

American Society Viewed from Youths' Lens: A Study on Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall"

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the lyric of a famous song entitled *A Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall* composed by American folk musician, Bob Dylan. The objective of this study is to analyze the perspective of the *baby-boomer* generation, which remarkably differs from that of the older generations in terms of their attitude on certain issues such as war, social injustice, racism and equality in the 1960s America. All of these are reflected in the lyric of the song and also in the sociological and historical facts around the time when the work was created. The approach of sociological literature is employed in this study, which is chosen for the analysis to start from the assumption that the meaning of the lyrics is seen as the reflection of what happens in the society. This is also to reconfirm that a literary work can be used as a means of analyzing a period of time and, therefore, giving insights as to how the general public think about it.

Keywords: *injustice, racism, sociological literature, war.*

INTRODUCTION

Bob Dylan is one of the most influential figures in pop-culture history. Some critics say that Bob Dylan is as revolutionary as the way Elvis Presley "freed the body", yet Dylan "freed the mind". He caused teenagers in that era to fall in love with poetry, due to his musical lyric. He proved that rock and roll's lyrics, which once were known for their lightheartedness, could be very rich, sober, and meaningful (Marshall, 2007, p. 56). His rise to fame was granted by his allegiance to the Civil Rights Movement, which provided him both topics and motifs to write his songs. This makes Bob Dylan recognized as one of the most prominent figures of American music and popular culture.

Ricks (2014), the writer of *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, who has also penned books about T. S. Eliot and John Keats, argues that not only are Dylan's lyrics qualified as poetry, but Dylan does present among the finest poets of all time, on the

same level as Milton, Keats, and Tennyson (Ricks, 2014, p. 21). It is indisputable, though, that Dylan has been influenced by a great deal of poetry. He counts Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine alongside Woody Guthrie as his most important forebears. Born Robert Allen Zimmerman, he took his stage name, Bob Dylan, from the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.

Since his lyrics were immediately labeled poetry by many, Dylan's has become the first popular singer to get in college curricula and become the interest of literary critics who recognized the intertextuality between his songs and "*highbrow*" poetry. Combining forms borrowed from the folk ballad verse, blues, country and western, gospel music and writing techniques gained from French symbolists and the Beat poets, Dylan revitalized the popular song and inspired other musicians to follow his lead in self-expression, and among his one of the most celebrated and protest songs is entitled "A-Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall" (Marshall, 2007, p. 56).

Released in 1962, “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” lyric does not deal with a narrative story, as it is traditional in ballad form, but rather with a series of images that point to the political situation around him and to his place as a protest singer within the socio-political situation.

The first objective of this study is to observe and identify social problems of American society in 1960s that are found and reflected in the song lyric of Bob Dylan’s song entitled “A-Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall”. Secondly, it is to analyze the lyric message and meaning by linking it to the event which reflected the war and injustice in the America gloomiest time which happened around the years 1960s, the time when the songs first released. In line with the objectives of this research, it focuses on the meaning and message of the lyric and their relations which are reflected in the social and historical event happening in America around 1960s.

To accomplish the objectives of this paper, Bob Dylan song lyrics “A-Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall” was analyzed in relation to the society condition. This research uses a sociological approach to analyze the work as mentioned before. This approach was brought by the fact that the presence of a literary work cannot be separated from the reality found in the society. As stated by Damono (1974), “*bahwa karya sastra tidak jatuh begitu saja dari langit, tetapi selalu ada hubungan antara sastrawan, sastra, dan masyarakat*” (p. 7), which means that a literary work is not something falling from the sky, but it always has something to do with the poet, the work itself and its society.

The literary work is a part of a society because it talks about social life in the certain society. That this approach see the literature as something that can be used as media to explain a period of time, and give insights as to how the general public felt, conveying true emotions and ideals instead of just textbook descriptions. Also by understanding the author’s life it can help the researcher to be more comprehensive in analyzing and understanding the work by examining the world views of the author as the part of the society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To accomplish the aim of this article, which is to understand the songwriter’s idea about the situation and social problems that happening in America in the 1960s. Bob Dylan song lyrics “A Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall” was analyzed in relation to the society condition. For a songwriter, a lyric becomes an important matter because he can convey and express his feeling and idea through it. Poetry has a clear-cut purpose to achieve certain effects in an audience. Good poets are those who write both to delight and teach, or in other words, for delightful instruction (Sydney: 145). This hypothesis goes with the fact that poetry consists of language that produce effect ordinary language does not produce. Poetry tends to be aesthetic and using feature language to make the reader feeling more than only thinking when they reading a poetry.

This paper employs the sociological approach to analyze the work. In the paradigm of literary studies, especially the sociology of literature, is regarded as the development of a mimetic approach by Plato the Greek philosopher, who aim to understand the literary works in relation with the reality of a certain society. This view was encouraged by the fact that the presence of a literary work cannot be separated from the reality in the society. A literary work is part of a society because literature describes social life in a certain society (Damono, 1974, p. 7). This approach sees the literature as medium to explain a period of time, and give insights as to how the general public felt, conveying true emotions and ideals instead of just textbook descriptions. Also understanding the author’s life can provide a better understanding of the work by analyzing the world views of the author as the part of the society.

Bob Dylan’s life background and world views of the social-political issue in America around 1960s influences the critical idea of his work as the protest singer. At that time Dylan use his music in order to show the experiences of injustice within American society. His works are greatly inspired by certain issue such as racism, generation gap, civil rights movement, Vietnam War and many other issue that occurred in

America in 1960. The music of Bob Dylan became the anthem of the youth movement in 1960s because he openly expressed his disapproval of the American political and social system in order to encourage his audience to move in a direction for change, that also coined Dylan with the title *the spokesman of the generation*.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that the content of Bob Dylan's song entitled "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" shows the reality of the society and how the writer responds to it. Furthermore, a work of art cannot be separated from its social, political and cultural background. The society in which the author lives, the author's word views and experience during his/her life, and to whom the author wants to convey the message of his works play an important role in the creative process of making the works. So by analyzing a work and its relation to the reality is an important thing as the main point of the discussion, the writer believes the application of the sociological approach will be most appropriate to use in the research.

METHODS

The method used in this study is library research, by which the data sources and references are taken from written materials in the library. The material object of this research is Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" song lyric. The main approach to the appreciation of Bob Dylan's lyrics is by "finding references in people, places and objects" (Boucher, Gamble and Wilde, 2009, p. 137). This method is the most prevalent claim in the literary study of Bob Dylan's works, which requires the understanding of historical backgrounds to assist the comprehension of the lyrics. Therefore it is seen as an optimal method for political and social music in general. The secondary data are Dylan's biography, discographies and historical notes of the events that happened in America in 1960s. This secondary data is to sharpen the analysis and the understanding of the work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bob Dylan's Biographical Sketch, American Society in the 1960s and Folk Music as Protest Song

As a protest song, "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" lyric gives an insight picture of certain socio-historical issue happening in American society at that time. The 1960's was a decade of liberation for music, public opinion, invention, and the binds of racism. American in the 1960s were popularized by a generation familiar to the political activism. Nearly all aspects of the dominant culture were subject to being challenged by members of the "demographic surge" after WWII, known as the *babyboomer* generation. The generation was popularly known for their acts of profanation against many of the sacred myths about the characters and specials in the United States of America. The challenge came in the form of a socio-cultural break with the old tradition known as the generation gap. Many fundamental features of the hierarchy of values were challenged and redefined by the generation.

Born in an economic prosperity, a visible proportion of the *baby boomers* sought alternatives politically and culturally. They began to seek a deeper purpose than accumulating money in a context dominated by business interests and routines. The American Civil Rights Movement masterminded by the baby boomer generation was a series of non-violent protests conducted in the 1950s and 1960s to support political and various minorities to fight for the equal rights. Issues of race, class, gender came to the forefront at various points throughout the decade, and acts of protest have come to symbolize the movement's desire for change.

From this young generation movement spawned some of the greatest musical artists of all time—one in particular named Robert Allen Zimmerman a.k.a Bob Dylan. Through his music and songs, Dylan became a factor in the revolution of hundreds of thousands of people in the Civil Right Movement. He may not have been responsible for the ideologies behind the movements, but he provided the "emotional drive" behind them. His songs lyric influenced the

movement, as much as the movement influenced him.

In a time of revolution and social change in the United States in 1960s, the protest music served as an outlet for expression of social inequality and anti-war sentiment. Throughout this time, folk music served an outlet for musicians to voice their support for this change. The influence of protest music, especially folk music, grew into a driving force behind the social and civic change at the time. The protest music may be defined as music whose lyrics convey a message which is opposed to a policy or course of action adopted by an authority or by society as an institution" (Haynes: 1). The protest music tells stories whose multiple facets reflect the lives of the invisible mass.

“A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” lyric as the Young Generation Perspective of American Society Issue in the 1960s

“A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” is one of the most celebrated protest songs in the 1960s. It was a song whose inspiration comes from “Lord Randall”, the English-Scottish old ballad. There is a conversation between a mother and her son and some of the mother’s questions are identical or similar to the old ballad (Marqusee: 64). The lyrical structure of “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” was based on “Lord Randall” (Child ballad No. 12) which he learnt from Martin Carthy. According to Zuckerman, there are many versions of this song, but all follow the same basic question-and-answer structure. Although the surrealistic flood of images that makes up the “blue-eyed” son’s reply to the inquiry has no connection to “Lord Randall”.

Through the imitation of the ballads, Dylan encapsulates the way by which the spirit of war and racial tension is poisoning the American youth. The song was written in 1962 in a period of racism and political crisis between the United States and Cuba. Subsequently Cuba had installed some Russian missiles on the island that menaced the American nation. America was in their darkest time, they were in the struggle of the brink of a nuclear war crisis, civil rights movement, and many other social break events.

Dylan breaks from the tradition of the folk movement where songs are all about narrative of a specific social topics. Breaking from the tradition of the ballad, Dylan’s song “Hard Rain” does not deal with a narrative story, but rather with a series of images that point both to the direction of the political situation around him and to his place as a singer within that situation. The song lyric describes the feeling of fear and of Dylan’s depression, which can also represent that of the common people in America, when they are trying to cope with that frustrating situation.

Through the use of imitation and anaphora, Dylan maintains the question-and-answer style. This is to question society and human nature, by urging the listeners to examine his or her moral perspective and the direction of society towards the issue that's happening around them. One stanza is composed of 9 to 11 lines. The first two lines in every verse are questions from the parents, whereas the other lines are the answers from the blue-eyed son. Moreover the first two lines and the last two lines repeat in every stanza. Repetition is probably the most noticeable part in some of ballad lyrics, as repetition is a rhetorical device repeating a word or phrase, or rephrasing the same idea, to secure emphasis. Thus, when the father asks questions, the blue-eyed son will answer it. Every stanza is characterized by a specific action by the son (be, see, hear, meet, and do).

The song opens with a father who asks a question to his blue-eyed son in the first and second line of the first stanza, *Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son? / Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?* It is a conversation between two different generations. By looking to the sociological aspect of America in the 1960s when the work is done, the conversation depicts the gap between the old and young generation of America 1960s. The term generation gap was popularized in the 1960s to describe the societal conflict taking place between young people at that time and their parents, teachers and authority figures in general. At that time the young generation seemed to go against everything their parents had previously believed in terms of music, values, governmental and political views.

The story switches from the concerned parents to the blue-eyed son telling of where he had been in his life. In the third and fourth line in first stanza: *I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains / I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways*, these two lines depicts the blue-eyed son past journey. The misty mountain lines tells about the uncertainty of the American future, which was misty and blur. The blurry vision of the future makes it look full of uncertainty. The uncertainty causes the people in America to have to stumble and carry out many struggles in the course of their own history. The six crooked highways are also the metaphor which says that the blue-eyed son as the young generation views that America had already faced and going through many difficult times.

The conversation continues in the second stanza of the song. This is to start again with the same type question like in the first verse by the father. In the word *thou* (the second verse), the father gives the follow up to the first question. He is asking what his blue-eyed son has seen along his journey. Then the blue-eyed son answers in the third line in second stanza: *I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it*. By looking at the sociological aspect of America society at that time, it can be seen that the newborn baby is the allegory of the new born generation or the *baby boomer* that point out to the people whose age was under thirty at that time. They were surrounded by the wolves all around them. Where the wolves here are the opposite side of the young generation which refers to the old generation. The wolves are an allegory of how the perspective of the young generation toward the old generation. The young see the old generation as full of egotism, greed and violence.

The blue-eyed son then continues to tell the story in the fifth line of the second stanza to his father that he has seen a black branch with blood that kept dripping. Thus, the first race issue in the lyric is in the tune. By looking at the social outbreak event around the time where the song was being written, the black branch here refers to the African American people that were treated fiercely as a slave in 1950s-1960s. This verse leads to one of the miserable historical events of racism in America, in which many of the African

Americans at that time were found dead hanging on a tree, after being lynched in the Southern and border states.

In the seventh line of the second stanza, it is written: *I saw a white ladder all covered with water*. A ladder is a tool which helps people to reach something higher, and in this verse Dylan uses the white ladder as an allegory of the road to reach the what is so-called the American Dream. The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, a symbol of the American people's way of life to reach success in their life. It results in the believe or idea from the old generation that anyone can become rich and/or famous if they work hard and try their very best. The set of ideals (Democracy, Rights, Liberty, Opportunity, and Equality), includes the opportunity for prosperity and success.

However, in this line Dylan portrays the ladder that the blue-eyed son saw has white color and also covered with water. This may symbolize that the ladder which is supposed to reach the American Dream or the successful way of life is built only for whites, and not for everyone. The blue-eyed son describes that the ladder is also covered with water, which is described that the ladder is wet and slippery. Here, Dylan describes that the journey to reach what is called the American Dream is hard for the American people, and even harder for the African-American. In this verse, the blue-eyed son serves as an allegory of the young generation who firmly criticizes one of the fundamental beliefs of the American nation. It seems they say that the American Dream is still a "dream", and that the set of the ideals is nothing more than just a slogan.

The dialogue then is continued in the third stanza where it is written: *And what did you hear, my blue-eyed son?* Here, the blue-eyed son begins his answer with a gripped atmosphere in the third and fourth line the third stanza as he says *I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warning / Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world.*

He depicts the worlds which look like going to be falling apart. He hears a sound of a roaring thunder and herald rain storms that is rumbling in the distance and it is getting closer and louder. He

also hears a roar of a wave with a tense sound as well, which makes him think that it could make the whole world drowned.

In the fifth line of the third stanza Dylan writes *'Heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazing'*. In this part, the blue-eyed son continues to depict the intense Cold War horror in American society. Drums play an important role in the American Civil war. Many of the young boys served as drummers during the war; they were not supposed to be fighters, but they did a very important job during the Civil War. His job is walking beside the marching soldiers, and beating his drum to keep them together. In the noise and confusion of battle, it was often impossible to hear the officers' orders, so each order was given in a series of drumbeats to represent it. The beating of the war drums represents the critical period of America. This may also foretell that this country will once again step into another big war.

In this next verse in line seventh in the third stanza it is written: *'Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughing'*. Here, the blue-eyed son illustrates that there is one person which is suffering, but the other group of people, which are near to him/her just laugh at him and do not show any empathy at all. Human, normally, with his sense of the humanity, must not show any happy expression or gestures when there is one person feels sad or in suffering the other group. Instead they should help the other. In this line, the blue-eyed son shows a contrast picture of happiness and misery in one picture. It seems that he is trying to say to his father as the representation of the old generation that the world is full with ignorant and egoistic people where they just care about his own life and do not really care with other people's misery at all. This line is a criticism for the people that do nothing when they see something bad happens around them. This is for the first time that the blame for racism is being taken not only on those people who commit acts of violence, but also on the general population who close their eyes to the oppression that is becoming increasingly more prevalent.

This dialogue continues again in the fourth stanza. In the first and second line on the fourth stanza, *'Oh, who did you meet, my blue-eyed son? / Who did you meet, my darling young one?'* The father now is asking to the son what he has already met in his life. The blue eyed son answer in the line fourth in the fourth stanza *'I met a white man who walked a black dog'*. This verse is obviously addressed to the issue of racism as well. It is about the white people who controlled the blacks with segregation laws and treated them like animals. The simple and common act of walking a dog is used as a metaphor for slavery, which was a major issue in the early sixties (the song was released in 1962). The blue-eyed son clearly shows the attitude of the white people who thought that they were more superior than the black and treated them like a dog even as a slave.

Then the blue-eyed son continues his answer in line fifth and sixth in the fourth stanza *"I met a young woman whose body was burning / I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbo.'* These two lines are an anomaly in this song; it is the only good thing that comes to the blue-eyed son in the whole song. While, the other verse lines show all of the ugly things that happens around him. On the other hand, in these two verses the blue-eyed son sees something good. He said to his father that he met a young woman whose body was burning and also a girl that gave him a rainbow. This might relate to the second-wave of feminist activism which began in the 1960s with the aim of increasing women's opportunities and freedoms not just through legislation but also by challenging the social and cultural factors that combined to confine women to their traditional domestic role. The movement of women that aimed to have equality in the society.

In the 1960's the phrase *"Bra Burning"* was well known. People say that very few women actually burned their bras, but many supported those actions. Women burned their bras because they felt that it proved a statement or made a stand for Women's Rights. Another reason they burned their bras is because it was a symbol that showed independence of men at the time. The burning woman that the blue-eyed son tries to depict is that how woman shows the spirit of the

expansion of the feminism movement which had great impact on the 1960s equal rights movement.

The youth and rainbows represent someone who has not grown up yet and therefore has not been affected and corrupted by the problems that are found in modern society. That can be Dylan's reference to the young generation of 1960s. Thus, the young girl can be seen as a representation of innocence and naivete of the generation. Then the rainbow that the young girl gave symbolizes pluralism and equality that they were fighting for. In this two lines, the blue-eyed son wants to show to the audience that he sees a hope that is reflected from the movement. That is the blue-eyed son which serves as the allegory of the younger generation that will bring hope in the time of violence and despair. He believes that the world still has a chance to be a better place for human in the future, when it is under the rule of the younger generation. A hope for a change in the hand of those people that listen and do not remain silent after seeing those ugly things. It is the young generation that brings the biggest movement in America 1960, the counterculture and the civil rights movement.

In the last verse the father asks the blue-eyed son about what he will be doing now, after going through all that experiences. That he have been travelling the world, seen, heard and met all those people. Unlike the other verses of the song lyric which ask the blue-eyed son to recount his experiences, the fifth stanza is asking about what would he do after going through all those experiences. The blue-eyed son then answers in the third line in fifth stanza, *'I'm a-goin' back out fore the rain starts a-fallin.'*

The rain here is referring to the verse *'and it's a hard rain gonna fall'* that is always repeated appearing at the end of every stanza. The "hard rain" here does not exactly symbolize a literal meaning of rain, or an acid rain, due to the Cuban missile crisis issue in the early 1960s. From all the explanations above, along the stanza by seeing the sociological and historical picture that happened in America around 1960s, the researcher believes that the rain here is more complicated than that, the rain here is can be seen as symbolizing the feeling of fear, that something bad is going to

happen. It is the feeling of worry and anxiety that result from the combination of various issues that he had been experienced and happened around the blue-eyed son itself. In this line, the blue-eyed son wants to say that he will not just keep quiet after seeing all those ugly things that happen around him. Then he will, therefore, go out again and make a change before it was too late.

The blue-eyed son continues his answer in the line tenth, eleventh and twelfth in the fifth stanza: *'Where black is the color, where none is the number/ And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it /And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it.'*

From the line ten above, it can be seen that the blue-eyed son talks about the universal equality that he dreams about and that he will fight for. The place where black people are regarded as "a complete" human, just as white. It will be the place where black and any other marginalized culture, are to be accepted in the society, and a place where people in America live with little opportunity for material success. The blue-eyed son will continue to speak until people can listen to his opinions, and until the people of the older generations that serve as the decision makers of the country at that time can also understand him.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that Bob Dylan's *A Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall* was created under the certain issues like generation gap, racism, social injustice, Vietnam War, civil rights movement and the Cold War tension that influence Bob Dylan as a protest singer and part of the America society in writing the lyric.

Bob Dylan through this song lyric tries to bridge the gap by creating "the dialogue" between the two generations. He creates the father and the blue-eyed son character as an allegory of the old and the young generation. The blue-eyed son symbolizes the innocence and pure perspective of the young generation of America toward the social condition. He depicts the young generation of America 1960s whose opinion differs greatly from their parents and politicians supporting the war and overlooking the injustice.

The young generation began to see the signs of racism, hatred, war and violence within society in 1960. In the end of the songs it explains that the young generation is aware that things will get worse, unless they do something and fix it. They then creates alternative lifestyles and protest movement in order to promote a peaceful change within society, and Dylan with his song tries to tells that the old generation should listen to the young generation opinion to make a better society.

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