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## “Counter-Narratives in Bob Dylan’s Lyrics: A Postmodernist Examination”

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### Abstract:

*This paper aims to analyse Bob Dylan’s lyrics as postmodernist texts that manifest counter-narratives, emphasising incredulity toward metanarratives,” a concept defined by Jean-François Lyotard. By scrutinising songs like Hattie Carroll,” “Who Killed Davey Moore?,” and Maggie’s Farm,” the study highlights Dylan’s critique of societal norms and injustices. These songs serve as potent counter-narratives challenging the dominant cultural narratives embedded in race, social justice, labour conditions, and individual freedom. The paper delves into various scholarly definitions of narratives to contextualise how Dylan’s work resists and subverts these prevailing stories, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of his contributions to cultural discourse.*

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, counter-narratives, postmodernism, master narratives, lyrics

This paper aims to closely read Bob Dylan’s lyrics to understand the context of counter-narratives as postmodernist text. Hence, it suggests “incredulity toward metanarratives”, defined as postmodernism (Lyotard xxiv). This paper articulates this incredulity through counter-narratives that Dylan manifests through his lyrics. Before we study Dylan’s lyrics as counter-narrative, we must know what narrative is. However, before that, it is essential to know about Bob Dylan.

Bob Dylan, a singer, lyricist and poet in his own right, was born on May 24, 1941, in Duluth, Minnesota, baptist as Robert Allen Zimmerman. A die-hard fan of Woodie Guthrie and Little Richard, Dylan also aspired to become a singer. In 1959, he started his career by giving

performances at Minneapolis clubs. In January 1961, he moved to New York. His first eponymous album, released in 1961, did not go well, but his second album, released in 1963, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan”, was appreciated. His album “Blood on the Tracks” was released in 1975, bringing him ever-growing fame. He performed at Greenwich Village, Woodstock and Newport Folk Festival at various points of time in his career. He won his first Grammy for the best vocal performance male in 1980 for “Gotta Serve Somebody”; in 1991, he was conferred with a Lifetime Achievement award by Grammy. In 1962, he officially changed his name to Bob Dylan and went electric in 1965. Although this use of electric guitar has brought more controversy than fame. His albums “The Times They Are A-Changin’”, “Another Side of Bob Dylan”, and other albums increased his fame manifold, and indeed not to forget his never-ending tour that started on June 7, 1988. Pulitzer Prize confers special citation on Bob Dylan in 2008. In 2016, he received the Nobel Prize for his poetic abilities (Manzella 98-99; Kooper).

Narrative is a broad concept interpreted in various ways. Peter Moss views it as discourse, while Lisa Roberts contrasts narrative with objective knowledge, seeing it as a form of personal meaning. Jerome Bruner highlights the multiplicity of meanings within narratives, describing them as a way of thinking and organising knowledge essential to education. Scholars like Barone Clandinin and Connelly, and Polkinghorne define narratives as stories with diachronic data, which are chronologically arranged, even if disrupted by techniques like flashbacks or flash-forwards (qtd. in Bresler 21).

The “typical stories” are known by various names, including “folk theories,” “frames,” “scenarios,” “scripts,” “mental models,” “cultural models,” “Discourse models,” and “figured worlds,” each carrying its specific nuances. These stories are stored in our minds as images, metaphors, and narratives. However, as further suggested, they are not exclusively confined to our heads but are ingrained in the social and cultural milieu (Gee 70-71). These narratives manifest in movies, songs, ads, TV and several other ways in quotidian life. They are also called “master narratives” or “grand narratives”, coined by Lyotard (Stanley 14).

In opposition to this, master narratives are counter-narratives. As hidden in the name counter-narratives, narratives that counter the postulates of master narratives are counter-narratives. They go against what is recognised, naturalised and legalised. Bob Dylan is vociferous and articulative regarding those who are marginalised. He is known for raising concern over issues like nuclear war and injustice in society, primarily related to race, colour, community and the downtrodden. The songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind”, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”, and “Masters of War”, to name a few.

Stanley states that those narratives that oppose or contradict master narratives are counter-narratives. Hence, “offer alternatives to the dominant discourse in educational research (14).”

Bob Dylan’s song “Hattie Carroll,” from his 1964 album “The Times They Are A-Changin’”, provides a poignant counter-narrative that critiques racial and social injustice in America. The song recounts the true story of Hattie Carroll, an African American barmaid who was killed by William Zantzinger, a wealthy white man, at a Baltimore hotel in 1963. Dylan’s lyrics meticulously detail the disparity in how justice is served based on race and social standing, illustrating the profound inequalities that plague the American legal system. For Dylan, “these songs were never about blame. They were more about justice (qtd. in Heylin ch. 98).”

In the song, Dylan juxtaposes the lives of Carroll and Zantzinger to emphasise the stark differences in their social positions. Hattie Carroll is depicted as a hardworking, humble woman who toils tirelessly to support her family, embodying the struggle of many African Americans facing systemic oppression and economic hardship.

“Hattie Carroll was a maid of the kitchen

She was fifty-one years old and gave birth to ten children

Who carried the dishes and took out the garbage

And never sat once at the head of the table” (Dylan)

Conversely, William Zantzinger is portrayed as an arrogant, privileged individual who abuses his power and wealth.

“William Zanzinger, who at twenty-four years

Owens a tobacco farm of six hundred acres

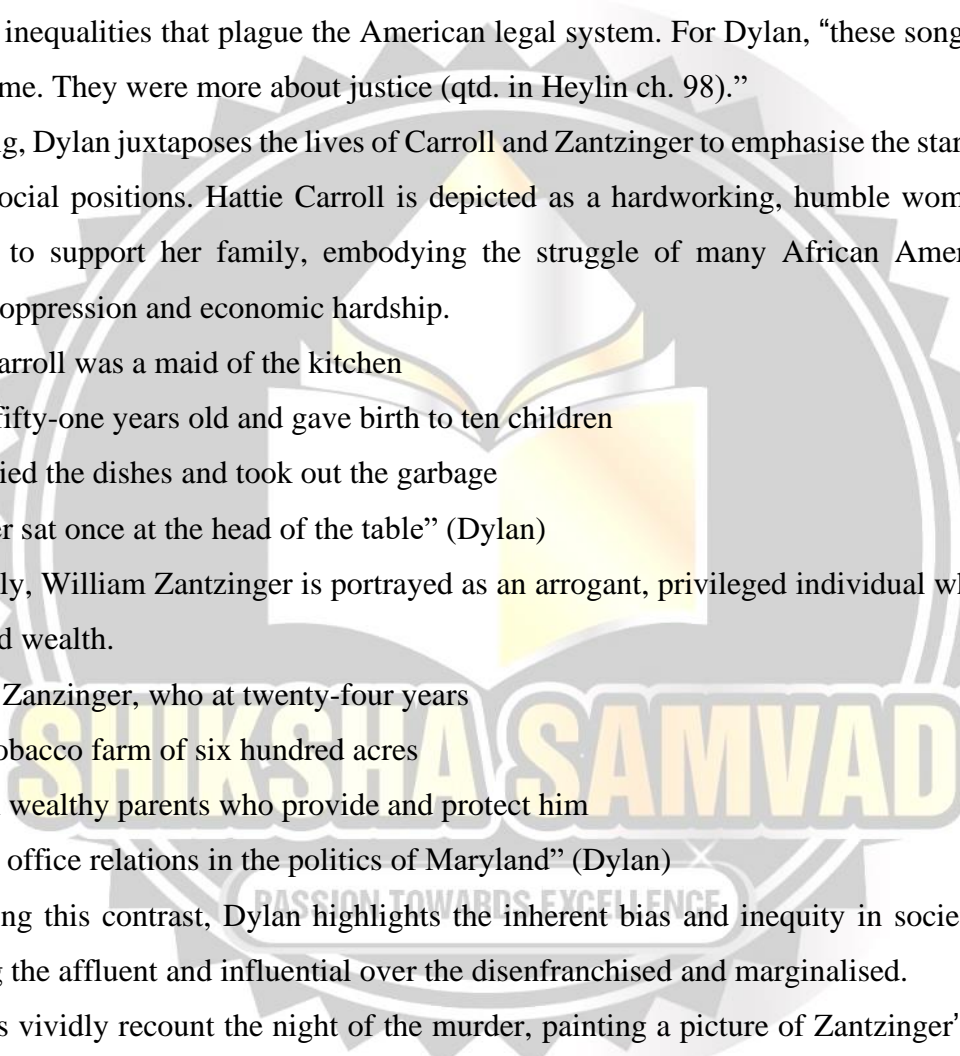
With rich wealthy parents who provide and protect him

And high office relations in the politics of Maryland” (Dylan)

By drawing this contrast, Dylan highlights the inherent bias and inequity in societal structures favouring the affluent and influential over the disenfranchised and marginalised.

The lyrics vividly recount the night of the murder, painting a picture of Zantzinger’s callousness and Carroll’s tragic fate. Dylan’s storytelling prowess shines through as he describes how Zantzinger struck Carroll with a cane, causing her death. The incident is depicted not merely as an act of individual cruelty but as a symptom of a significant, systemic issue of racial violence and injustice. Dylan’s narrative is a powerful indictment of a society where such heinous acts can occur with impunity, particularly when the perpetrator is shielded by their social status.

Dylan’s critique becomes even more pointed as he describes the judicial proceedings that followed after the killing. Despite the gravity of his crime, Zantzinger received a shockingly lenient sentence of just six months in jail: “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”. This outcome underscores the deeply entrenched racial biases within the legal system, where the lives of black individuals are undervalued, and justice is skewed in favour of the white and wealthy. Dylan’s lyrics express a profound sense of outrage and disbelief at the miscarriage of justice, serving as a rallying cry for awareness and change.

The song’s refrain, “Take the rag away from your face, now ain’t the time for your tears,” serves as a call to action. Dylan urges listeners not to be passive observers but to confront the harsh realities of racial injustice head-on. He challenges them to recognise these issues’ systemic nature and strive for a society where justice is genuinely impartial and equitable.

“Hattie Carroll” is a testament to Dylan’s social commentator and activist role. Through his lyrics, he sheds light on uncomfortable truths and galvanises his audience to question and resist societal injustices. The counter-narrative presented in “Hattie Carroll” is not just a critique of a specific incident but a broader condemnation of the pervasive racism and inequality that characterised America during the civil rights era and, unfortunately, continues to resonate today. Dylan’s powerful storytelling and evocative lyrics ensure that Hattie Carroll’s story remains a poignant indicator of the constant struggle for racial justice and equality.

Bob Dylan’s “Who Killed Davey Moore?” is a poignant exploration of the societal and moral complexities surrounding the death of the boxer Davey Moore, who died from injuries sustained in a match in 1963. The song adopts a counter-narrative approach where various stakeholders—each representing different facets of the boxing world—deny responsibility for Moore’s death, effectively shifting the blame to one another. This counter-narrative technique underscores Dylan’s critique of systemic issues in sports and society.

In the song, Dylan employs a chorus-like repetition where different characters repeatedly declare, “...It wasn’t me that made him fall / No, you can’t blame me at all” each giving their reasons why they are not to blame for Moore’s demise. The first verse presents the referee, who insists he did his job correctly and followed the rules and shifts the blame on the crowd. This justification suggests a critique of the regulatory framework within sports, implying that adherence to the rules does not necessarily equate to justice or morality. By pointing to the rules, the referee distances himself from the ethical implications of Moore’s death, highlighting a systemic detachment from individual suffering.

The third verse brings in Moore’s manager, who justifies his actions by pointing out that he did his best to prepare Moore and that it was Moore’s choice to fight. This narrative introduces the theme of personal agency within the constraints of economic necessity. The manager’s argument reflects athletes’ harsh realities, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, who may have limited opportunities outside their sport. This explanation underscores the exploitative nature of

professional boxing, where the athletes are often seen as mere commodities. “‘Not me,’ says his manager / Puffing on a big cigar” his casual way of refuting the blame sparks anger in readers. Next, Dylan gives voice to the gamblers who claim they merely placed bets, thus dissociating themselves from the direct physical harm Moore suffered. This verse critiques the spectators and broader society that profit from the sport without considering the human cost. The gamblers’ stance

“It wasn’t me that knocked him down

My hands never touched him none

I didn’t commit no ugly sin

Anyway, I put money on him to win

It wasn’t me that made him fall

No, you can’t blame me at all” (Dylan)

represents a broader public complicity in continuing dangerous sports practices driven by entertainment and financial gain.

Dylan includes the sportswriters, who claim their only role was to report the event. This claim brings attention to the media’s role in perpetuating and sensationalising violence in sports, thereby influencing public perception and acceptance of such risks. The writers’ detachment reflects a broader societal tendency to consume and normalise violence when it is mediated through entertainment and journalism. “‘Boxing ain’t to blame / There’s just as much danger in a football game”.

The last verse features Moore’s opponent, who argues that he was doing what he was trained to do—fight and win. This verse delves into the ethics of competition and the inherent violence in sports like boxing. By presenting the opponent’s perspective, Dylan highlights the paradox of a sport that glorifies physical prowess and victory yet can result in tragic consequences.

“I hit him, yes, it’s true

But that’s what I am paid to do

Don’t say ‘murder,’ don’t say ‘kill’

It was destiny, it was God’s will” (Dylan)

Through this multi-perspective narrative, Dylan does not provide a single answer to the question of who is responsible for Davey Moore’s death. Instead, he exposes the complex interplay of individual actions and systemic structures that collectively contribute to such tragedies. The song is a powerful critique of the boxing industry and the broader societal values prioritising profit and spectacle over human life and dignity. Dylan’s counter-narrative approach compels listeners to reflect on their complicity and the ethical dimensions of their entertainment choices. Dylan’s lyrics act as a catalyst for changing readers’ perceptions. Hence, to achieve profound cultural change, it

is essential to spread counter-narratives—stories that challenge or balance the prevailing master narratives of culture, thereby diminishing the influence of prejudicial stereotypes (Abbott ch. 13). Bob Dylan's song "Maggie's Farm," released on his 1965 album "Bringing It All Back Home", is a powerful counter-narrative that critiques oppressive labour conditions, societal expectations, and the conformity demanded by institutions. Through its vivid imagery and biting lyrics, Dylan's song conveys a message of rebellion and personal liberation.

"Maggie's Farm" opens with the narrator's declaration of refusing to work on Maggie's farm anymore, a metaphor for the oppressive systems and societal norms that stifle individual freedom and creativity: "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more / No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more". The song's protagonist is fed up with the monotonous and exploitative conditions imposed by the farm, symbolising any institution or system that enforces conformity and exploitation. By rejecting this life, the narrator embarks on a journey of self-assertion and resistance.

The lyrics present various characters, each representing different societal control and exploitation facets. "Maggie's brother" symbolises the enforcement of conformity and surveillance, constantly monitoring and criticising the narrator's every move. This enforcement reflects the broader societal tendency to suppress individual expression and creativity, urging people to adhere to established norms and expectations. Dylan critiques this stifling atmosphere, advocating an individual's agency to think and act independently.

"Maggie's Ma" represents the hypocritical moral authority within society. She says, "Well, she talks to all the servants / About man and God and law", embodying the self-righteous figures who impose moral standards on others while failing to recognise their flaws and contradictions. This character's portrayal highlights the duplicity and moral superiority often exhibited by those in positions of authority. Dylan's critique extends to the broader hypocrisy within societal and institutional structures that dictate behaviour and morality.

"Maggie's Pa" epitomises the economic exploitation inherent in the system. He is described as a brute who exploits the workers without regard for their well-being: "Well, he puts his cigar / Out in your face just for kicks". This character embodies the capitalist drive for profit at the expense of human dignity and freedom. Dylan's depiction of Maggie's Pa reflects his disdain for the dehumanising aspects of capitalist exploitation, emphasising the need for liberation from such oppressive structures.

The refrain, "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more," reinforces the song's theme of defiance and liberation. It is a rallying cry for those trapped by societal expectations and oppressive labour conditions. Dylan's repetition of this line underscores the determination to break free from these constraints and assert individuality and autonomy.

“Maggie’s Farm” can also be interpreted as a reflection of Dylan’s experiences within the music industry and the expectations of fans and the media. Just as the narrator rejects the farm’s oppressive conditions, Dylan desires to break away from the folk music scene’s rigid expectations and explore new artistic directions. This personal dimension adds another layer to the song’s counter-narrative, highlighting the struggle for artistic freedom and authenticity.

In conclusion, Bob Dylan’s “Maggie’s Farm” is a compelling counter-narrative that critiques various societal oppression and exploitation forms. The song advocates for personal liberation, creativity, and defiance against conformity through its vivid characters and powerful refrain. Dylan’s lyrics challenge listeners to question the structures that constrain them and to assert their individuality in the face of societal pressure. “Maggie’s Farm” remains a timeless anthem of rebellion and self-determination, resonating with anyone who has ever felt the need to break free from oppressive systems.

Consequently, counter-narratives that individuals share and embody often serve as direct or indirect resistance to the prevailing cultural stories (Bamberg and Andrews 1). Dylan uses his lyrics to point at these counter-narratives and questions what narratives are naturalised and eulogised in society and culture.

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