

Bob Dylan's "This Dream of You" – an analysis by Kees de Graaf.

This song is the only one on the album *'Together through Life'* (2009) of which both the music and the lyrics were composed by Bob Dylan; the rest of the lyrics of the album were co-written with Robert Hunter. It is a song that one hand deals with the fragility and mortality of the poet's earthly existence which tends to drive him into the morals of despair, and on the other hand it deals with a faint, wavering and distant hope; a hope which is yet strong enough to keep him living on.

As is the case in many Dylan songs, it is a debatable question as to who the "You" in the song might refer. When we take a look at the verses, we have good reasons to assume that the "You" might be Jesus or God. The mood of the song is definitely spiritual and there are a lot of Biblical connotations in the song; on the other hand, the song does not entirely exclude the possibility that the "You" may be a girl or a woman or some other person. This has one major advantage: it makes this song accessible and palatable to the public at large. Let's have a closer look at the verses to see if we can back up our stance that the "You" may indeed be Jesus or God.

"How long can I stay in this nowhere café, 'fore night turns into day, I wonder why I'm so frightened of dawn". The picture that is drawn is in some sort of a way reminiscent of the ["Blood in my eyes"](#) video. In our imagination we see some weird stranger, sitting all by himself at a table, drinking whiskey in a shabby café in the middle of nowhere and talking to himself in a monologue. It is way past midnight, long after closing time and the dim light of dawn is already on the horizon. The waitress has already silently urged him to leave and although it seems - *"there is nobody in the place but me and her"* - (as it says in the song *"Highlands"*), he still lingers on and on. Why is the poet so frightened of the dawn? He looks as if he is of a retiring disposition, shy and introvert, and he knows that as soon as another dreadful day starts, he cannot escape having to see and deal with people around him, people whom he does not trust and whom he fears. People of whom he said in the song *"Cold Irons bound"* - *"I thought some of them were friends of mine, I was wrong about 'em all"*. No wonder that such an isolated and deeply lonesome person has no one left to turn to but God, as he says in the renewed version of *"Gonna change my way of thinking"*: *"Oh LORD, You know I've got no friend but You"*. We must realize that Dylan has never been a member of any church. He can best be described as a stand-alone messianic Jew. Although he calls his fellow believers *"All my loyal and much-loved companions, they approve of me and share my code"* (*Ain't Talking*) and *"I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me"* (*"Mississippi"*) he seems to do without the indispensable support of a brotherhood in church. The resulting solitary life style which – from a poetical point of view- may be his strength, may make him at the same time – from a Biblical point of view - very vulnerable and excessively pessimistic in matters of faith. His genius is both his strength and weakness.

It is the reason too why the refrain says: ***"All I have and all I know, is this dream of you which keeps me living on"***. The poet seems to describe the whole concept of Jesus or God as "a dream" which keeps him living on. When he says "dream" he does not mean "dream" in

the common, literal, sense of the word, in the same way as he used the word “dream” in the song *“I feel a change coming on”* where Dylan says: *“Well now what’s the use in dreaming, you got better things to do, dreams never did work for me anyway, even when they did come true”*. In meaning the word “dream”, as used in this song, comes close to the word “vision”, or even better, to the word “hope”. “Hope” is often used colloquially expressing uncertainty, with no reference to the future, but that is not what is intended here. “Hope” in the Biblical sense expresses a high degree of certainty, and is described as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (Hebrews 6:19). I think that this is what the poet may have had in mind when he says: ***“All I have and all I know, is this dream of you which keeps me living on”***. This dream is like a vision to which he hangs on, and although this dream is in some sort of a way a last resort. yet he ***knows*** for sure, and he has high hopes and feels confident, that although he is forsaken by all of his friends, Jesus or God will *never* forsake him.

“There’s a moment when all old things become new again, but that moment might have come and gone”. The meaning of these words comes close to what Dylan says in the song “Pressing On”: *“What’s lost has been found, what’s to come has already been”*. Very likely the poet had the book of Ecclesiastes in mind when he wrote: ***“There’s a moment when all old things become new again, but that moment might have come and gone”***. It says in Ecclesiastes 1:9, 10: *“History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, ‘Here is something new!’ But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new”*. (New Living Translation). In the eyes of the poet, everything on earth, even new things, are of a temporary nature and seem meaningless, futile and soon replaced by new things and are in the end forgotten. (Ecclesiastes 1:1). It may be an attempt too to relativize his own work. Charges of plagiarism have dogged Bob Dylan throughout his career. Quite wrongly so! We have to remember that all artists draw from all sorts of earlier sources to produce new art and by doing so, one may say that ***“old things become new again”***. But no matter how sublime the poet’s power of expression may be, they offer him no permanent solace, no lasting inner peace. The thrill which new things bring goes by, ***that moment might have come and gone***. In the end he is thrown back on what is left inside of him. The only thing the poet finds left inside of him is this dream, this hope of God, the bargain he made with God and about which he talked about in his 2004 CBS [interview](#), the deal he made with God, only these things enable him to carry on and not give up.

“I look away, but I keep seeing it, I don’t want to believe, but I keep believing it, shadows dance upon the wall, shadows that seem to know it all”. We have good reasons to believe that here Dylan speaks about his relation to God, about his faith in God or Jesus. One of the main characteristics of faith in God is that you have to surrender to God and trust your fate in the hands of God. Man, however, has a natural tendency *not* to do this and to resist the presence of God in his life. And this natural tendency ***‘to look away’*** when God looks at you, remains in a human being throughout his whole life, no matter if you are a believer or not. In Roman Romans 10:20 God says: *“I was found by people who were not looking for me, I showed myself to those who were not asking for me”*. The poet experiences the same thing. His poetical gifts – *“my thoughts so sublime”* as he calls his talents in the song “Mississippi” –

his world-wide fame as a musician and as **the** songwriter and poet of this and last century give him all the reasons **'to look away'** and not to believe and trust in God but only to trust himself and to rely on his own capabilities to find his way in life. What person, who is in a position like Dylan, would prefer the folly of the cross of Jesus by following him, to the all the riches and fame and glory which is at his feet in this world. However, no matter how often the poet looks away from God, God comes back to him and makes him see again. No matter how often he says: "I don't want to believe all this stuff", God comes back to him and makes him believe. Elsewhere Dylan calls this 'saving grace'.

"Shadows dance upon the wall, shadows that seem to know it all". This line may be inspired by the poet S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834). In his poem "A Day-Dream" we find:

*"The shadows dance upon the wall,
By the still dancing fire-flames made;
And now they slumber, moveless all!
And now they melt to one deep shade!"*

Although the poet's heart continuously tries to have him look away from God and not to believe, the dancing shadows upon the wall tell him a completely different story. They for-shadow that something new is coming which will be everlasting. In "Tomorrow is a long time" Dylan wrote:

"There's beauty in the silver, singing river. There's beauty in the sunrise in the sky". The beautiful sunset, the falling shadows dancing on the wall, the whole creation reflecting the beauty and glory of God, confirms and proves that He is there, God does exist, even the shadows **"seem to know it all"**.

It is the reason why the poet wonders: **"Am I too blind to see, is my heart playing tricks on me, I'm lost in the crowd, all my tears are gone"**. These words remind us of two Dylan songs.

The first one is "Heart of Mine" which says *"Heart of mine so malicious and so full of guile, give you an inch and you'll take a mile, don't let yourself fall, don't let yourself stumble, heart of mine"*.

The second one is "Forgetful Heart" where it says: *"Forgetful heart, lost your power of recall, every little detail, you don't remember at all"*. Ever since man fell into sin, there is a struggle going on in a man's heart. If a man's heart would not have been affected by sin, he would immediately see, that when a takes a look into the sky and sees all the stars and the immense universe, when he sees the pure beauty of creation, that there **is** a God, a creator of all things. But sin tears a man's heart into the wrong direction, sin blurs his vision, **"he is too blind to see"**, he allows his sinful heart to **"play tricks on him"**, so that he does not see the reality, he does not see what is so obvious and what is right in front of him: *"Freedom just around the corner for you"* ("Jokerman").

"I'm lost in the crowd, all my tears are gone", aggravates his pain. *"He feels like a stranger nobody sees"* ("Mississippi"). He walks the streets where nobody seems to be going anywhere. He feels completely lost, with no direction home. I think that this feeling may have to do with what we wrote above. We wrote that Dylan has never been a member of any church and that he seems to do without the indispensable support of a brotherhood in church. His solitary life style, the reclusion, and the impenetrable personality of his poetic mind make him feel very lonely, as if he is lost in a big crowd, just a number without support from anyone. Deep down inside he cried so often that all **"his tears are gone"**, he is just feeling vacant and numb. In those dreadful circumstances he has nothing left to turn to, and no other option left but to persevere in his faith: **"All I have and all I know, is this dream of you, which keeps me living on"**

“Everything I touch seems to disappear, everywhere I turn you are always here, I’ll run this race until my earthly death, I’ll defend this place with my dying breath”

“Everything I touch seems to disappear” reminds us of Dylan’s song *“Everything is broken”*.

This song deals with the fragility and decay of life in general. The brokenness of life is in material things: *“broken dishes, broken parts, broken cutters broken saws”* etc., and in immaterial things: *“Streets are filled with broken hearts, broken words never meant to be spoken, everything is broken”*. Dylan quite often draws from the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says: *“Everything is meaningless,” “completely meaningless!”* Nothing in this life is lasting. Today you may think you can touch and possess things, tomorrow they may have disappeared and vanished into oblivion, there is nothing you really can take for granted under the sun. On the other hand: God is *always* near; that is what the shadows that dance upon the wall tell him and that is the reason why he now says: ***“everywhere I turn you are always here”***. Definitely Psalm 139:7-12 shines through here: *“I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night—but even in darkness I cannot hide from you”*(New Living Translation)

When Dylan wrote this line he may also have been inspired by the poem Anthony F. Neiland wrote in 1983 titled: ***“Lord, You Are Always Near”***. This poem says:

*“Though many times I turn from you,
Still you understand when I’m in need of you;
Lord, you are always near to forgive,
Lord, you are always near to be with”*.

“I’ll run this race until my earthly death, I’ll defend this place with my dying breath” Life is a hard and difficult road the poet has to walk. Here life compared to a race which you have to run till you die. I Corinthians 9:24, 25 refers to this race: *“Don’t you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!. All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.”* Miserably though as the poet may feel during this race, yet – like most human beings- he is chained to the earth and he is inclined to hang on to life as long as he can, ready to defend his life and that is why he says: ***“I’ll defend this place with my dying breath”*** This line may be read against the background of William Blake’s *“Auguries of Innocence”* where we read: *“Now I see that the mourning burdens so much, would peace have come sooner with death’s biting touch? “Your safe!” I had uttered with my last dying breath. Is life with such sadness better than death?”*

“From a cheerless room in a curtained gloom, I saw a star from heaven fall, I turned and looked again but it was gone”. This line seems to be inspired by the poet Henry Timrod. His poem *“Serenade”* has:

“Hide, happy damask, from the stars,

*What sleep enfolds behind your veil,
But open to the fairy cars
On which the dreams of midnight sail;
And let the zephyrs rise and fall
About her in the **curtained gloom**,
And then return to tell me all
The silken secrets of the room".*

From an earthly perspective, it is obvious that the poet is in a dreadful position. Here on earth it is doom alone that counts. The words "**From a cheerless room in a curtained gloom**" emphasize what Dylan once wrote in the song "Rolling and Tumbling": "*The night is filled with shadows, the years are filled with early doom*". But amidst the darkness of his mind, there is suddenly hope that, when he sees a star from heaven fall, something tangible and visible is about to occur, the curtain in the cheerless room is lifted and something is going to happen to which he may connect. When he says: "**I saw a star from heaven fall**" this looks like a *shooting star*, a cosmic event, a sign that the Apocalypse must be near. In his song 'Shooting Star' Dylan connects this notion of a shooting star with the Latter Day : "*as the last fire truck from hell goes rolling by, all good people are praying, it is the Last Temptation, the Last Account, last time you might hear the Sermon of the Mount*".

This uplifting experience, however, of this shooting star lasts only for a brief moment: "**I turned and looked again but it was gone**". Disappointment shines through, the whole event was "*nothing that would pass inspection*" (as expressed in the song "Series of Dreams"). As soon as the falling star had appeared, it was gone again. It is as if the poet pinches himself and squeals: "Is this for real?". The poet is not allowed to hang on for long to something tangible like a shooting star. He must return to what may seem a last resort: "**This dream of you**" but what in the end proves to be, not only to be his only comfort but also the only way in which he can be redeemed: "**All I have and all I know, is this dream of You, which keeps me living on**".

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