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**Ambiguities in Bob Dylan's
Relationship Songs**

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Ambiguities in Bob Dylan's Relationship Songs

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Abstract

This paper looks at the different ways in which Dylan writes about relationships. The dissertation looks at three pairs, categorised into three distinct parts of a relationship. *Wedding Song* and *Make You Feel My Love* are love proclamations, and are investigated to show the disturbing and the humble ways, respectively, love can be expressed. Through *Don't Think Twice, it's Alright* and *It Ain't Me, Babe* the dissertation shows Dylan's portrayal of hurt over a break-up: hiding pain through coldness. Finally, *If You See Her, Say Hello* and *Mama, You Been on My Mind* are explored as Dylan's reflective songs, looking at a past relationship, and how at times such reflections bring honesty, at others self-delusion, but always a pang of pain.

Introduction

In 'Like a Rolling Stone' (1965) Miss Lonely is asked: 'How does it feel?' (Dylan, 1965, l. 10), a question that seems impossibly difficult to answer, covering many different emotions. Such questions are not uncommon in Dylan's songs, especially those discussing relationships. This dissertation will look at a selection of Dylan's relationship songs depicting proclamations of love, break-ups and reflections after a break-up. I call them relationship songs as though they could be classed as love songs, most of them do not focus on love specifically, however they all engage with the concept of relationships. I will examine the way Dylan's songs portray the speaker and the lover in the songs, as well as the way Dylan inserts ambiguity into his songs. I will pair songs according to general topic and each pair will be looked at in detail over the course of the following three chapters.

In chapter one I will pair 'Wedding Song' (1974) and 'Make You Feel My Love' (1997). Both songs have a speaker professing his love to the lover. While 'Wedding Song' is about a lover in a current relationship, 'Make You Feel My Love' is about an 'underdog' speaker trying to convince the lover of his competence. The music in this pair is different to many of his songs, as "not all Dylan's songs are riff-based... But in the many that are, it is that short, melodic, rhythmically repeated phrase that drives the selection and articulation of words with music" (Negus, 2007, p. 76). 'Make You Feel My Love' has a calculated and structured refrain, but 'Wedding Song' spirals out of control through a repetition of its musical structure. These songs show how "Dylan constructs an author-reader relation pointed on the model of an irresolvable enigma which is both the incitement to and the perpetual frustration of readerly desire" (Brown, 2003, p. 193).

In chapter two I will pair 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright' (1963) with 'It Ain't Me, Babe' (1964). Both are break-up songs in which the speaker is leaving the lover. There is a prominent lack of love in these songs. Often "Dylan's imagery creates a fairly shallow post-modernist world of popular culture, which we need to accept on its own terms, rather than to give it a specious mythical depth" (Butler, 2003, p. 53). There is no mythical level to the appearance of love in these songs, instead it is calmly attacked. Despite Dylan saying that "if you examine the songs I don't believe you will find anything in there that says that I'm a spokesmen for anyone or anything... they must not have heard the songs" (CBS, 2004), I will show that in these songs there is a great deal of meaning that is subtly suggested.

The final pair in chapter three are about the reflective speaker. This is depicted in two different ways in 'Mama, You Been on My Mind' (1991) and 'If You See Her, Say Hello' (1975). In 'Mama You Been on My Mind' the speaker arrogantly says to the lover that he barely cares about her, claiming she is merely a passing thought. In 'If You See Her' there is a breaking down of a mask as the speaker tells the listener that he is faking it to others, but that inside he is hurting. In these songs we get the sense that "Dylan, for one, has always refused to play the role of the guru or prophet, a refusal that has served only to deepen his mystique" (Masur, 2007, p. 167). We have two characters that, even when open, are withdrawn, unwilling to tell us plainly what they feel, or give us any advice. Karlin notes that "his Americanness is not regional or ethnic, but self-conscious and constructed" (Karlin, 2003, p. 31). I would extend this to the characters in his songs: they are rarely a product of one place or time, instead they are born of a universal understanding of emotions and relationships without becoming a definitive answer to any of the issues with which they grapple.

Many academics in the field believe that the music is important to the songs¹, yet it is not frequently engaged with. This dissertation will examine the songs as songs², paying attention to Dylan's use of music to strengthen, or contest, the lyrics. When examining Dylan's work, "literature theory gets into trouble only when it pretends that the word *literature* can be satisfactorily defined, and then tries to erect generalisations on such a delusive definition" (Hirsch, 1978, p. 26). Thus in order to fully examine these works the music can and should be analysed.

I will analyse the pairs separately in order to focus more fully on each song and the themes that they bring out by themselves and in contrast to their pair. Each pair speaks of a different understanding of a relationship, a different set of coordinates on Dylan's map of relationships. This dissertation will show how "without claiming him a prophet... Dylan's writing has proven, time and time again, to be prophetic" (Dettmar, 2009, p. 3), in this instance of the way we see, understand and experience relationships and their emotional outcomes.

Furthermore, I will show the ambiguities in these songs. This dissertation will show that the two characters in the songs are complex and often hypocritical, without making either characteristic detract from the song. These songs can help us understand our present and past relationships a little better. In an interview "in 1965 [Dylan] proclaimed 'songs can't save the world'" (Masur, 2007, p. 177). This, I believe, is incorrect. Art, songs included, *can* change the world, if only a little at a time. By trying to understand the characters in these songs, we can learn to understand and change our selves. At no stage do I think that the speaker in the songs is Dylan³. As Lindley points out "the problems of subjectivity versus objectivity, the position of the poet in relation to the 'I' of the lyric, to the reader and to objective reality have been endlessly debated" (Lindley, 1985, p. 80), and with Dylan it is even more so as he has always been elusive and contradictory when talking about his work.

Finally, there is the question of why I chose Bob Dylan. I think that these songs portray the self in a unique way that is constantly fresh and powerful, allowing this investigation to reach to the core of its task and to do so in a new and interesting way. But, beneath it all, "there is something inevitable about Bob Dylan" (Armitage, 2003, p. 113) and his music; the cult power he accumulated, the energy of his interviews and the magnitude of his songs make them an almost unparalleled choice as the focus of this dissertation.

¹ A great discussion of this is Bowden's work *Performed Literature* (2001).

² Though I do believe that Dylan is a poet, this topic does not fall under this dissertation's focus.

³ Furthermore, for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the speaker of the song as male and the lover as female, though I by no means believe that this is necessarily the case, especially in songs such as 'Don't Think Twice'. However this line of investigation falls out of the focus of this paper.

Chapter 1: Madly in Love

Dylan's 'Wedding Song' and 'Make You Feel My Love' showcase different strands of the familiar love-song narrative. 'Make You Feel My Love' is about a speaker that tries to convince the lover that he is worthy of her, while 'Wedding Song' is about a relationship that has been going on for a while, and the speaker's expressions of love range from the poetically beautiful to the deeply uncomfortable. This chapter will look at these two songs and analyse how the speaker and the lover are portrayed, and then examine the ambiguities that arise from the speakers' desires, expressions of love and the songs' settings.

In 'Wedding Song' the speaker subjugates himself to the lover. This is apparent when the speaker claims:

"I've said goodbye to haunted rooms and faces in the street
To the courtyard of the jester which is hidden from the sun" (Dylan, 1973, ll. 6-7).

The speaker is claiming to have repressed aspects of himself in order to be with the lover, who is implicitly compared to the sun. Heylin suggests that this "presents a Dylan gearing up to hit the road, writing one last love letter to deny that the lure of the road is calling" (Heylin, 2010, p. 548). This is probably true, as though the speaker forsakes the rooms, he might still live the showman's life, not able to fully separate himself from his previous identity. Commenting on the song 'Jokerman' (1983), Bell says that "as Dylanesque identities blend, merge, disappear, and reappear, the relationship between Jokerman and the narrator vacillates unstably" (Bell, 2000, p. 113). This is also expressed in 'Wedding Song' through the dichotomy between Dylan's persona and the speaker in the song. In 'Wedding Song' the undying loyalty and adoration towards the lover are in opposition to the persona Dylan created for himself. In McLean's 'American Pie' (1971) it is often speculated that Dylan is McLean's jester that takes the king's thorny crown (McLean, 1971, ll. 47-48). When merging the two personas, by claiming to leave the courtyard he is either willing to give up being the jester and no longer wants to be king, or now that he received the acknowledgement he desired he can leave it all behind. These different interpretations of the jester and the erratic jumps between claims of love show the speaker's descent into insanity as the listener understands him less and less. This is mirrored in the song's musical content. The song repeats the same chords and riffs, resembling a whirlpool into which the speaker sinks in his insanity. One can also hear the 'loose screws' through Dylan's hand slapping the guitar and the guitar knocking into Dylan's buttons. The speaker is, quite literally, madly in love.

'Make You Feel My Love' has a composed and collected speaker. The speaker is trying to convince the lover that he is the right person for her. We are told that the lover has not yet decided whether the speaker is the right man after two verses, when the speaker says:

"I know you haven't made your mind up yet
But I would never do you wrong" (Dylan, 1997, ll. 9-10).

The lyrics are so sincere that it seems odd, at first glance, that the lover is not yet convinced. It is Dylan's use of a bad voice that explains the lover's hesitation. Speaking of 'Desolation Row' (1965) Karlin says that "you have to listen to this American accent in the song to understand its yeasty ferment, its sour energy and craft" (Karlin, 2003, p. 38). The same is true for 'Make You Feel My Love'. It is Dylan's "equality of feeling, arising from complex beliefs and a complex musical context, that brings his work to the level of what John Pasmore calls 'serious art'" (Butler, 2003, p. 65). It seems apt that the speaker says: "you ain't seen nothing like me yet" (Dylan, 1997, l. 20).

The elegance of 'Make You Feel My Love' is exhibited through its "simple devotion... [which] broke like sunshine through the roiling clouds of *Time Out of Mind*" (Brown, 2017). This devotion is exemplified in the first verse:

"I could offer you a warm embrace
To make you feel my love" (Dylan, 1997, ll. 3-4).

The song's tempo creates a sense of calmness, allowing the listener to get sucked in by the music despite being repelled by the voice. The lack of dramatic propositions, such as the ones made in 'Wedding Song', gives credibility to the speaker. Day says that "'the singing voice at once solicits and rebuffs. The gratifications it offers are uncomfortable ones'" (Negus, 2007, p. 73, quoting Day). While this description of the voice is correct, we are nevertheless gratified by believing the speaker. The song's speaker is tender, soothing in his words to the point that his voice becomes loving, if still coarse. While both speakers are sincere, it is plain to see that the speaker in 'Wedding Song' descends into madness while the speaker in 'Make You Feel My Love' is composed and confident.

The lover in these songs is more elusive, at times less of a character and more of an idea. In 'Wedding Song' the speaker subverts normal love, and through it the lover. However this does not happen immediately, as the song starts very lovingly:

“You breathed on me and made my life a richer one to live
When I was deep in poverty you taught me how to give” (Dylan, 1973, ll. 5-6).

The lover has godly powers. She may not have breathed actual life into the speaker, but she was able to make his life more meaningful. In Medieval poetry “a characteristic assertion of the poets is to identify themselves as craftsmen, and the audience then delights in the mastery of complex patterns of rhyme and repetition, and the manipulation of standard ideas” (Lindley, 1985, p. 52). The deceitfully simple structure that bears resemblance to Medieval poetry allows the ideas presented in the song to become something very different. The giving lover is subverted into something ominous. This is evident when the speaker says: “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth, your love cuts like a knife” (Dylan, 1973, l. 14). Rather than exemplifying the power of their love it conjures a frightening image of the lover, as her love is described as something vengeful and Biblical. The relationship thus becomes a question of power. It has been said that “‘Wedding Song’ was Dylan’s last Hail Mary shot at reconciliation with his wife” (Tony, 2011). If true, then Dylan seems to have a warped understanding of relationships. He describes the lover as an overbearing and violent person while the speaker is subservient to her desires. The music solidifies this as “the repetition of stanza form may be accepted as a way of reinforcing feeling, intensifying the presentation of a state of mind” (Lindley, 1985, p. 44). The words and music play into one another as the final chord of each verse is not the same as the chord of the next verse, which suggests that the song will go on forever as the lover dominates the speaker.

In keeping with the song’s cyclical nature, there is also a return to a tender and romantic love. Towards the end of ‘Wedding Song’ the speaker says:

“I love you more than all of that with a love that doesn’t bend
And if there is eternity I’ll love you there again” (Dylan 1973, ll. 23-24).

This is a beautiful claim, especially as it creatively rephrases a very known and common cliché of love after death. There is also a sense of the macho in line 23, as the speaker’s love is so strong it will not bend. It is very common for “Dylan [to use] macho stereotypes for a good story. His shapeshifting offers him greater aesthetic freedom” (O’Dair, 2009, p. 85). In ‘Wedding Song’ the macho stereotypes are often placed in the lover while the speaker is the more feminine persona, making line 23 both an anomaly (in the song) and a commonality (in Dylan’s music). There has always been “this paradoxical conflict between ‘persona’ and genuinely self-revealing work [which is] typical of the pop world, in which ‘revelatory’ publicity

is so often also fiction” (Butler, 2003, p. 54). We can therefore interpret the song as how the public (the speaker) views Dylan (the lover), and how it has nothing to do with who he is.

‘Make You Feel My Love’ is different as the speaker is attempting to convince the lover of his eligibility. The lover in this song is considerably less active, and is more of an idea. There is a permeating feeling that the lover is in dire need of help, or is maybe allured by the dangers of nature:

“The storms are raging on the rolling sea
And on the highway of regret
The winds of change are blowing wild and free” (Dylan, 1997, ll. 17-19).

The speaker is referring to himself as the winds of change that are shaking the world¹, while the lover is filled with regrets, which is why she needs a new lover. The lover needs the speaker to change things, to help her find hope. This is reinforced by the fact that this is sung in a bridge section. In it Dylan’s voice rises and descends, mimicking the winds and giving emotion to the lover’s regrets. More than the elegant words, it is the “elemental feeling finding expression in musical sound that matters” (Lindley, 1985, p. 29). In ‘Make You Feel My Love’ the elements will change the lover’s mind. The speaker does not speak about how much he can give the lover, and the lover is not simply a beautiful object; she is not described at all. The speaker presents the lover as something spiritual. Dylan “[urges] us to open up and accept not just [his] art, but [his] presence both spiritually and physically” (Ford, 2003, p. 128). The start of the song gives comfort a physical form, while the spiritual powers bring change.

In opposition to the never ending musical background of ‘Wedding Song’, the last two verses of the song (which bracket the second bridge section) of ‘Make You Feel My Love’ rhyme, making the ending a connected conclusion to the song’s argument. This is furthered by the first and last chord of each verse being the same, making the concluding statement a powerful conclusion to the argument. The final few lines speak of metaphysical ideas, which seem to come out of the more spiritual power of the second bridge:

“I could make you happy make your dreams come true
Nothing that I wouldn’t do
Go to the ends of the earth for you
To make you feel my love” (Dylan, 1997, ll. 21-24).

¹ This is also a reference to his song ‘Blowing in the Wind’ (1963).

In the previous sections, the speaker seemed to ground his love. But by the end he is able to give the lover her dreams; he is able to offer her everything, and we believe him. A large part of this is due to the tenderness and beauty of the music and lyrics despite the gruff voice, creating “two visual images [which] form what one may call a visual chord. They unite to suggest an image which is different to both” (Hulme, 1998, p. 64). The lover is not a person but an idea of what a person can be. She was broken down and in need of help and protection. Noting that “the carefully constructed and very striking image Dylan made of himself in the mid-1960s was a distinctly androgynous one” (Corcoran, 2012, p. 18), allows us to accept Dylan’s use of a gruff masculine voice in tandem with the tender lyrics. This creates a gentle and fragile lover, while in ‘Wedding Song’ the lover is a loving but vengeful god.

The final outcome of the songs on the targeted lover differ between the songs, revealing ambiguity in ‘Wedding Song’ and ‘Make You Feel My Love’. There is little doubt that in ‘Make You Feel My Love’ the lover will choose to be with the speaker, while in ‘Wedding Song’ we wonder whether the lover is able to see the speaker as anything other than a disturbed individual, and whether that is what she wants. The setting in ‘Make You Feel My Love’, however, is ambiguous. Though at first glance the song describes a tender scene through the music, in actuality the situation is quite bleak:

“When the evening shadows and the stars appear
And there is no one there to dry your tears” (Dylan, 1997, ll. 5-6).

This warmth preceding the declarations of love could be quite misleading. As Lindley comments when speaking of a different work: “the complacency of the ending of the first stanza... leaves open the question whether the ensuing declaration of love is not just the patter that this [speaker] dishes out to any beauty” (Lindley, 1985, p. 61). However I feel that Dylan’s voice proves the sincerity of the words. It sounds honest, and the music’s warmth makes that palpable, allowing the voice to imply that the speaker never wanted anyone else. Thus there is little doubt that the lover will believe the speaker. Adele interprets this song differently, as she felt “it’s about regretting not being with someone” (Brown, 2017, quoting Adele). I disagree with Adele because the lover is in pain over something, and the voice and song’s entrance are abrupt. The song gently, but firmly, explodes onto the lover’s world. This is a remaking of the snare-shot in ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ that, as Springsteen said, was like someone “kicked the door to your mind” (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, 2010). This time it is a gentle kick, making the lover take note of the speaker.

Dylan does something very different in 'Wedding Song', which leaves us to question whether we think the lover would stay. The speaker in 'Wedding Song' states his devotion many times:

"And I can never let you go no matter what goes on
'Cause I love you more than ever now that the past is gone" (Dylan, 1973, ll. 31-32).

The last part of line 31 is suspect to say the least. Assuming that the lover wants him, this is possibly an abusive relationship, especially as he says earlier "happiness to me is you and I love you more than blood" (Dylan, 1973, l. 20). This suggests a cruel female lover that has an enchanted and possibly masochistic partner. Line 32 says that the happiness that the speaker longs for is possible "now that the past is gone," and since he even mentions a flood in the song, it is obvious that the speaker's "envisioned [world is] fantastic, biblical, or mythical" (Bell, 2000, p. 111). Though Bell is speaking of Dylan in general, it fits this song perfectly. The world is full of fantasy: a god personified by the lover and her mythical jester. It is clear that this song's internal struggles of madness to the accompaniment of minor chords, the sound of his buttons hitting the guitar and the words themselves make "'Wedding Song' a song that would probably scare the bejesus out of the reception guests if it were actually played at a wedding" (Countdownkid, 2012). Thus I feel that the listener almost hopes that the lover decides to leave him. The past is never gone, and previous heartbreaks are always around, not to mention that this speaker is falling into a form of devotional insanity that he cannot escape.

The two songs 'Make You Feel My Love' and 'Wedding Song', on the surface, seem like average love songs. However in both songs Dylan subverts the norms, exposing the ambiguities surrounding the settings of love declarations. This, however, achieves very different effects. 'Make You Feel My Love' is a transcendent love song in which an underdog speaker (hopefully) wins over the lover. 'Wedding Song' parodies the vows people make to one another, especially at a wedding ceremony, by showing through the speaker the extremes to which they are committing. While both songs have biographical aspects that may provide a new level of meaning, it is clear that Dylan shows us what passionate love can look like, even its ugly side.

Chapter 2: Break-Up

This chapter will look at 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright' and 'It Ain't Me, Babe'. The two songs cover a break-up, however in 'Don't Think Twice' the speaker is breaking up with the lover, while in 'It Ain't Me' the speaker rejects the lover. I will examine how the speakers represent themselves and how the lovers are portrayed in the songs. I will also look at the ambiguities in the songs. In both songs the lover is portrayed as the one in the wrong, but I will show that this is not as straightforward as it seems.

In both songs the lovers are in the wrong, according to the speakers. However there are some differences. In 'It Ain't Me' the lover also represents an outdated ideal, while 'Don't Think Twice' plays on a more personal dimension. The speaker in 'It Ain't Me' delivers his words as a direct address which does not allow space for any response from the lover or listener. The speaker lists the qualities the lover wishes him to have, which are chivalrous but excessive:

"You say you're looking for someone
Who's never weak but always strong" (Dylan, 1964, ll. 5-6).

This is not just a lover, but a society that is still clinging on to romantic ideals of a male hero which Dylan, through the speaker, is denouncing. The song is a "devastating anti-romance song" (Heylin, 2010, p. 232). The lover requests an idealised version of romance and masculinity that are impossible for any man to provide. The lover is an "expressive [object] fashioned by an individual in response to his times" (Marqusee, 2003, p. 3). From a person that will always be strong, the speaker goes on to add that:

"You say you're looking for someone
Who will promise never to part" (Dylan, 1964, ll. 17-18).

'It Ain't Me' "scrutinises, with devastating honesty, the inability of the singer to measure up to the ideal proposed by the woman" (Corcoran, 2012, pp. 19-20). While Corcoran believes that this demeans both the lover and the speaker, I think that it only speaks negatively of the lover. She is the one trying to get him back, believing in an impossible fairytale, while the speaker is grounded and presented as the voice of reality. The music, however, suggests that the speaker feels bad for the lover, as Dylan's voice is considerate. Not to the point of sympathy, but it does ease the rejection. Thus the lover is placed gently in the wrong, like an innocent victim.

There is a marked difference between that lover and the one in 'Don't Think Twice'. In the latter the lover is denounced as the one in the wrong on a personal level. The speaker tells the lover:

"It ain't no use in turning on your light, babe
The light I never knowed" (Dylan, 1963, I. 9-10).

The light here is more than the physical light, but the lover's light. The speaker is criticising the lover for not giving him her all. However it is sung in a gentle tone, softening the criticism. The finger-picked guitar makes the song sound less aggressive, as a full-played chord sounds powerful and united. Here, the guitar's single notes symbolise the fragility of both characters, and softens the blow. As Landau comments "the beauty of Dylan's vocal-guitar-harmonica performance doesn't really say what the words do, and, in fact, really transforms the verbal meaning of the song into something much deeper and much less coarse" (Thurschwell, 2003, p. 266). Though the speaker condemns the lover's behaviour, he does so in a sympathetic way. The lover is described as a bit simple:

"It ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe
Even if you don't know by now" (Dylan, 1963, II. 1-2).

She is not able to understand what is going on, and the speaker is gently rejecting her for it. The reason for the speaker's desire to leave is only explicitly mentioned later, when he says: "I gave her my heart, but she wanted my soul" (Dylan, 1963, II. 23). The lover, like the one in 'It Ain't Me', is possessive. In such songs¹ "Dylan limns a well-worn male-female dynamic... where, in the guise of a needy girlfriend, the woman really just wants to change him" (O'Dair, 2009, p. 82). The lovers in these songs are depicted as having wronged their partner. Yet, though they are not shielded, they are not brutally assaulted as the lyrics on their own would initially suggest.

In these songs the speakers have been hurt by the lovers and they hurt the lovers in return. It is the speaker that walks away from the relationship. In 'Don't Think Twice' we have the thoughts of the speaker as he leaves, while in 'It Ain't Me' the speaker makes a long dramatic monologue at the lover, through which Dylan rebels against those that are trying to control

¹ Another song that has a similar message is 'Just Like a Woman' (1966).

him. In 'It Ain't Me' the speaker is borderline cruel in his rejection, as he says at the end of the song:

"Go melt back in the night
Everything inside is made of stone
There's nothing in here moving
And anyway I'm not alone" (Dylan, 1964, ll. 25-28).

Dylan's speaker stands on a metaphorical balcony, shielded from the lover he repels. While he says that he has turned to stone, it is only to the lover's desires. She is the one that melts while he remains solid with his new lover. Thurschwell comments that "by ending *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964) with the savage 'It Ain't Me, Babe' Dylan rejects both women who expect too much from him and a culture that was doing the same" (Thurschwell, 2003, p. 260). These lines show the speaker practicing what he preaches. By the end of the song, the lover is stripped of her defences, left alone and isolated.

As in 'Wedding Song' there is an undercurrent to Dylan's refusal: a refusal to accept the rules that are being forced upon him by fans. The song is a declaration that "the writers who would be able to use the old instrument with the old masters refuse to do so for they find it inadequate. They... refuse to be cramped by them" (Hulme, 1998, p. 61). Dylan will not be "cramped" by past ways of writing and understanding songs the same way that the speaker will not be "cramped" by outdated expectations. What puts the nail in the coffin is the chorus:

"But it ain't me, babe
No, no, no, it ain't me, babe
It ain't me you're lookin' for, babe" (Dylan, 1964, ll. 12-14).

There is an unmistakable refusal of the role by the speaker and a subtle refusal from Dylan, as he parodies The Beatles' 'She Loves You' (1964) chorus. Both "The Beatles and Dylan sing 'yeah, yeah, yeah' / 'no, no, no' with the same three pitches descending within the interval of a minor third... Dylan's is a typical bluesy folk melody that bears only a tenuous 'functional' relationship to the chords" (Negus, 2007, p. 78). Dylan uses The Beatles' hit melody and subverts it. Not only is the meaning reversed but Dylan barely sings the words. Instead, he groans his annoyance at the lover, and through her the culture that hampers him. It is not surprising that the song "is among Dylan's most elegant women-don't-get-me songs,

cataloguing an erstwhile girlfriend's ill-founded expectations of old-fashioned chivalry and fidelity" (Rolling Stone, 2016) and a break from musical stereotypes.

While 'It Ain't Me' has a speaker that is almost cruel in his rebellion, 'Don't Think Twice' has an ambiguous speaker that refuses to be pinned down. The speaker is apologetic in what he says, which leads to the conclusion that he is hurting, though he will not admit it. The pain leads to the cutting lines:

"I ain't saying you treated me unkind
You could've done better but I don't mind
You just kinda wasted my precious time" (Dylan, 1963, ll. 29-31).

Some critics, thinking of these lines in particular, suggest that "Dylan's lyrics are frequently misogynistic" (Butler, 2003, p. 58). I completely disagree. This is not an unscathed man speaking his thoughts while he is at peace, but a speaker that is hurting and in the midst of uprooting himself into the unknown. It is this pain that makes the song sound misogynistic, when in actuality it is a broken man thrashing in pain, not caring about what he sounds like. There is further evidence to the speaker's pain earlier in the song, as he says:

"I wish there was something you would do or say
To try and make me change my mind and stay
We never did too much talking anyway" (Dylan, 1962, ll. 13-15).

There is an admission of pain in lines 13-14 as the speaker wants to be reconciled. Line 15 is telling as he partially, and implicitly, blames himself. By saying "we" did not speak a lot, he is placing some of the blame on himself. This is supported by the use of the word "knowed", which suggests that the speaker is not very articulate. Thus it is proper that "the 'verbal bayonet' comes out in the song, where he could be sure to hit his target" (Heylin, 2010, p. 125), which are the lover and himself. The emptiness the speaker feels during the break-up is mirrored in the darkness he chooses: "I'm on the dark side of the road" (Dylan, 1963, l. 12). The speaker chooses exile, plunging himself and the lover into darkness and pain. Therefore it is not misogyny but self-pity and anger, showing how "there is another candidate Dylan only belatedly recognised as the song's possible target - himself" (Heylin, 2010, p. 292).

In 'It Ain't Me' the question arises whether the ideal partner can exist at all. In the line "Someone who will die for you and more" (Dylan, 1964, l. 21) there is a blurring of roles and ideals. To have a partner that is willing to die for you sounds, upon first reflection, like a

romantic ideal that can still be sought, if, hopefully, never properly proven. The speaker rejects her by adding something impossible. Dying is considered the 'ultimate sacrifice', so what could someone ask that is "more" than that? Dylan hints, through the subtext of a singer repelling his appropriation, that legacy is what is left. Dylan refuses to leave his legacy to any one person. This is supported in the previous lines:

"You say you're looking for someone
Who will promise never to part
Someone to close his eyes for you
Someone to close his heart" (Dylan, 1964, ll. 17-20).

lines 17-18 ask for something plausible, but then change quickly into an ambiguous line of thinking. The lover presumably asks the speaker not to look at other women. Line 20 asks the speaker to love no one but the lover. However the language is imprecise, making the claims sound preposterous. Furthermore, the use of repeating minor chords played in this section creates a melancholy atmosphere in which the speaker, arrogantly, says how the lover requests something ludicrous. And yet, perhaps it is not too much to ask. The lover is asking for someone that will put her above themselves, and will not cheat on her. Thus perhaps Dylan is not merely claiming his independence from the appropriating audiences and their ideals, but is also warning future lovers that he is not going to be true. When speaking of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Armitage comments that "here was a storyteller pulling out all of the stops... The songs themselves were written and performed to give the suggestion of spontaneity, improvisation even, but they were too memorable to be anything less than crafted and composed" (Armitage, 2003, p. 114). Thus even the seemingly spontaneous nature of the song's setting falls into question.

In 'Don't Think Twice' the placement of blame is unclear. Namely, whether Dylan's refrain, "Don't think twice, it's alright" (Dylan, 1963, l. 8), is serious or sarcastic, if all refrains come under the same category. Dylan's voice throughout the song is rather plain, giving the words a feel of regret and sympathy. It has been suggested "that an orally rhymed insult may... give extra power to an attacker... by distancing the attacker from responsibility for hurt caused by those rhymed words" (Bowden, 2001, p. 129). Thus when Dylan ends each verse on a non-rhymed line, we cannot tell whether he is being sarcastic (which in this instance is tantamount to offensive) or whether he is telling the lover that she should not fret about his departure. The line stands out as a rose, revealing either the flower or the thorny stem. There is also the interpretation that he does not want the lover to think twice because then she would realise it

was not her fault, but his. All these different interpretations of the line bounce back and forth, making it impossible to pin down what the speaker or Dylan wish to convey.

There is also the lack of concreteness in the song. In the final stanza the speaker delivers a couple of odd lines: "So long, honey babe/ Where I'm bound, I can't tell" (Dylan, 1963, ll. 25-26). There is a fluidity in those lines, a manner of speech that makes one think of a person melting away, as if the speaker and the lover in 'It Ain't Me' are one and the same. The first of those lines has one very protracted word, which is the only time Dylan uses that musical technique in the song. Prolonging the word 'long' and singing it in a whiny voice conveys what the word could not have done alone: that he wants to leave, but a part of him wishes that he could find a way to stay. Here "instead of these minute perfections of phrase and words, the tendency will be rather towards the production of a general effect" (Hulme, 1998, p. 63). This production of a general effect creates an anticlimax when the speaker says that:

"Goodbye's too good a word, babe
So I'll just say fare thee well" (Dylan, 1963, ll. 27-28).

This is far from the beginning of the song, in which the speaker plunges them both into darkness. The last stanza is on the verge of reconciliation, but does not fully commit. As Dylan says, it is "not a love song. It's a statement that maybe you can say to make yourself feel better. It's as if you were talking to yourself" (Heylin, 2010, p. 125, quoting Dylan). Trying to make oneself feel better is conveyed by the solemn but comforting tone of voice and guitar. Though the speaker is the one leaving, "Don't Think Twice' does a (deliberately) lousy job of disguising the very real hurt underlying those verbal putdowns" (Heylin, 2010, p. 125), making the speaker a human being speaking out through the pain.

Often we see break-up songs as rather simplistic expressions of anger, resentment or an attempt at reconciliation. Dylan refuses these tropes, creating something that is both complex and ambiguous. Adjectives and swooning words of love are replaced with poignant and intricate statements. In 'Don't Think Twice' Dylan's lover is sympathised with and shares the blame of the mixed expectations the two characters had of each other. In 'It Ain't Me' the lover is more than just a person but a culture, a group of people attempting to appropriate Dylan and his music, thus his rejection of the lover becomes a much greater statement. In both songs the listener has a tough job deciding whether they believe the speaker. Though often country and rock music is sincere, Dylan creates a muddled pool of emotions, and the truth is anyone's guess.

Chapter 3: Reflections

The previous chapters examined the more immediate parts of relationships: the declarations of love and the break-ups. This chapter will complete the sequence by looking at the way Dylan presents reflections on relationships after they have ended. I will examine 'If You See Her, Say Hello' and 'Mama You Been on My Mind'. The speaker's feelings in 'Mama You Been on My Mind' are concealed in ambiguity, while the speaker in 'If You See Her' gently reveals the duplicity he enacts to hide his feelings. I will examine the way the speakers portray themselves, the way they portray the lovers and the ambiguities that lie within their words.

Unlike the other songs, the lovers have become memories. In 'Mama You Been On My Mind' the speaker is trying to convince the lover that he is not interested in her, even though he is thinking about her. In 'If You See Her' the speaker cannot move on, but admits it only to the listener. The speaker in 'Mama You Been On My Mind' tries to reassure the lover of his apathy by saying:

"I don't mean trouble please don't put me down or get upset
I am not pleadin' or saying 'I can't forget'" (Dylan, 1991, ll. 5-6).

The speaker denies that he has any desire to get the lover back. The words "trouble," "put down" and "upset" follow in quick succession, even sung faster than the slow-pace of the song would intuitively allow. This gives the song a feeling of an elegy, as "elegy opens [the lyric], among other things, to quasi-personal 'passionate meditation'" (Lindley, 1985, p. 11). Sentimentality is created through the sombre voice and slow guitar rhythm that jumbles up the lines. It is hard to know where the lines end as they are often cut mid sentence, creating inharmonious gaps with the music in which the sombre tone of an elegy emerges. The song's "grief seems primarily driven by feelings rather than thoughts which suggests a griever who, in traditional terms, is more likely to be... intuitive" (Smith, 2013, p. 290). The speaker wants the listener to believe that he is attuned to his feelings. There is a forced carefreeness to the song: "I don't even mind where you'll be wakin' up tomorrow" (Dylan, 1991, l. 11). The line is spoken in a whisper, as if the speaker is forcing the words out. While the words are comprehensible and seem to be what the speaker wants us to believe, his voice betrays him.

'If You See Her' delivers a speaker gripped with a pain that cannot be admitted to the world, and we get a glimpse of it through the speaker's thoughts. This is clearly expressed when Dylan sings: "She might think that I've forgotten her, don't tell her it isn't so" (Dylan,

1975, l. 4). The speaker's pain becomes prominent through the use of a double negative, expressing the doubly negative feelings he is experiencing, and through Dylan's choice of voice as "what Dylan does with vowels relates to what's being expressed" (Greenlaw, 2003, p. 76). The final elongated 'O' in the line is an expression of pain, as if the speaker is breaking down and needs a moment to swallow the pain before he continues on to the next verse. Commenting on the album *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), Brownstein says it "is Dylan's civil war... *Blood on the tracks* leaves both the artist and the listener scarred" (Brownstein, 2009, p. 155). I think that calling 'If You See Her' a civil war is troublingly accurate. In the final verse he says:

"Sundown, yellow moon, I replay the past
I know every scene by heart, they all went by so fast" (Dylan, 1975, ll. 17-18).

This could be interpreted in a couple of ways: is the speaker at home thinking of the past, or is it Dylan playing the songs that speak of his past? Whichever is the case the speaker is open about the duplicity that he enacts. Both speakers are putting on a brave face to the world, but while the speaker in 'Mama You Been on My Mind' is not showing grief directly, the speaker in 'If You See Her' does.

The lovers in these songs are voiceless. The lover in 'If You See Her' is not addressed at all, but spoken about, while in 'Mama You Been on My Mind' the speaker either preempts what she will say and counters it, or she is actively saying these things and we do not get to hear it. At the start of 'Mama You Been on My Mind' Dylan says:

"Perhaps it's the colour of the sun cut flat
An' cov'rin' the crossroads I'm standing at" (Dylan, 1991, ll. 1-2).

This shows that the lover is very much on the speaker's mind, as she dominates nature itself. Heylin comments that "'Mama, You Been On My Mind' in many ways mirrors 'Girl From the North Country'... However, that song was and wasn't about Suze, whereas there is no such doubt concerning 'Mama, You Been On My Mind'" (Heylin, 2010, p. 235). To view either song biographically does not acknowledge the songs' complexities. In 'Girl from the North Country' (1963) the speaker is thinking actively of the lover of that song, while in 'Mama You Been on My Mind' the lover is ever-present on the speaker's mind, but the speaker does not acknowledge it. Thus the lover is presented not as powerful on her own, but as powerful due

to the power the speaker feels she has on mind. Like other Dylan songs¹, “women fracture the possible continuity of relationships and narratives by abandoning their partners (often the singer) to a kind of limbo” (Roe, 2003, p. 101). In the song the speaker describes a kind of limbo from the outset. One can imagine the speaker standing at a crossroads in the desert, unsure of where to go. In line 1 the lover has control, as the speaker has to justify and protect himself from her. Bulson comments that “even at [Dylan’s] most down-to-earth moments, he can be ironic, detached, evasive, and cagey” (Bulson, 2009, p. 126). Reversing this trope, Dylan portrays the lover in such a manner, rather than the speaker. The pain in the song has both matured for a long time and maintained its youthful anger, as Springsteen said about ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ “it sounded simultaneously young and adult” (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, 2010). This pain, coupled with the speaker’s manner of recollection and self-defence, shows that the lover is always on his mind, and does not need or want the speaker.

In ‘If You See Her’ the lover’s presence is a soft one. Though the pain exists, it is not crippling, nor is the lover an overbearing figure. The speaker says that:

“Whatever makes her happy, I won’t stand in the way

Though the bitter taste still lingers on from the night I tried to make her stay” (Dylan, 1975, ll. 11-12).

There is a level of understanding on the speaker’s part, as he realises that he acted wrongly. The bitter taste remains not merely because the lover decided to leave, but because he did not, or could not, understand that he was not the person that could make her happy. Coleridge points out that “sorrow and love become the principal themes of elegy” (Lindley, 1985, pp. 68-69). I think that ‘If You See Her’ can, thematically, be considered an elegy, especially the way that Coleridge describes it. This becomes very evident when we consider how the song “adds a painful memory of the night the woman refused to stay, and the strangeness of hearing her name on other people’s lips” (Smith, 2013, p. 284). This painful memory is also a comment *on* memory, as the speaker remembers the love he had, and it shifts from despair to anger, to self-reflection and finally self-loathing. As Brownstein comments, “In the end, [*Blood on the Tracks*] is one glorious mess of songs, one tangled story, told and then retold because that’s how you commit something you love to memory - or how you exorcise despair from your mind” (Brownstein, 2009, p. 156). In ‘If You See Her’ the speaker might be Dylan playing the songs over and over again, and a speaker that has to

¹ Such as ‘Most Likely You’ll Go Your Way (And I’ll Go Mine)’ (1966).

remember and feel all of these different emotions again and again: "I hear her name here and there as I go from town to town" (Dylan, 1975, l. 14). The lover is not an overbearing figure but a brave one that the speaker respects and regrets his actions towards her, while in 'Mama You Been on my Mind' the lover is powerful and overbearing, but that does not imply anything negative about the lover herself, but of the part she plays in the speaker's pain.

Both songs provide insight into Dylan's use of ambiguity. In 'If You See Her' we have two forms of ambiguity: the ambiguity that is a result of the speaker not telling us everything, and the way he presents himself to other people. 'Mama You Been on My Mind', more than any song examined, obscures the speaker's feelings, as the music and lyrics fight against each other to create ambiguity in meaning. The speaker says towards the end of the song "I'm just whispering to myself, so I can't pretend that I don't know" (Dylan, 1991, l. 15). He is whispering that he is whispering, as if the louder he says it, the more real it becomes. He is fighting between admitting that he thinks of her and not admitting it. But there is a deeper battle: whether he wants her back or not. It seems the speaker is denying it too vehemently for him to not want her back. And the delivery captures this. Speaking of 'Lay Lady Lay' (1969) Greenlaw says that "Dylan's delivery resists two kinds of structure it's pinned to: the words and the tune" (Greenlaw, 2003, p. 73). Here there is a similar resistance. The voice drops to a whisper, making the guitar sound louder. Thus the duality of the words are juxtaposed with the unacknowledged emotions expressed through the unbalanced music. While he does not want to pretend, he is possibly denying something important. Acknowledging these emotions would mean that they are real and need to be acted upon, or at least confronted.

The last lines create the most intricate image in the song:

"I'd just be curious to know if you can see yourself as clear
As someone who has had you on his mind" (Dylan, 1991, ll. 19-20).

The scene Dylan conjures is so innocent that it almost seems ordinary: a person waking up and looking in the mirror. And yet, that final question, that final stab at the powerful lover, destroys everything normal about the scene. At first glance, this is a powerful Dylan-esque put-down, as the speaker tells the lover that she is not the amazing person she thinks she is. Ricks comments that "Dylan has always loved questions that have to be answered yes or no" (Ricks, 1990, p. 35), but this is not the case here. Not only is this question ambiguous and hard to interpret, no interpretation can be simply answered 'yes' or 'no'. Is the lover the one with the wrong view, or is it the speaker? Is the lover's shape in the speaker's mind the right shape? Does the lover know the right shape? Do either of them? There is no forthcoming

answer. Furthermore, the question is a double-edged sword, as the lover could legitimately ask the speaker the same question. Dylan brilliantly captures how “one of the things we humans do is tell ourselves stories, consciously and unconsciously... and in these stories we attempt to come to terms with the events and emotions of our lives” (Smith, 2013, p. 280). Thus can we truly believe that the speaker has the answers? Probably not. Dylan’s knowledge of tradition is also apparent as “the contemplation of one’s reflection in the mirror is itself a subgeneric convention in modern poetry” (Lindley, 1985, p. 20). The song’s undertones of people trying to incorporate Dylan’s work as part of their ideas returns here, and he asks them to examine their lives and ideas; see if they “can see [themselves] as clear.” Dylan “ends the fifth and final verse with a question, which comes across as both gentle and sharp” (Frere-Jones, 2014). He cuts the lover down, but the voice, the softening guitar strokes and the quick sharp harmonica notes right after the question show that this is not just about the lover, it is also about the speaker, and his inability to confront his own emotions.

‘If You See Her’ contradicts itself. The speaker ends the song saying:

“If she’s passin’ back this way, I’m not that hard to find
Tell her she can look me up if she’s got the time” (Dylan, 1975, ll. 19-20).

The man that has not yet gotten used to hearing the lover’s name, but wants her to be happy, now wants her to visit even though there is a bitter taste. These confounding desires make the song the closest song to emotional truth than any of the others examined. This points to Dylan being a “pre-feminist [man that is] just as confused by [his] own [role] in the free world as [he is] by the women that surround [him]” (O’Dair, 2009, p. 84). This is expressed in ‘If You See Her’. The speaker is unable to understand what his role should be, and is also unsure of the lover’s role. This criss-crossing of roles is a metaphor for memory and the passage of time. The song exemplifies how “Dylan’s achievement as a poet, musician and singer... is the resourcefulness with which he confronts, responds and plays to the passing of time” (Roe, 2003, p. 82). Time has estranged the speaker with himself, leading to the speaker’s ambiguity. Thinking of the way people talk about his past lover, the speaker comments:

“I’ve never gotten used to it, I’ve just learned to turn it off
Either I’m too sensitive or else I’m getting soft” (Dylan, 1975, ll. 15-16).

Ambiguity is created when the listener tries to pass judgement. The Rolling Stone remarks that line 15 “packs just as much punch as his most venomous songs” (Rolling Stone, 2016).

But the punch is not just directed at the speaker, but also at the people that are inconsiderately speaking of the lover. This continues the parallel with the speaker and Dylan: the people around him could be reporters trying to get under his skin to solicit a reaction. The disgrace, at first glance, is the speaker's actions towards the lover, but it quickly encompasses the people around the speaker as well. The only person that seems to be unhurt in the song is the lover's new partner, whom the speaker addresses and almost accepts. In this song "the first-person singular is fuzzy, wavering, inclining towards and away from the third-person" (Bell, 2000, p. 117) as the speaker tries to find himself both internally and in relation to the world at large. Both songs have an inherent ambiguity to them, but while the ambiguity in 'Mama You Been On My Mind' comes across through anger and hurt, the ambiguity in 'If You See Her' comes from trying to rebuild what is broken inside the speaker.

These songs teach us about the way Dylan reflects on past relationships, completing the timeline of unsuccessful relationships explored in this dissertation. These songs primarily focus on the speaker rather than on the lover and the relationship, and they both express the difficulties that arise from the passage of time. Though not looked at in detail, there is the question of the new lovers that these characters have found (or not) during their time apart. However, it is clear that although the pain is still felt, both speakers try to rebuild, even if they are not fully aware of the scope of the destruction they have experienced.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the ways in which Dylan represents characters at different moments in different relationships. I have looked at Dylan's declarations of love in 'Wedding Song' and 'Make You Feel My Love'. I then progressed to analyse 'Don't Think Twice' and 'It Ain't Me' to show two versions of Dylan's break-up songs. Finally I looked at 'Mama You Been on My Mind' and 'If You See Her' to investigate Dylan's reflections on a failed relationship. This investigation analysed the ways Dylan inserts complexity and ambiguity into the characters and their relationships, as well as Dylan's representations of relationships. This paper viewed these songs as songs, analysing lyrics, music and their interactions with one another, showing that often in these songs Dylan created "different musical effects on two axes: soothing vs. unsettling, simple vs. complex" (Bowden, 2001, p. 29).

Looking at Dylan's songs of love, Dylan expresses manic desire in 'Wedding Song' and soothing, comforting love in 'Make You Feel My Love'. Yet in both songs the lyrics alone did not present the full scope of emotions and the complexities of the situation. Dylan has broken

the “sense that it was the words which guaranteed the moral worth of music [that] persisted well into the eighteenth century” (Lindley, 1985, p. 28) and arguably to this day. Looking at ‘It Ain’t Me’ and ‘Don’t Think Twice’ Dylan’s expressions of heartache were felt through the music alongside the complexities that arise from the lyrics. Once more Dylan reverses a commonly held notion that “‘musical’ lyric is artificial, where the pressure of deep feeling requires passionate directness” (Lindley, 1985, p. 40). This is furthered by the encouraged reading of these two songs as mirroring Dylan’s engagement with the world and his fans, as “he became a folk legend, the proverbial voice of a generation, with moving tunes received as songs of social engagement and protest” (Masur, 2007, p. 166). Looking at the reflection songs ‘If You See Her’ and ‘Mama You Been on My Mind’, the entangled emotions and thoughts felt after the end of a relationship are powerfully expressed. It is in these songs, more so than in the others, that the “questions [and] quasi-symbols... [become] strategies for evading definitive [statements]” (Roe, 2003, p. 84), making it impossible to pinpoint a single, core emotion in the songs.

This paper made a selective decision in its choice of songs and routes of analysis. I did not look at the biographical or historical contexts of the songs, nor did I deeply investigate Dylan’s persona and its relationship to the songs. When choosing songs, I did not look at love songs in which Dylan plays on tenses. Such songs include ‘Nettie Moore’ (2006), in which past and present are entwined, or ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ (1975), in which there is a speaker in the present retelling past events. While I did look at the music of the recorded version of the songs, I did not investigate Dylan’s reinterpretations and performances of these songs. As Bowden comments ‘It Ain’t Me’ “becomes variously a happy love song... and a devil-may-care denial of responsibility for the woman’s hurt” (Bowden, 2001, p. 2). This dissertation did not provide an exhaustive reading of the ambiguities in the songs, but has instead entered upon a manner of discussing them.

Ricks comments that “endings are a very important part of Dylan’s art” (Ricks, 1990, p. 33), and indeed they are paramount to all works. Writing and researching this dissertation has exposed more and more of the sea of Dylan’s work and the plethora of ways to investigate them, both as part of his oeuvre and in isolation. Though I provide a reading of the songs, I doubt that there will be a point at which the ambiguities can fully be untangled and examined. It is for this reason that this dissertation only attempted to glean a few of the answers blowing in the wind.

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