



Document Set 2 - Arguments Against Bob Dylan's Award of the Nobel Prize

(Side B reads first, Side A reads second)

Writer Stephen Metcalf, Slate:

Forget music, for a moment. Bob Dylan's contribution to the world is insuperably large; a solar constant, like warmth and light. You need only know that until John Lennon met Bob Dylan, he didn't believe a pop song could express more than "Love Me Do." Lennon was seething with words, class resentment, big ideas; but he had to see Dylan, to meet him in the flesh, as Melville once met Hawthorne, to know he could make of his art a functioning correlative to his inner chaos. In the coffee shop where I write these words, they're playing Bruce Springsteen's *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, and this is not only an album, not only a career, but a worldview that wouldn't exist without Dylan. Is it really such a stretch to close your eyes, butterfly effect it in your head, and imagine a world in which we didn't get to hip-hop with no Dylan?

Nonetheless, Bob Dylan is a musician, not a poet.

Bob Dylan is a genius, and for his genius, he's been rewarded in every way; with fame, money, acclaim. He deserves all of it, but he doesn't deserve the Nobel. It may be that Dylan's claim to posterity will be larger than Murakami's or Roth's (or Wilbur's or Didion's), but that isn't what is at issue in awarding the highest prize in literature to a pop musician. The objection here hinges in the definition of the word literature. You

wouldn't give the literary prize to an economist or a political saint. You shouldn't give it to Bob Dylan.

My thinking goes as follows, and who knows, I'm probably wrong. But the distinctive thing about literature is that it involves reading silently to oneself. Silence and solitude are inextricably a part of reading, and reading is the exclusive vehicle for literature.

This is historically contingent in every way: Literature as a silent and lonely activity is scarcely older than the printing press. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle once wrote, half teasingly: "It was not until the Middle Ages that people learned to read without reading aloud." Reading silently, a kind of crossroads is formed. Your voice, on the page, becomes my voice, in my head. In reading, the mind is made separate from the mechanistic and perspicuous world, and a self is formed that is not precisely in or of that world. In reading, you experience that rarest loneliness, a loneliness that reminds you: You exist.

If, reading this, you are thinking, "Ha! This is a convenient way of thinking for the least competent among us, isn't it?" I would wholeheartedly agree, only adding: We pathetic literati have a few days to pretend to world importance. We just lost another.



Editor and Author Anna North, New York Times:

Bob Dylan does not deserve the Nobel Prize in Literature.

He does deserve the many Grammys he has received, including a lifetime achievement award, which he won in 1991. He unquestionably belongs in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, into which he was inducted in 1988 along with the Supremes, the Beatles and the Beach Boys. He is a wonderful musician, a world-class songwriter and an enormously influential figure in American culture.

But by awarding the prize to him, the Nobel committee is choosing not to award it to a writer, and that is a disappointing choice.

Yes, Mr. Dylan is a brilliant lyricist. Yes, he has written a book of prose poetry and an autobiography. Yes, it is possible to analyze his lyrics as poetry. But Mr. Dylan's writing is inseparable from his music. He is great because he is a great musician, and when the Nobel committee gives the literature prize to a musician, it misses the opportunity to honor a writer.

As reading declines around the world, literary prizes are more important than ever. A big prize means a jump in sales and readership even for a well-known writer. But more than that, awarding the Nobel to a novelist or a poet is a way of affirming that fiction and poetry still matter, that they are crucial human endeavors worthy of international recognition.

Popular music is such an endeavor too, but, for the most part, it already receives the recognition it deserves. And apart from a few spoken-word awards, no one would expect the highest honors in music to go to a writer — we won't be seeing Zadie Smith or Mary Gaitskill in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

The committee probably did not mean to slight fiction or poetry with its choice. By honoring a musical icon, the committee members may have wanted to bring new cultural currency to the prize and make it feel relevant to a younger generation.

But there are many ways they could have accomplished this while still honoring a writer. They could have chosen a writer who has made significant innovations in the form, like Jennifer Egan, Teju Cole or Anne Carson. They could have selected a writer from the developing world, which remains woefully underrepresented among Nobel laureates. They could have picked a writer who has built an audience primarily online, like Warsan Shire, who became the first Young Poet Laureate of London in 2014.

Instead, the committee gave the prize to a man who is internationally famous in another field, one with plenty of honors of its own. Bob Dylan does not need a Nobel Prize in Literature, but literature needs a Nobel Prize. This year, it won't get one.



Novelist Hari Kunzru, Twitter:

Serious thread on why you're seeing writers disappointed by Dylan Nobel. It's not that we don't love "Girl from the North Country."

Literature in translation makes up 3% of US book sales, and similar percentages in other Anglophone countries.

The literature Nobel is the biggest date in the calendar for publishers of translations. Nobel win can be transformative.

Transformative for winner and publisher too. Last year Svetlana Alexievich's win put Fitzcarraldo, a great indie, on a sound footing.

Dylan's lyrics wonderful, but he's famous. I'd rather have seen boost for Archipelago, New Directions, Melville House, Dalkey, Europa, NYRB.

These publishers are among those who do important and badly rewarded work that is vital for world literature.

So you can call me 'vicious', 'ignorant' or 'bitter' because I'm not super excited at Dylan's Nobel, but we all know his records already.

People could have been introduced to Marias or Ngugi or Yan Lianke or Solstad or Ugresic instead of confirming their Dylan love. So, meh.

Sure it's not purpose of Nobel to reward small presses, and sometimes famous Anglophone writers win, but there's a big world out there.

In terms of form I think the lyric is as worthwhile as any other - Brel would have made a good Nobel laureate.

Upside: does this mean we get to have a serious conversation about Dylan as appropriator and boundaries btw that and plagiarism?

Is any previous Nobel laureate known to have incorporated so many other people's words, unattributed, into his work?

Not thinking so much of his use of the traditional folk blues corpus as the stuff people identified in *Chronicles* etc.

Is that important for Dylan as a *writer* rather than interpreter or performer?



Editor Matthew Schnipper, Pitchfork

“Is Bob Dylan great?” is not a parallel question to “Does he deserve the Nobel Prize in Literature?” As an editor at Pitchfork, I am well aware of the value and power of music, yet it was still somewhat shocking—even disappointing—to see that Dylan had won this year’s prize. His work, certainly, is monumental. His words changed songwriting—culture, even. And he has been awarded for that repeatedly in appropriate forums—with Grammys, an Oscar, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. But he is a musician, and his relationship with words is as a lyricist, someone whose prose exists inexorably with music. To read his lyrics flatly, without the sound delivering them, is to experience his art reduced.

Consider one of Dylan’s most powerful songs, “Hurricane,” about the false imprisonment of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, an anthem whose words are delivered with a rhythmic urgency that mirrored the

situation his writing described. “We wanna pin this triple murder on him!” is not the greatest sentence on its own, but rendered through the character embodied by Dylan’s voice, the line becomes fierce. Reading him is fine, but considering Dylan’s words without his music is like watching a cooking show and declaring chocolate cake superb without ever having taken a bite. Sure looks good, but is that all that makes it delicious?

Along with all the holy prestige, recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature are granted a near-million-dollar windfall. Not having an intimate understanding of Dylan’s finances—though knowing he performed at a concert with a talent budget reportedly in the tens of millions last weekend—it seems like a safe bet to say he doesn’t need the money.



Author Claire Rudy Foster, The Review Review

Dylan's receipt of the Nobel is an embarrassment. Is this the best we can do? Of all the writers in this country, all the idealists and firebrands, is Bob Dylan the best representative of what America has to offer? Thanks to his ex-girlfriend Joan Baez, Dylan took the stage in the 1960s; his evocative lyrics gave a voice to the folk movement, though he himself was strongly apolitical. "I'm not part of no movement," he said in a 1964 interview.

The songs that made him rich, famous, and the voice of the disenfranchised Boomer generation were written in a 20-month sprint over 50 years ago.

What has Dylan done lately?

Further, why reward yet another aging, wealthy white guy for something he did in his early 20s? Does Dylan even want a Nobel? Let's consider some of his contemporaries: white, commercially successful American writers over 60. I'm thinking of Ursula LeGuin and Joyce Carol Oates, who are both equally deserving and have contributed more over their decades-long careers than Dylan did in less than two. Because the Nobel's list of nominees is sealed, we won't know if these two exemplary writers were even considered for the prize for 50 years -- long after they are both dead.

In my gut, I am angriest about this award because the committee has chosen a winner who is so universally likeable. In my opinion, real artists -- the iconoclasts, the rebels -- challenge the reader. They can be appreciated but they are not necessarily appealing or accessible. A look back at previous winners, such as Doris Lessing, Jose Saramago, and

Toni Morrison, shows writers who are compelling because they are not easy to read. The Nobel Prize in Literature is to recognize "in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction." It is not supposed to be a popularity contest, and this year feels like a nod to the Great White Past instead of a serious consideration of forward-looking, meaningful work by writers, poets, and yes, songwriters, who have shown sustained dedication to society's "ideal direction."

On a personal level, this tells me that as a woman, my writing -- any woman's writing -- will never be as valuable as something a man did fifty years ago, when he was fresh out of college. It tells me that being likable holds more weight than tackling life's daily problems in my writing. I'll point out that last year's winner, Svetlana Alexievich, was chosen for "her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." Her accounts of wartime refugees' voices not only dignified creative nonfiction, but also introduced new perspectives to literature. She told the truth, daring her reader to look away. It was not likeable. It was good.

Dylan's selection affirms, for me, every rejection letter I've gotten that tells me that my characters are too difficult, or that my stories are too challenging, too bleak. "I just didn't relate," is a common refrain. Why do I have to be likeable? I wonder. Jonathan Franzen isn't likeable. Neither is Lionel Shriver -- or, for that matter, Elfriede Jelinek, the Austrian writer who won the Nobel in 1983. What happens when we stop recognizing and rewarding writing that isn't the equivalent of an easy-listening album?