inequality theme: it refers to unfair political situations that can be easily fixed if not the majority of all politicians were thinking of themselves instead of the people (Manzella 32).

Apart from having a strong stance on social inequalities, the song also criticizes authority figures and the cultural elite, as seen in the second, third, and fourth stanza. In the second stanza, a metonymy is at work; the poet refers to “writers and critics”, which is closely associated to the cultural elite and the media, and it is used as a critique towards those who “prophesize with [their] pen”. It can be interpreted as criticism to other musicians, writers, or publishers of the major newspapers. The whole second stanza criticizes the media, but ends on a hopeful note: “for the loser now will be later to win”. The figurative language used suggests that media should think before publishing their truths, because everything is temporary (Ricks 218). The “senators, and congressmen” in the third stanza is a metonymy for the rulers, since both “Senators and Congressmen” are closely associated with Congress, which in turn is commonly used as a metonymy for the American Government (Littlemore 102). Here the lyrics continue with “Don’t stand in the doorway, don’t block up the hall”, which can be seen as both metonymies and metaphors with a prodigious rhetorical effect. As metonymies they represent the whole Congress, but they also have a metaphorical force since both “doorway” and “hall” are narrow paths which commonly are easy to walk through. The

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2 As in "the pen is mightier than the sword". Pen is closely associated to writing in general, whereas sword is closely associated with war in general.
figurative language here suggests that the changes can easily be made, as long as the politicians do not block up the narrow paths which leads to justice. The fourth stanza goes on to address the “Mothers and fathers throughout the land”, another type of authority figures, and a metaphor is presented in the seventh line: “You’re old road is rapidly aging … get out … if you can’t lend a hand”, which refers to change happening fast: the values of parents might not be the same as for their “sons and daughters”, and the only thing to do is to accept changes because everything is temporary (Ricks 223).

There is not a specific group of people being addressed in the final stanza: “The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast”. Instead the song concludes with metaphors that emphasize that everything is temporary, but also that things will change: “the slow one now, will later be fast”, “the first one now, will later be last”. All criticism presented in the stanzas is tied together by the fact that everything is under constant change.

In short, the use of figurative language in “The Times They Are A-changin’” is used to create an emotional response to social inequalities. While events such as the civil rights movement are only referred to as “waters” that have “grown”, the criticism of society and authority figures throughout the song is obvious. However, by not spelling out all specific issues, the figurative language helps making the song both current and timeless: the metaphors make the song still relevant for today and tomorrow.

The third song of the album, “With God On Our Side”, is basically a summary of America’s war history until the nuclear threats of the Cold War, with God as a recurring metaphor for the use of religion to justify wars. There is therefore a lot of critique towards America as a nation, and how the American people are fooled to support acts of war. The song is unusually direct, with several stanzas that contain no figurative language at all. However, there are allusions to the Bible in the lyrics, which are used to question the religious assumptions of the title. The song-title reeks of disgruntled sarcasm, and each stanza ends with different variations of the line “God on our/their/your side”. The sarcasm is especially directed towards America’s handling of current acts of war, the Vietnam War in particular (RightwingBob).

I will first go through how the song criticizes America’s history of war, and secondly how other themes strengthen the main theme. The narrative voice starts by presenting himself, where he is born and raised, that he was brought up “by the laws to abide”, and that the country he lives in has “God on its side.” The story is told with an air of truthfulness by an adolescent with great awareness of his environment, and is general enough to be applicable to
different wars. Already in the beginning, criticism towards America’s handling of its war history is present: the poet starts the stanza by referring to how “the cavalry charged” and “the Indians fell”, an allusion to the American westward expansion during the 19th century. In the last line, before the “With God on its side”, the poet mentions that “the country was young”, a metaphor that compares the age of the nation to that of a person, which is the first example of a personification where the poet gives a non-living object human qualities. The fourth stanza is about the First World War, and one can clearly feel that the song is becoming increasingly sarcastic towards the use of religion to justify wars, and that having “God on your side” is an excuse for nations to hurt and kill each other for pathetic reasons. The last part of the verse, “you don’t count the dead / when God’s on your side”, strengthens the claim that the song title is an ironic metaphor: as long as God is on your side, you can justify the bad things that one’s country has done (de Graaf). The criticism of America’s handling of its wars is sidelined when the narrator addressing the Second World War, where the emphasis is instead on the fact that the Germans murdered six million Jews in their concentration camps.

However, there is a shift of theme in the sixth stanza, where the poet states that “I’ve learned to hate the Russians”, and “if another war starts, then fight them we must”. The sixth stanza is about the Cold War, but it is described in an indifferent matter with a tone of fear. Instead of summarizing America’s history of war, the stanza instead expresses the fear of the population as the Cold War takes place. It is no longer about what has happened, it is about what may happen, and the fear for it. The seventh stanza, however, returns to the criticism of America by bringing up the unthinkable, namely a nuclear war and the destruction that can be brought on if that should happen: “But now we have weapons, of chemical dust”, a metonymy for nuclear weapons and an allusion to the Cold War. The last stanza also strengthens the underlying theme of fear: “So now that I’m leaving, I’m weary as Hell”, “the confusion I’m feeling, Ain’t no tongue can tell”, are the four opening lines of it, and one can clearly feel the anxiety and fear brought forward in the lyrics. In the penultimate stanza the narrator tells us that he has been thinking of all these things “through many dark hours”, a metaphor for someone who lies awake at night, but can also be seen as an allusion to the dark times ahead.

There is also an allusion to the Bible in the penultimate stanza which undercuts the assumptions of the recurring lines about God being on the warring side: “that Jesus Christ was, betrayed by a kiss … I can’t think for you … decide … Whether Judas Iscariot, had God on his side”. Jesus, associated with kindness, purity and light, was betrayed by the implied violence of a kiss (normally an act of trust) given by Judas Iscariot, a traitor to his group
The poetry questions the religious basis for the claim that a warfaring nation, like America, can “have God on its side”, which connects to the majority of all stanzas.

To conclude, “With God On Our Side” is a song that is critical of how America has justified wars in the past and in the present. The poetry expressed in the lyrics is used as good critique of America’s indifference considering wars, and that “as long as God is on our side no one will complain”. However, the figurative language in the song is not as frequent as in “The Times They Are A-Changin”’, but it creates a strong rhetorical effect which strengthens the song’s main theme.

As the third example from The Times They Are A-Changin’ we will turn to the eighth song, “When The Ship Comes In”. The figurative language presented in the lyrics makes it one of the most vivid and complex songs on the album, with a critique that is embedded rather than obvious, as seen in the other two examples. A third person narration is used, since the poet refers to a lot of different things whilst being all-seeing. My interpretation is that the recurring line “when the ship comes in” is again tied in with the title of the album by being a metaphor for social change, a stance that is supported by main parts of the lyrics. Also, a few biblical allusions are presented throughout the lyrics. My analysis will be divided into two parts, one that considers the theme of social change and the Civil Rights Movement, and a second one that looks at other related issues.

The entire first part of the song states that good things will happen “the hour when the ship comes in”, but we are not at first certain who comes with the ship, or what intentions it might have. The very beginning of the song portrays the stillness “when the wind will stop”, and when “the breeze will cease to be breathin,” a first example of a personification. However, the continuation “like the stillness in the wind, before the hurricane begins”, a playful adaptation of the old saying “the calm before the storm”, shows that a change is about to come. The second stanza is tied together with the first, and it keeps hinting that “the ship” comes with good intentions regarding this change: “and the wind will pound, and the morning will be breaking”, are further personifications indicating that all things existing will react to “the ship” as it comes. The change about to happen will not escape anyone. The poetry in the song is a bit more challenging than in my previous examples, since the poet presents a mixture of personifications and metaphors, sometimes followed by the phrase “the hour that the ship comes in”. Most of the figurative language is allusive rather than clear cut. “Fishes will laugh as they swim out of the path”, for example, is a personification which further
implies that the ship will be a good thing without specifying in what way. While the raging wind, like the earlier hurricane, implies that the change is forceful and potentially destructive, the laughing fish become a metaphor for the positive result. The fourth stanza makes a slightly clearer connection to the Civil Rights Movement by mixing its metaphors, with the implication that the ship represents social change:

And the words that are used
For to get the ship confused

Will not be understood as they’re spoken. (Dylan, “When The Ship Comes In”)

The fight for civil rights was a long and difficult process, and the opposing voices were loud and persistent, yet the “ship” has caught up such speed that it is impossible to stop. The lyrics carries on by stating that the ship “drifts on to the shoreline”, and that “the sun will respect every face on the deck”, where “the sun” is used as a personification/metaphor of acceptance: the sun is all-seeing, and respects every single person regardless of the colour of their skin. In addition, the stanza that follows brings up “the ship’s wise men”, who “will remind you once again that the whole wide world is watching”. The wise men is a metonymy for the leaders in the civil rights movement, people like Martin Luther King Jr. His speech I have a Dream from 1963 was a reminder of what kind of place earth could, and should be. Similarly, the protest chant “the entire world is watching!” was a call for America to become more humane. The structure of the song is clear, although its punchline only occurs in every other stanza.

My focus will now switch to the other issues of the song, and how they support the main theme. Just like “The Times They Are A-Changin’” and “With God On Our Side”, the song criticizes certain authorities, while praising others. The praise is seen in the third stanza, which states that “the rocks on the sand will proudly stand”, a metaphor for the people who became the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement: “stone” is commonly considered as something steady and solid, which means they will not move an inch from the opposing political winds as they come (Kovecses 33). The opposition is dealt with towards the end of the song, in stanzas seven and eight. The penultimate stanza starts with “the foes will rise, with their sleep still in their eyes” and ends with “they’ll pinch themselves and squeal, and know that it’s for real”, which indicates that not all authority figures want things to change since it might mean bad business. Furthermore, the last stanza starts with “Then they’ll raise their hands, sayin’ we’ll meet all your demands!” which implies that the opposition to the Civil Rights Movement will eventually have to bow down; in order for a country to change, the ones who exercise the power must give up their resistance. The following allusion “we’ll
shout from the bow”, is a play on the idiom “we’ll shot across the bow”, which according to Martin Gary, means “a warning shot, either real or metaphorical” that originated from old Sailor slang. As used in Dylan’s song it refers to a warning shout rather than a shot directed at the authority figures. However, the strongest criticism comes in the form of a biblical simile (seen in the use of the word “like”) to achieve a stronger rhetorical effect: “And like pharaoh’s tribe, they’ll be drowned3 in the tide” is a reference to the wave that drowned Pharaoh’s army during the exodus of God’s people from Egypt (Varesi 35). The line that follows, “And like Goliath, they’ll be conquered”, refers to another classic story from the Bible in which David kills Goliath, a giant Philistine warrior (1 Samuel 17). Already during the period of slavery the African-Americans had used these biblical stories to describe their own underdog battle for freedom. In “When The Ship Comes In”, it symbolizes the continued battle for the oppressed, who will defeat their oppressors. The allusions are used to strengthen the theme of social change, and as a warning to those who stand in the way.

To conclude, “When The Ship Comes In” is a song about change: it gives the reader hope that revolution is in the air, even if the changes will not happen all at once. The song is very powerful in its portrayal of the political climate of its time, and can also be seen as both current and timeless due to its usage of figurative language. Even though this example contains the most embedded criticism of social rights and authority figures of my examples from *The Times They Are A-Changin*’, it is clear that the song criticizes the opposition of the Civil Rights Movement, and supports the movement’s foundation and ideas. Of the three songs looked at, it is the most subtle in its use of figurative language even as it ties in with the album’s main theme.

The other album, *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), has been celebrated as one of the most career-defining albums written by an artist, although that happened long after its release. In 1965, Dylan met with audience displeasure by switching to electric music. The switch was his own initiative: “Nobody told me to go electric. I didn’t ask anybody. I asked not a soul, believe me, I didn’t ask anybody” (as quoted in Shelton 116). Two songs will be included in my analysis, the longest one, “Desolation Row”, but as in the earlier album my other example will be the title song, “Highway 61 Revisited”, the album’s seventh track.

“Highway 61 Revisited” is a third person narrative filled with biblical references as well as many examples of figurative language. It has a long cast of characters, such as salesmen, hoboes, a promoter who will do anything to make a buck, as well as gamblers (each verse has

3 Dylan is funny when he creates his own words.
a separate main character), but the setting always goes back to Highway 61, a road in the American Midwest that actually exists in Dylan’s home state of Minnesota (Rogovoy). The song contain religious dilemmas and criticize race relations, but Highway 61 can also be seen as a metaphor for the progress of history, or even life itself. My analysis will be divided into the different themes of social rights and popular culture, and how they are expressed.

Firstly, I will look at stanzas with an implied critique of society expressed through allusions. In the first stanza there is a conversation between God and Abraham, an allusion to Genesis 22 where God tests Abraham by telling him to kill his son Isaac. In the biblical version, Abraham grieves over the loss of his son but is willing to comply due to his faith, whereas in Dylan’s version he answers with street-jive (Polizzotti 119). The rewrite starts with: “God said to Abraham, kill me a son”, Abe says: “man you must be puttin’ me on”. The lyrics portray Abraham and Isaac’s situation as a contemporary happening between two fed-up hipsters: “man you must be puttin’ me on” is a fairly disrespectful answer to “kill me a son” (Rogovoy). The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most morally challenging in the Bible, and in Dylan’s version God answers that the killing should be done out on Highway 61. This indicates that Highway 61 is a place without moral guidelines, a metaphor for life itself since standards of moral are constantly changing. Another literary allusion that challenges moral and criticizes society is present in the fourth stanza: “Now the fifth daughter on the twelfth night”, which is a reference to Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night (1602), according to Ricks (107). The lyrics carries on with a discussion between the “first father” and “the fifth daughter”, who says that her skin is “too white”. The color white could be used as a metaphor for wholeness, purity, innocence or completion. But due to the nature of the song, “too white” also refers to her being “too privileged” in comparison to the African-Americans during the 50’s and early 60’s. Also, “the fifth daughter” is the one getting told what to do: she is ordered by the first father to “step into the light”. This could be considered as critique of patriarchy, and the fact that woman in the 60’s were tired of getting told what to do. At the end of the stanza, they too end up “out on Highway 61”. More criticism of the bad treatment of the Afro-Americans is presented in second stanza, which refers to “Georgia Sam”, an alias used by one of Dylan’s favorite blues artists Blind Willie McTell, a poor black blues musician growing up in the Deep South at a time when Afro-Americans had limited rights. Since the

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4 http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/07/living/sixties-women-5-things/ just to list a few of all the things unequal in the 60’s.....
5 The proper change of civil rights did not start until 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to get up of her seat in the “bus part for white people”.
lyrics refer to someone greatly acknowledged, Dylan expects the readers to know who the allusion is about (Polizzotti 120). The lyrics continue by stating that “he had a bloody nose”, and that the “Welfare Department they wouldn’t give him no clothes”. “Bloody nose” is a metonymy for being beaten up, but “to give a bloody nose” is also an idiom that means “to defeat or damage someone, but not permanently or seriously” (The Free Dictionary). Blood is also commonly used metaphor for both life and death, and according to Kovecses, blood can be seen as something dirty and “unclean” when it is seen outside of the body (210). The figurative language suggests that McTell had a hard time, which also corresponds to the biographical facts (Bastin 112). Another allusion similar to the previous one is seen in the third line of the second stanza, where the lyrics mention “Poor Howard”, a folk-blues stock character in an old folk song written by Lead Belly who is “dead and gone” (Polizzotti 120). In addition, the two characters interact throughout the verse, and Sam (McTell), needs to know which way to go: “tell me quick man I got to run”. “To run” could be considered a metaphor for “to take a journey”, which is supported by Kovecses (38), and the journey in all these verses leads to Highway 61.

While the song does have an implied political message, it also contains playful stanzas without any obvious critique of society. For instance, the third stanza begins by addressing “Mack the Finger” who speaks to “Louie the King”: “Mack the Finger” is a double allusion since the lyrics point both to Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s “Mack the Knife”, a murder ballad from the Three Penny Opera (Hu). Louie the king might be a playful double allusion to both the French king, and to King Louie, the orangutan in Kipling’s The Jungle Book, a way for Dylan to mix high and low, both in art and in history. The jokey feel is maintained through the hyperbole of “a thousand telephones” being used in the conversation between the two. “Mack the Finger” possess a lot of assets that he wants to get rid of, which probably is a reference to the original “Mack the Knife”, who was a thief.

To conclude, “Highway 61 Revisited” is a title track packed with allusions which affect the figurative language presented. Starting out with a religious issue the song touches on race relations and ends with existential questions, all tied together by the reference to Highway 61, the overarching metaphor for the road of life or even the progress of history. There is a lot of social stand-points presented in the song, such as the Afro-American’s civil rights and the feminist wave of the 60’s, all brought forward with the help of allusions, yet there are also playful allusions without any political import. In comparison to The Times They Are A-
Changin’, the criticism of society is much more embedded than obvious, and expressed through allusions, which makes the presentation of the problems more vivid and complex.

My final song to analyze is the ninth track of *Highway 61 Revisited*, “Desolation Row” (together with “With God on Our Side” the longest song of the album). Like “Highway 61 Revisited” the song is filled with figurative language, and is in a sense a follow up to the earlier song. It portrays America as a funhouse that is everywhere and nowhere, and its title alludes to two novels Dylan enjoyed immensely, Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* (1944) and Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels* (1965) (Polizzotti 133). There are a lot of embedded criticism brought forward through figurative language in this song, from the treatment of Afro-Americans in Dylan’s home state to criticism of the Second World War. A greater complexity and sophistication is seen in Dylan’s usage of figurative language, but also in that the song has no obvious linear narrative thread and uses both first and third person narrative. I will first investigate how the allusions affect the song’s social criticism, and then explain other allusions that comment more obliquely on these issues, or is of a more personal nature.

Criticism of America’s treatment of Afro-Americans is presented already in the first stanza of “Desolation Row”: it refers to an event which took place in Dylan’s home state in 1920, when three Afro-American circus workers were lynched because of an unproven accusation of rape. The reason for the lynching was purely based on the fact that the circus workers were Afro-American and “not from around”. Actual postcards of the incident were sold and it became a symbol of the injustice and social inequality in “the land of the free”. Dylan uses “the circus” as a double metaphor: “the circus was in town” when the African-American workers got lynched, and a “circus came to town” in terms of the media attention surrounding the outcome of the event (Longjamming). The stanza critiques the social standards of America immensely and in a relevant manner. Furthermore, the lyrics continues by referring to “the blind commissioner” and that “they’ve got him in a trance”: in this context, the commissioner is likely to represent authority figures such as the police. In other words, the policemen were “blind” and could not stop “the restless squad” from lynching the innocent men. The stanza ends with the use of a first person narrative: “as Lady and I look out tonight, from Desolation Row”, making the narrator, like the commissioner, a passive participant, a narrative strategy that also involves the reader in the atrocities committed.

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6 The injustice is still present to some extent, 94.5% of elected prosecutors in Death Penalty states are white. Also, 80% of the people executed belongs to minorities. If this interests you, more can be read at [http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/race-and-death-penalty](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/race-and-death-penalty).
Furthermore, the stand on social issues continues in stanza three where the poet criticizes politicians and the media. It begins with: “The moon is almost hidden”, “the stars are beginning to hide”. The moon and the stars is the night’s light, and if they disappear, then the night becomes even darker than usual. The poetry takes an obscurer turn with the line “the fortunetelling lady, has even taken all of her things inside”, a reference to, and criticism of, people of power. Usually politicians and the media try to predict the future or speak of how it will be, but here there is a lot to be said but no one is speaking out. They are working around the question rather than addressing it. To this Dylan adds two biblical references that speak of moral choices. The first allusion is to Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve, where Abel represents righteousness whereas Cain embodies sin. When God prefers Abel’s sacrifice over Cain’s, Cain goes mad. Inviting his brother to the fields, he murders him with a rock. When God asks about his brother, he only responds “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4: 9). [I deleted sentences that break the line of argument.] A second biblical reference to “the Good Samaritan” (Luke 10: 25-37) is present in the last part of the stanza, which according to Cambridge Idioms Dictionary means “someone who helps people in trouble.” Here we find critique towards people of power and the political climate in the 60’s: “the Good Samaritan is dressing” and “he’s getting ready for the show” are metaphors which hints that the political speeches are nothing but a show. Both biblical references imply that there is both good and evil in this world, saints and sinners, which strengthens the claim that the song can be seen as criticism of both people of power as well as the moral dilemmas present in a timeless society. In short, good and bad run through the song, and eventually, as in every single verse, it all leads back to “Desolation Row.”

Stanza number eight follows up on the same ethical theme. It starts with “The superhuman crew” that “come up and round up anyone that knows more than you do”, which I interpret as an allusion to the fascist use of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the “übermensch”:

Then they bring them to the factory
Where the heart-attack machine
Is strapped across their shoulders
And then the kerosene
Is brought down …
By insurance men who go.
The lines can be interpreted as critique towards the Nazi regime and how the world allowed it to happen. Zyklon B caused heart-attacks (Bowlby), and then kerosene, a highly flammable liquid, is added, the grisly details becoming a metonymy for the cold and ruthless execution methods in the gas chambers. All of these horrible events were financed by powerful men and politicians, referred to by the metonymy “insurance men”. “Desolation Row” thus contains a lot of embedded criticism towards men of power and how the world could let awful things happen.

There is further criticism of humanity in “Desolation Row”. For instance, the sixth stanza begins by presenting another allusion, “Dr. Filth”. According to Ricks, “Dr. Filth” is a reference to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (published in 1604), who’s main character sells his soul to the devil (10). While some parts of the stanza is gibberish, including characters that do not have anything to do with the other persons or figurative language present, Dr. Filth’s nurse is “in charge of the cyanide hole” and has “a card that read have mercy on his soul”. A nurse murdering whilst showing mercy is a hypocrite, which means there are pretenders at Desolation Row, exactly as in the real world. The criticism of society is present in the ninth stanza as well, where “Nero’s Neptune” refers to the emperor of Rome, made infamous due to his political murders and playing his fiddle as Rome burned (History.com “Nero”). The poet uses the brutality of a historical figure to criticize modern society. Even though today’s political leaders are not as ruthless it is still hinted that some are in it only for status and personal profit. “Desolation Row” is thus an abstract description of the world we live in, with its different characters alluding to or representing contemporary issues to be criticized. The poetry is at the same time playful and dazzlingly captivating even when it paints modern society as a “Desolation Row.

The song also questions gender roles. The second stanza refers to “Cinderella” who “seems so easy”, an allusion combined with an inconsistent metaphor. The stanza portrays Cinderella as a modern, not altogether likable woman. The line “The only sound that’s left … Is Cinderella sweeping up” is the stanza’s only reference to the original story, in which she had been used as a servant by a stepmother who made her life anything but “easy”. The song instead goes on to state that Cinderella “puts her hands in her back pockets, Bette Davis-style”. Bette Davis is still referred to as “The First Lady of American Screen”, having been insanely famous and having had a great effect on America’s as well as Europe’s popular culture. She was well-known for her gift of playing unlikeable characters, and she was not afraid to act bad off-screen either (Nastasi). The metaphor implies that Cinderella has the
same elegance as a timeless Hollywood star, whilst remaining spiky and a bit unsympathetic. The next line pairs her up with Romeo from Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet (1594), who “is moaning”, something he does to Juliet outside her window in the original play. The following line states that Romeo is in the wrong place, which is logical since the two characters of the stanza originates from two separate stories. This stanza portrays Cinderella as strong and independent woman whereas Romeo is a whiny lover who has run out of luck. In short, in Desolation Row stories get mixed up and everything seems possible.

Several of the song’s stanzas, such as number four, five, seven, and ten, are more abstract and confusing in their use of figurative language. These stanzas are filled with allusions without any obvious criticism of something specific, and seem there to comment on, or sometimes blunt the edge of other, seemingly clearer stanzas. There are allusions to everything from the Bible to Shakespeare. For instance, the fourth stanza starts with “Ophelia”, a reference to Shakespeare’s play Hamlet (1602). In the original play Ophelia commits suicide by drowning herself. In “Desolation Row” she is instead “‘neath the window”, which seems like another reference to Romeo and Juliet, thus becoming an oblique reference to the gender discussion of stanza two. This gender angle appears to be confirmed by the next four lines which allude to Joan Baez, the folk-singer who Dylan had a short relationship with. We also find an allusion at the end of the stanza to “Noah’s great rainbow,” which again can be seen as a comment on another stanza, this time the earlier biblical allusions in stanza three. The reference here is to the rainbow created by God after the flood had cleansed all the world from evil, a sign of the covenant that God made with the human population: the earth will never be destroyed again, and after the storm and rain comes a rainbow to shine on its whole vastness (Genesis 9:11-15). The flood and its aftermath further demonstrate that the title of the song is a metaphor for life itself, something that cannot be fully controlled.

The same interpretative difficulty is present in stanza seven, which by the line “in the perfect image of a priest” alludes to the original “Phantom”, the charismatic but insane and cold blooded murderer in Gaston Leroux’s The Phantom of the Opera (1909). My interpretation of his presence in “Desolation Row” is that the allusion points to the function of genius and insanity, a combination Dylan embodies in the song. In addition, “the image of a priest” is a direct quote from Jack Kerouac’s Desolation Angels, another indication that the song’s title is inspired by that novel (Warner 47). Dylan, like Kerouac, believes in “the modern prose”. As John Wrighton argues, the language of “Desolation Row” speaks of the
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Jacob Forsberg
Supervisor: Åke Bergvall

poet’s trust in his own genius, and the complexity allows the poetical presence to come naturally in quite unstructured composition (106). Dylan alludes to two of the most prominent poets of the twentieth century in the last stanza, where he sings that Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot are “fighting in the captain’s tower”. The vibe of the stanza hints that they are not mentioned for any specific reason other than the fact that Dylan enjoyed their poetry (Ricks 16), but he also adds his own insanity by filling the last stanza with babble, the lyrics being thrown together in the studio in stark contrast to the great writers alluded to throughout the song, from Marlow and Shakespeare to Kerouac, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

As we have seen, these oblique allusions can hide very personal issues. A reference in stanza five to two famous persons, one fictive and one real, may be Dylan’s indirect comment on his status as an artist: “Einstein disguised as Robin hood.” [Sentences deleted. You don’t need to explain who the two were.] Einstein taking the form of Robin Hood, a master of disguise, may be Dylan’s way of handling his “genius” status through the use of disguises.

The song was recorded only one week after Dylan’s controversial performance at the Newport Folk Festival, the “Dylan goes electric” gig. When keeping that in mind the lines “Now you would not think to look at him, but he was famous long ago” could be interpreted as Dylan cutting through the figurative language to speak directly about himself. The crowd at Newport Folk Festival could not handle his new “disguise” as the “poet”; to them he “was famous long ago” since to them he had stopped caring about political injustices, greed and racial inequalities in favor of commercialism and money. However, as seen in the political message of these songs from Highway 61 Revisited, their fears were unjustified.

Now that select songs from the two albums have been analyzed, I will conclude my essay with a comparison to see how the figurative language have been used in the two albums. As seen in my introduction, many claim that Dylan became less expressive and colorful, and less critical of social issues as he switched from being “the Voice of a Generation” to “a Poet writing rock songs”. My readings, however, have demonstrated the opposite, namely that Dylan remained a social critic whilst becoming a better and more expressive poet. Dylan did not sell out, but evolved, something that changed popular music forever.

Figurative language is used frequently in both albums, but is presented in a more obvious and easy-to-understand manner in the earlier album, especially in the title track, “The Times They Are A-Changin’”, where it is used to highlight what are for the most part clear themes and thoughts. The only allusion with much depth in the title track is when the poet refers to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s. Even though
the entire song is critical towards complex society issues, Dylan expresses it in simple language, nor is the song as concrete in its criticism as the ones from *Highway 61 Revisited*. The social criticism, delivered through allusions and other types of figurative language, is harder to discover in that album, but, if given proper attention, cuts deeper. The lyrics of the later album’s title track, “Highway 61 Revisited”, is more complex in its use of embedded allusions and metaphors. The song embodies the moral of sin and righteousness (in the allusion to Abraham and his son), while it remains critical of social injustices such as the color of one’s skin. While “The Times They Are A-Changin’” is hopeful and upbeat in its criticism, “Highway 61 Revisited” adds layers of seriousness even as it mixes its message with levity. It also contains a unifying metaphor summed up in the title of the album that implies an album of stories which always lead back to Highway 61, or “the road of life”, which makes it far more interesting and gives it a whole other depth.

The same contrast between the two albums applies to the longer songs “With God on our side” and “Desolation Row”. “With God on our side” is obviously critical of America’s history of warfare. It does, however, contain less figurative language than any of my other examples whilst still being one of the most critical ones. “When the Ship comes in” (also on the earlier album) shows the poet’s play with language as it explains the political climate in a less direct manner, but it does not come close to “Desolation Row.” One can understand the fans’ fury because it is easier to see the political critique in the acoustic songs of the earlier album, even in “When the Ship comes in”, but in “Desolation Row”, the poet continued to be critical if in a more ambiguous manner. Instead of being straightforward, Dylan chose to criticize society through indirect references to literary and historical characters, such as Cain and Abel or Nero. There poet also criticizes fascism and discusses gender issues on the later album. The later album is unique in its complex, captivating use of imagery and in its long, playful lyrics even as Dylan kept his stance on social inequalities. In short, *Highway 61 Revisited* stands at the crossroads of a major shift in American culture and of popular music, and paved the way for more complex and literate strains of rock (Polizzotti 9) as it influenced many great artists such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.
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“Newport Folk Festival Marks 50 Years since Bob Dylan Went Electric | Billboard.”


