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*It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)*

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1996 Words.

“Songs move through time, seeking their final form. What happens on that path is only partly up to the writer, the singer, the musicians” commented Greil Marcus in an article dubbing the 2016 Nobel Prize winner, Bob Dylan, ‘The Master of Change’ in the title of a New York Times article. Dylan’s 1965 satirical hit, *It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)*, from the album *Bringing it All Back Home*, has only become more influential with each year that passes, eclipsing the author’s intentions with the profundity of its significance. “He who is not busy being born is busy dying” (Dylan, 1965:11-12) is one of the many controversial statements referring to American culture that has awarded Bob Dylan with the undesired critical acclaim as the revolutionary “Voice of His Generation” (NPR, 2016). The statement possesses a pluralistic meaning characteristic of Dylan’s impeccable prowess by romanticizing the fast-paced American lifestyle whilst simultaneously alluding to the nihilistic death of a meaningful existence bequeathed upon any individual that adheres to this lifestyle. Although Dylan staved off his revolutionary title, partly in efforts to keep his head off the guillotine, he received his acclaim in 2016 when he was granted the Nobel prize in Literature “for having created new poetic expression within the great American song tradition” in tandem with his contribution to the understanding of the human predicament. However, the significance of Dylan’s lyrics has established its grandeur through the passage of time by absorbing various pragmatic elements along the way. Dylan’s creative thought will be examined through postmodern lens, which will provide a framework for navigating through the cultural hegemony, existential concerns, and the futility of human existence that Dylan censoriously expresses throughout the song’s text. Simultaneously, an analysis of the progressive contextual factors in relation to Dylan’s semantic intentions will be put forth in order to establish “the way [his words] have taken on elements of [past] times as they move through them” (Marcus, 2016).

Dylan uses 20 stanzas to reveal the futility of the human condition by explicating the destruction evocated by power structures and their prescribed unimodal ideologies. With capitalism only entering its golden years in the 1960s, time has allowed Dylan’s words to ferment into the increasingly palpable hegemonic reality that we inebriate and wilfully blind ourselves with as a society. From the “disillusioned words” (Dylan, 1965:30) of “human gods” (Dylan, 1965:31), “emanated a new cultural critique encompassing the alienation of everyday life, commodification

of consumption, inauthenticity of a mass society in which we wear masks and suffer sexual and other oppressions” (Žižek, 2009). Dylan ironically illustrates the hypocrisy of these power structures by exposing the absurdity of capitalist culture and the consequences of capitalist acculturation within the songs text.

Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, 51 years after the songs initial publication date in 1965, and upon reflection over the criterion governing the eligibility of nominees for the award, it poses the question as to the reason behind the new-found appreciation of Dylan’s ability to contribute towards mankind and its growth. A Nobel Prize in literature calls for an array of criteria to be present in the nominee’s elective works. Initially when granting this award, stipulations require literature that is idealistic in its viewpoint and function “to the benefit of mankind” (Ball, 2007). In a recent statement made by the Swedish Academy, emphasis on literary and artistic value was centralized as the primary requirement for granting the award. Contrariwise, reflection over earlier nomination standards specified that it was not a primary requirement that an award of “idealistic tendency” (Ball, 2007) needed to include literature however, it should share the recognition of changing views of humanity. Over the years, the meaning of “idealistic tendency” (Ball, 2007) have varied considerably and now include characteristics of “uncompromising integrity in depicting the human predicament” (Ball, 2007).

Dylan has used his unique ability to navigate through a dynamic reality, in which he poetically exposes the hypocrisy and false ideologies of master narratives. In doing so, he has gifted humanity with a vernacular seed, a recourse that delegitimizes these narratives and sheds light upon society’s wilful ignorance. His lyrical seeds have uprooted the hegemonic ideologies that have governed human existence and has altered the way in which individuals perceived the meaning of human existence, to the benefit of mankind. In support of this, Critic Robert Shelton argues that “Dylan arguably did for the popular song-form what Picasso did for the visual arts, Stravinsky for ‘serious music’, Chaplin for film, [and] Joyce for the novel” (Thomson, 2016).

The song’s resurgence along with his recognition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, accentuates Dylan’s words and resonates its prophecy as late capitalism devours contemporary American culture and any authentic remnants of humanity. The

hegemonic influence that has “baptised [its] principles” (Dylan, 1965:76) upon the “wise men and the fools” (Dylan, 1965:67) of the 1960s has evolved voraciously into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the expanding array of media platforms. In arrears of technological advancement, media commercialism is interwoven into our everyday lives bombarding the postmodern individual with varying facets of cultural hegemonic influence. The rapid rate at which contemporary America is being absorbed into the artificial world of capitalist culture allows Dylan’s words to deepen as he highlights “people’s games” (Dylan, 1965:45) of superficiality and mocks the players of consumerist culture. In the following lines “as human gods aim for their marks/ made everything from toy guns that spark/ To flesh-coloured Christ’s that glow in the dark” (Dylan, 1965:31-33). Dylan speaks of capitalist culture referring to “capitalism and greed” (de Graaf, 2014) as “human gods” (Dylan, 1965:31). He then uses simplistic vernacular to assimilate and expose the metaphorical blatancy concerning the production and violent influence of “toy guns that spark” (Dylan, 1965:32) ideologies of war in the minds of the youth. The semantic arrangement in the following line illuminates the capitalistic intentions of the “human gods” (Dylan, 1965:31) to commodify religious discourse with “flesh-coloured Christs that glow in the dark” (Dylan, 1965:33). The vulgarisation of authentic culture depicts the American culture’s collapse into the artificial, exemplifying how capitalist culture has transformed religion and war into what, Marxist critic, Frederic Jameson terms ‘pastiche: “a series of emptied out stylizations... that can be commodified and consumed” (Jameson, 1991).

The rapid and widespread growth of media commercialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has catapulted the rise of hegemonic influence upon contemporary America to new heights and fuelled the capitalist mode of thinking in becoming the dominant thought form. This mode of thought is envisaged by Dylan when stating how “They...Cultivate their flowers to be/Nothing more than something/They invest in” (Dylan, 1965:73-75), with ‘flowers’ being representative of children. In Dylan’s 1964 bootleg recording of the song, he uses alternative lyrics which clarifies the above analysis of his semantic meaning with the lyrics “raise what they grow up to be, nothing more than something they invest in” (Dylan, 1964:73), exposing the dehumanization of humanity into “production material” (de Graaf, 2014). In the following verse “while some on principles baptized” (Dylan, 1965:76), Dylan substantiates his claims by nihilistically

expressing the futility of human existence by alluding to the indoctrination of individuals from birth. In the broader context of these two stanzas', the cyclical nature of the capitalistic system can be viewed in relation to Dylan's alternative 1964 lyrics: "raise what they grow up to be" (Dylan, 1964:73), explicating the fact that the use of the same capitalistic discourse will be used to govern later generations. The commodification of the youth renounces the victory of capitalism "over all spheres of life and marks the postmodern reliance of the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson, 1991).

Dylan's words not only recognize the social and economic implications of capitalist thought modalities, he also poignantly captures the intimate elements of depression and isolation experienced by individuals who have "been bent out of shape by society's pliers" (Dylan, 1965:84). The analogy of pliers depicts the pressures elicited upon an individual's psyche by the contradictory ideologies that govern their acceptance within society. In tandem, Dylan nihilistically discloses that these individuals will soon "discover that [they would] just be one more person crying" (Dylan, 1965:18-20), alluding to the shared alienation archetypal of the human predicament. Musical Journalist and leading authority on works of Bob Dylan, Paul Williams suggests that Dylan reflects an "alienated individual identifying the characteristics of the world around him and thus declaring his freedom from its 'rules'"(Williams, 2004). By identifying these characteristics Dylan demonstrated the type of rationality in reasoning characteristic of the enlightenment era that inadvertently, provided a recourse that confronted "them that must obey authority" (Dylan, 1965:69) submissively. In support of this, Critic Raphl Gleason states in the book *The Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin* that "Dylan's songs and the pressures it generated had more to do with creating a society in which it was possible for Nixon to thoroughly fuck up and be caught at it and threatened with impeachment than politics are likely to believe" (Taylor and Israelson, 2015).

Dylan's socio-political motive was often misinterpreted by counter culture movements in the 1960s and "as the political intensity magnified, many expected Dylan to provide commentary against the war or the political violence that seemed to tear the country apart" (Taylor and Israelson, 2015).The nihilism in his lyrics were mistaken for pessimism with revolutionary semantic intentions, Dylan however "saw

futility in the attempt to remake a corrupt society via the political process or revolution” (Taylor and Israelson, 2015). These views are expressed in the content of the song as Dylan states that “it is not he or she or them or it that [he] belong[s] to” (Dylan, 1965:64-65) making it abundantly clear that he is not part of the revolutionary counter culture. It is this nihilism, that propelled Dylan’s lyrics through time and into 21st century.

As Dylan’s song moves through time, the varying pragmatics around his words alter their significance and deepen their meaning as his vision materializes beneath totalitarian structures shedding a metaphorical light upon the blinding darkness emitted within their jaded ideologies. Many lines from Dylan’s lyrics have found its popularity in an anti-establishment stance that formed part of chants and poetic descriptions used by followers of this movement. One of the verses within the song, “But even the President of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked” (Dylan, 1965:41-43) refers to the reality that every man will be judged in the end, even the most powerful of men. As times passed, these lyrics materialized, occurring for the first time in 1974 when the Watergate scandal was tumbling to a fore and President Richard Nixon was forced to resign later that year. Gleason suggests that the lyrics from *Its Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)* that “called authority’s actions into question contributed to the response” (Taylor and Israelson, 2015). Gleason further highlighted Dylan’s influence by stating that “he changed the way we thought and through that, the way others thought” (Taylor and Israelson, 2015). Almost a quarter century later, the ruminants of Clinton-Lewinski and President Bush JR’s downfall supplied Dylan’s words with its infamous prophetic status. Another line from this song, “he who is not busy being born is busy dying” (Dylan, 1965:12-13) ironically earned its favour among politicians and consequently, played a role in their electoral campaigns. It featured within Jimmy Carter’s acceptance speech during the 1976 Democratic National convention and thereafter, moved on to become Al Gore’s favourite quote during his campaign for presidency in 2000.

The unfolding of Dylan’s prophetic lyrics over time may be attributed to Dylan’s nihilistic understanding of the capitalistic system and its methods of indoctrination. This is corroborated by Dylan’s words “There is still a message but

the same electric spark that went off back then could still go off again, the spark that led to nothing” (Taylor and Israelson, 2015).

Dylan’s words have travelled through the evolution of contemporary American culture, magnetically absorbing its relative significance from various pragmatic elements that have excavated its depth. History has imprinted itself upon Dylan’s lyrics and cultivated the seeds that the Nobel prize winner planted in 1965. It is therefore, a culmination of unpredictable causative variables along with Dylan’s vernacular literary prowess that has “created new poetic expression within great American song tradition” (Nobelprize.org, 2017). The song’s timeless nature may be attributed to Dylan’s ‘uncompromising integrity’ in understanding the futility of the ‘human predicament’ that transforms *Its Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)* into a universal statement “that conferred the greatest benefit to mankind” (Nobel, 1895).

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