



Document Set 1 - Arguments for Bob Dylan's Award of the Nobel Prize

(Side A reads first, Side B reads second)

Author and Educator Rob Salkowitz, Forbes Magazine:

Bob Dylan is many things, but he is not in need of wider exposure. His entire recording catalog, stretching back 55 years, is in print, along with dozens of collections of live performances and session outtakes. He has toured the world nonstop for nearly 30 years, playing to millions of people. He's been the subject of a shelfful of books and several films. The Nobel Prize for Literature comes with a cash award of about \$904,000 – an amount that might be meaningful to a struggling poet in a poorer part of the world, but which hardly registers as a rounding error in the income of an iconic global rock star.

If Bob Dylan's own voice is not in need of amplification, perhaps the Nobel Committee is seeking to call attention to the characters who populate his work. If so, their choice is both well-timed and deeply perceptive, given the social and political currents that are roiling America, Europe and the world.

Bob Dylan began his career as an interpreter of traditional American folk music, including blues, gospel, country, the protest songs of the left-wing labor movement, and rural Appalachian ballads. In the early 1960s, when "authenticity" was the coin of the realm among the mostly white, college-educated denizens of the Greenwich Village folk scene, this scraggly troubadour from northern Minnesota, barely out of his teenage years, had internalized these

influences to such a degree that his recordings from that era, including his first album *Bob Dylan*, sound like the work of a grizzled middle-aged bluesman. When he began writing his own songs, he continued to mine this rich vein of influence. His 1963 album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, may be best remembered for the rabble-rousing title song that anticipated the mass social protests ahead in the decade, but it stands out today for a quartet of songs that mingle the timeless themes of folk ballads with contemporary concerns.

"North Country Blues," the lament of an aging woman in a town that the mining industry left behind, echoes the despair and frustrations that one can still hear today across the deindustrialized Midwest. "Hollis Brown" is another harrowing portrait of rural poverty and desperation culminating in senseless gun violence. "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," immortalizes a then-current news story about the son of a rich Baltimore industrialist who gets away with murdering his cleaning lady because of white privilege and bias in the judicial system. "Only a Pawn in Their Game," about the larger social forces in the South that led to the death of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, remains one of the most perceptive and sadly relevant statements about the role of racism in American politics.



Music critic Jon Pareles, New York Times:

What took them so long?

That's the only question for the Nobel committee that finally chose Bob Dylan to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature this year.

It's not as if some new work suddenly clinched the deal. Mr. Dylan has been recognized by anyone who cares about words — not to mention music — since the 1960s, when he almost immediately earned an adjective as his own literary and musical school: Dylanesque.

There's no question that Mr. Dylan has created a great American songbook of his own: an *e pluribus unum* of high-flown and down-home, narrative and imagistic, erudite and earthy, romantic and cutting, devout and iconoclastic, finger-pointing and oracular, personal and universal, compassionate and pitiless. His example has taught writers of all sorts — not merely poets and novelists — about strategies of both pinpoint clarity and anyone's-guess free association, of telegraphic brevity and ambiguous, kaleidoscopic moods.

A longtime stumbling block for Mr. Dylan's literary recognition has been that he is a songwriter, so his words are best heard with his music. Another is that his voluminous output includes some clinkers and throwaways. Both are absolutely true, and so what?

Mr. Dylan's good stuff, in all its abundance, is the equal — and envy — of countless writers who work strictly on the page. He's a grandmaster of verbal strategies. He can tell stories in a cascade of images, like "Tangled Up in Blue"; he can come at an elusive emotion from all sides and then twist the knife, as he does in "Desolation Row"; he can be the kindest of confidants, as he is in "To Make You Feel My Love" and "Forever Young"; or he can be the most savage of adversaries, as in "Positively 4th Street" or "Pay in Blood."

As much as any literary figure to emerge in the 20th century, he has written words that resonate everywhere: quoted by revolutionaries and presidents, hurled by protesters, studied by scholars and taken to heart in countless private moments: thoughts like "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose." That line, like so much of Mr. Dylan's work, speaks to the marginalized: to underdogs, outsiders, misfits. "To live outside the law," he advises, "You must be honest."

Like many an academically beloved poet — say, Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot — Mr. Dylan has always placed himself on a literary continuum where allusions focus and amplify meaning. But half a century ago, when guardians of culture were diligently policing boundaries between the purportedly high and low, Mr. Dylan drew his allusions not only from Western literature but also from the blues and the news, gleefully knocking their heads together. He pointed directly toward some of his sources: Woody Guthrie, Robert Johnson, Arthur Rimbaud, the Bible, the Beats and, above all, the anonymous writers and transmitters of folk songs who told the stories they had to tell. Mr. Dylan soon emerged as a fountainhead of allusions and aphorisms himself — he's got more one-line life lessons than Aesop. Behind his sunglasses, slinging his electric guitar, he became a writer other writers would build upon until, generations later, his wild innovations were just part of an American heritage.

Mr. Dylan's place in literature — the way he drew his very individual, paradigm-shifting radicalism from folk music's memory, its imaginative preservation of tradition — was clear long before the literary establishment deigned to recognize him. The Nobel doesn't have to certify Mr. Dylan; half a century of literature and songwriting have heard him and responded. Long before the prizes started rolling in, he had already rewired our minds. Still, better late than never.



Music Critic Bill Wyman, Vulture:

Dylan got [The Nobel Prize] because he was one of the signal poets of the 20th century. He was a folk singer, a rock star, a provocateur, and, now and then, a crank. But more than anything else, before he even sang his words, he put them to paper, crafted them with an unappreciated care, and intended them to mean something.

You have heard of his influences: Woody Guthrie's Commie Dust Bowl songs, to start, and then throw in the folk-blues. The Great American Songbook (which Dylan's seemingly depthless memory seems to know completely). The Surrealists. The Beats. Later, some psychedelia, the Bible, and other stuff.

The result, while varied — ballads, screeds, epics, poesy, and of course classic after classic after classic — were of a whole. They were Dylan songs, and the words were Dylan poetry, and, again and again, the words, to quote the poet Bryan Adams, cut like a knife.

"Chimes of Freedom" may be among the greatest pieces of lyric poetry of our time. The heavens open, and thunder cracks, and lightning flashes, and the account of all of this is delivered in florid prose in the first half of each verse. ("In the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales/ For the disrobed faceless forms of no position," for example.) But in it all, Dylan hears something like an insistence on justice, and

lurches suddenly, in the second half of each verse, into an almost hypnotically colloquial way of speaking to detail whom the lightning and thunder were recognizing.

Poring over the song, the members of the academy would have found the words "for those compelled to drift, or else be kept from drifting." It might have occurred to them that that Dylan had precisely lined two of the great tragedies of the 20th century — ethnic cleansing and forced exile, on the one hand, and the gulag on the other — in a single prosaic line.

Or how about this: "For the lonesome-hearted lovers with too personal a tale"; they might have seen at least a hint of recognition of the fights to come in the realm of interracial marriage and, of course, gay rights.

Moving on, they would have found fever dreams in "Visions of Johanna," bleak Westerns in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts." They would have found a naked lover's plea ("I can change I swear"); a barked dissection of capitalism ("money doesn't talk, it swears"); a broken parable, as enigmatic as a Sapphic fragment ("There must be some way out of here, said the Joker to the Thief"); and lancing accounts of injustice that the word cinematic doesn't do justice to ("The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Hurricane").



Editor Olga Vlasova, Russia Beyond:

I cannot say that I am an ardent admirer of Bob Dylan. However, if I were the Nobel Committee, I would agree on Dylan. Because we have to be objective: Bob Dylan is a broader cultural phenomenon.

The recognition of the man famous for protest songs such as “The Times They Are a-Changin’” and stream-of-consciousness compositions like “Tangled Up in Blue” as a participant of the world literary process is, in my opinion, excellent news for all living poets.

The idea of poems as song lyrics also being literature is not new. In the distant past poetry was recited only to the accompaniment of music, and the trend began to change only in Dante’s time. This is what secretary of the Swedish Academy Sara Danius meant when she said: “Homer and Sappho – they wrote poetic texts that were meant to be performed with instruments... it’s the same with Bob Dylan.”

A couple of weeks ago, just like the Nobel Committee, I also had the thought of poets being in demand for their musicality in our intensely market-oriented world. I saw an acquaintance’s poems on her Facebook page

and I was asked what I thought of them. The poems were obviously about love but were not bad.

However, I sadly had to admit that she has no chances of being published, unlike, for example, a young prose writer with the same amount of talent. The only way the young lady can become a popular poet, I thought, is if she finds some good musicians and starts writing songs.

So when the Nobel Committee announced that for the first time in its existence the prize for literature would go to a popular and acclaimed songwriter and solo artist who has been singing his poems for the last 50 years, I was not at all amazed. Perhaps the idea has been floating in the air.

However, the Nobel Committee’s unexpected decision is not only a gift and a promise of better life to the poetic community, it is in way a salvation for the prize itself. The prize can continue being given, as it should be, for contributions made to world literature and for important worldviews, and not to people who just happen to be at the right place at the right time.

High School Teacher Kay McSpadden, The Charlotte Observer:

I’ve never been what you might call a fan of Dylan – I’ve never owned his music and don’t know his lyrics by heart – but I applauded the Swedish Academy’s choice.

As an English teacher, I spend my days trying to get students to read, understand, and appreciate literature. Literature is my tool of choice to help students think clearly about their world and themselves. Literature – whether shaped into novels and plays or poetry and song lyrics – is how we know what it means to be human. More than that, it is how we learn what kind of humans we want to be.

In education, literature is often downplayed in favor of STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) curricula these days. But reading for pleasure – which for most people means reading literature – isn’t going away.

Although Dylan began his Nobel lecture with a fond call back to his musical influences, he spent most of his time talking about Moby-Dick, All Quiet on the Western Front, and The Odyssey, three pieces of classic literature that he read in school. the income of an iconic global rock star.