

# Bob Dylan's American Dream

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## Abstract:

Bob Dylan is renowned for using his songs to express different viewpoints on the American Dream. This paper examines how Dylan portrayed the American Dream in his 1960s song lyrics. It examines songs that criticize social injustice. Overall, the paper looks at how Dylan's insightful songs highlights ideas about equality, freedom, and the American Dream.

## Introduction:

Bob Dylan is renowned for using his songs to express different viewpoints on the American Dream. This paper examines how Dylan portrayed the American Dream in his 1960s song lyrics. It examines songs that criticize social injustice and an authoritarian government restricting freedom portrayed in his songs *Blowing' in the Wind* and *Subterranean Homesick Blues*. The injustice and corruption in the legal system were also exposed by Dylan which can be seen in songs like *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, *Like a Rolling Stone* was a satire on culture of American immorality as well as the greediness of riches. Overall, the paper looks at how Dylan's insightful songs highlights ideas about equality, freedom, and the American Dream.

## Content:

Bob Dylan is a composer who, more than anyone else, has captured the attitude of the American people's psyche toward the American Dream. Bob Dylan served as the reticent, unofficial leader and face of social revolution during the 1960s. He developed the notion that rock music might have intelligent and literary lyrics, and he transformed the concept of the popular song. Today, let's focus on the following question: How does Bob Dylan's song reflect the American Dream? Also, we will draw connections between concepts found in Dylan's lyrics and the texts.

Dylan was raised in the mining town of Hibbing, Minnesota, where he was born in 1941. He hitched a ride to New York shortly after quitting college, where he quickly became well-known for his folk covers. In 1962, he started releasing his own songs. He started with folk music, for which he was instantly dubbed the "*Spokesman of the Generation*" and was revered as a prophet by many. He started performing rock music in 1965, alienating his fan base in the process, and went on to create a number of incredible records. Since then, he has put out about 40 albums in a variety of musical genres, such as rock, blues, country, gospel, and folk. The quality of the albums varies. In 1965, album "*Highway 61 Revisited*" is considered by many to be the best ever recorded album and reviewer Howard Wenner remarked, "*It is the ultimate artistic achievement of Western civilization.*" It is also said to symbolize the pinnacle of his creativity. Dylan is accredited with taking the cerebrals of poetry and typical literature to the mainstream of pop music. From many years, Dylan has received laurels for his insightful influence on pop music and culture

of America by bringing noticeable lyrical works of amazing poetic power including “*Pulitzer Prize*”, “*Oscar*”, “*Golden Globe*”, and “*Grammy*”. Additionally, there is an increasing movement to award him a Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of his lifetime accomplishments.

To evaluate Dylan's description of the American Dream in his poems, we must primarily go through American Dream and its ideals. Basic essentials of the American visions are found in freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness under the intensity of achieving freedom. At the beginning of twentieth century, the supremacy of American Dream developed in achieving economic independence. Dylan's analysis of the failings of the affluent, who are blamed for distorting the American Dream is clearly mentioned in F. Scott Fitzgerald's ‘*The Great Gatsby*’. A few themes encapsulate Dylan's message and point of view as well.

One of Dylan's most important early compositions focuses on liberty, equality, and harmony which is seen in the 1963 poem “*Blowin' in the Wind*”. This throws light on the essence of humanity. Through a series of provoking rhetorical questions, Dylan here offers a critique of social and political injustice. Each question is followed by the phrase “*blowin in the wind*,” which is similar to Jay Gatsby’s usage of green light setting across the bay end of the Tom and Daisy’s dock in “*The Great Gatsby*”, here solution remains never fully attainable even though it always seems to be in reach.

The lyrics in the song “*Blowin in the wind*” clearly depicts how Dylan beautifully represent the purposeful ignorance of some people, like looking at the sky and not noticing it, or waving their head and made-up they don't see anything. He also acknowledges the people who are fighting hard for justice with white dove, sailing across the sea and deserve rest. People who are striving to remove those mountains and obstacles never seem to wipe off. Dylan observes all these things happening and wanted to motivate the citizens fight for a better world.

He also promotes equality and liberty through the sentence ‘*How many years can some people exist, before they're allowed to be free?*’ referring to the situation faced by Afro-Americans in the 1960s because they were still viewed as second-class citizens even after slavery was abolished more than a century earlier.

In 1965 anti-establishment song “*Subterranean Homesick Blues*” the lines delve more into the theme of freedom. Dylan compares America to a totalitarian police state devoid of opportunity and liberty. In this song Dylan demonstrates this by saying that he is proceeding the path and assessing the administration and conveying up the subject of phone tapping. He develops this idea in the verse from “*subterranean homesick blues*”:

*‘Look out, kid, it’s something you did,  
God knows when, but you’re doing it again,  
You better duck down the alleyway, lookin’ for a new friend,  
The man in the coonskin cap, in the big pen, wants eleven-dollar bills, but you only got ten.’*  
(Dylan, The Lyrics 1961-2012)

Although this song seems innocent, teachers, police, tax collectors, and the army pursue them in a world where everyone is biased against them. Dylan gives American kids counsel, advising them to think independently in the face of such a dictatorial regime as we don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows mentioned in the song “*Subterranean Homesick Blues*” in 1965.

The endearingly grim statements ‘*Twenty years of schooling*’ and ‘*they put you on the day shift*’ encapsulates shortage of opportunities cutting-edge modern-day America. Dylan also looks at the prejudiced American justice system's corruption and hypocrisy. He laments on the unfairness of American life through his song “*The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*.” This song mostly discusses how racially

and economically uneven American society is. He vividly explains an incident happened to an African-American maid who was taking too long to get a white man's drink, and how her death was caused by that wealthy white man.

The trial scene in *'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'* is described as:

*In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel  
To show that all's equal and that the courts are on the level  
And that the strings in the books ain't pulled and persuaded  
And that even the nobles get properly handled  
Once that the cops have chased after and caught 'em  
And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom  
Stared at the person who killed for no reason  
Who just happened to be feelin' that way without warnin'  
And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished  
And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance  
William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence  
(Dylan, *The Lyrics 1961-2012*)*

Dylan clearly disapproving unfairness legal system in America, pointing out that the wealthy White man was given a trivial punishment. Similar feelings are expressed by him in the song *"Hurricane"*, where he declares that he is really ashamed of living in a land of injustice.

Major characters Tom and Daisy Buchanan through their life style in the great American novel *'The Great Gatsby'* serve another example of the aristocracy's carelessness and lack of accountability for crimes against the common people in this story. Dylan mocks the preconceptions of the *"Land of the Free"* while simultaneously challenging the concepts of victories that the American Dream offers. He even questions the idea of victories itself in the factual sense. Dylan's opinion on victory can be seen in the following lines from:

*'There's no success like failure, and failures no success at all' (Love minus Zero/No Limit)  
'Up on housing project hill it's either fortune or fame, you must pick one or the other though neither of  
them are to be what they claim' (Just like Tom's Thumbs Blues)  
'You find out when you reach the top, you're on the bottom'.*

And in the phrase *Money doesn't talk, it swears. (It's Alright, Ma (I'm only Bleeding))*

Due to his extravagant displays of money and showy estate, which he used to try and gain acceptance into the elite class, Gatsby is perceived as pretentious and repulsive. Money, after all, swears instead of speaking.

Dylan offers scathing assessments of the American Dream's ascent to corruption as well as the country's increasing corruption. His opinions on the increasing immorality and corruption are evident in sentences from his song *Desolation Row*:

*'The National Bank, at a profit, sells road -maps for the  
soul., They're selling postcards of the hanging and  
They make everything from toy guns that spark to flesh-coloure  
d Christs that glow in the dark, it's easy to see without looking too far that not much is really  
sacred.'*(Dylan, *The Lyrics 1961-2012*)

The 1965 Dylan wrote a song titled *'Like a Rolling Stone'*, which is entitled as the popular song ever, a woman is seen who is reminiscent of Tennessee Williams *'Blanche DuBois'* from *"A Streetcar called*

*Desire*". It tells the tale of a woman who lost her wealth after growing up in luxury and is now struggling to make both the ends meet in the real world. Like all great works of literature, it has multiple layers of significance. Dylan takes great pleasure in making matters worse by denouncing the protagonist's prior dispositions and asserting that they deserved what happened to them. This is Dylan's attack against the haughty, apathetic upper class. Dylan said something that we heard like in the song '*Like a rolling stone*':

*Once upon a time you dressed so fine  
Threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?  
People call say 'beware doll, you're bound to fall'  
You thought they were all kidding you  
You used to laugh about  
Everybody that was hanging out  
Now you don't talk so loud  
Now you don't seem so proud  
About having to be scrounging your next meal  
How does it feel, how does it feel?  
To be without a home  
Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone  
Ahh you've gone to the finest schools, alright Miss Lonely  
But you know you only used to get juiced in it  
Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street  
And now you're gonna have to get used to it  
You say you never compromise  
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize  
He's not selling any alibis  
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes  
And say do you want to make a deal?  
How does it feel, how does it feel?  
To be on your own, with no direction home  
A complete unknown, like a rolling stone*

*(Like a Rolling Stone 1-2 stanzas) (Dylan, The Lyrics 1961-2012)*

In this closing line, which brings to mind the lavish parties of Jay Gatsby, Dylan condemns the conceited and complacent mindset of the rich classes that visit these parties.

*A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* is another poem at which we can capture his thoughts on the deficiencies of the American Dream. At this juncture, Dylan uses many deftly chosen analogies to completely destroy the unique picture of America that the American Dream offered. A barren and desolate American land of Hard Rain is filled with '*dead oceans*' '*crooked highways*' and '*sad forests*.' It is the one with insufficient virtue. Bob once remarked that he witnessed a new infant surrounded by wild wolves referring to his mother land. He believes that America is the country that lacks spirituality. He clearly states this idea through his poem '*A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*' through the line mentioned by him that he saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children.

There are few opportunities for material achievement in America. Also, he wrote, "*I saw a diamond highway and no one was on that,*" "*I noticed white ladder completely submerged in water.*" - The final statement refers to Benjamin Franklin's "*slippery slope,*" proving that the American Dream's "rags to

riches" component is false and that prosperity is actually a long, difficult and dangerous journey. The wealthiest in this country are thoughtless and cold to the predicament of the:

*I saw one-person starving, I saw many people laughing.*

It is a land of racial segregation and white dominance

*I saw a white man who walked a black dog'.*

*An unjust country where*

*the executioner's face is always well hidden. (Dylan, The Lyrics 1961-2012)*

### Conclusion:

Dylan believes that massive, radical social reform is the only way to realize the American Dream, and he promises to keep pushing for it. He wants to declare that black is just the colour and people should not be separated based on the colour. Also, he wants to proclaim it from the mountain top so that all men could see it and understand. Though he knew that he will sink in the ocean, he would like to stand on it to wipe out racial discrimination. In spite of all his attempts, he has little expectation that everybody listens. This is well explained through the line that he can heard ten thousand whispering and nobody listening. That's Bob Dylan's interpretation of the American Dream.

In the 1863 Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln rightly remarked as below:

*'Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. It is for us the living to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they*

*who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us ... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'.*

Bob Dylan clearly states that the task Lincoln alludes to is still unfinished, with American society still marked by material decay, racial segregation, and inequality, even after a century has passed. It's clear that the American Dream and the noble ideals have been neglected. But it's not lost for ever. Until writers like Dylan continue to defend values like liberty, equality, and opportunity, we can hope for a society governed of, for and by the people. Real American Dream may yet come true if society rejects injustice and an unrestrained materialism culture in favour of equality and liberty.

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