

Lyric analysis of Bob Dylan's "When the night comes falling from the sky".

This song was first released on the album 'Empire Burlesque' (1985). There is an earlier, much different version of the song, which was later released on 'The Bootleg Series' volume 1-3'. John Bauldie, in the accompanying notes to the Bootleg series version of the song, quite rightly wrote in 1991: *'it's remarkable to remember that this is a take which was presumably judged as not being good enough for release, merely a workout, and yet Dylan sings wonderfully. The song seems capable of kicking itself into ever-higher gear, and as the band recognizes it, so does Dylan, who gets audibly more and more excited as the song progresses'*. In comparison, the Empire Burlesque version is much more easy going and lacklustre. This outtake however, is full of apocalyptic menace and fire. This is the reason why I prefer the 'Bootleg Series' version and in my analysis I will follow the lyrics of the Bootleg series version.

What is this song about? The 'woman', which in Dylan's earlier works may be seen much more as a goddess, has more and more turned into an evil power, certainly ever since his conversion to Christianity in the late seventies. Over the years, the 'woman' or so-called 'love' is more and more seen as an expression of selfish lust, a force which continuously distracts him and tries to lure him into the morals of despair. Yet he shows an ambiguous attitude towards this force. On the one hand he makes it clear that he now lives in a completely different world and is continuously involved in a quest to give up 'the ways of the flesh', on the other hand he is still very much attracted to his former way of living and thinking. We find this ambiguity, this struggle, in many a song, also in this one. Let's see how this works out in the lyrics.

"If you look out across the fields, see me returning. Smoke is in your eyes, you draw a smile. From the fireplace where now my letters to you are burning, you've had time to think about it for a while". Satan did this once. Satan crossed the fields of the earth and reported his findings to God (Job 1:7). Here however, it is as if Jesus speaks through his mouth of Dylan. He immediately takes us in our mind to what will happen on the Latter Day. Revelation 1: 7 says: *"Look! He (Jesus) comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him—even those who pierced him. And all the nations of the world will mourn for him". "The same way I leave here, will be the way that I came"* Dylan would later on write, obviously about Jesus, in a poetical inversion when he composed the song "If you ever go to Houston", reflecting Acts 1:11: *"Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"*. In the poet's imagination that moment has now

come. It is as if Jesus says: 'be on the alert, look out across the fields, look up into the sky, I may return at any moment now'. **"Smoke is in your eyes, you draw a smile"** seems to be inspired by an old song called "Smoke gets in your eyes", written by Otto Harbach for the 1933 operetta Roberta. In the original lyrics it says: "Yet today, my love has flown away, I am without my love. Now laughing friends deride tears I cannot hide, so I smile and say when a lovely flame dies, smoke gets in your eyes". The notion seems clear. It expresses what Dylan wrote in 'What Good am I? : 'I laugh in the face of what sorrow brings'. Judgement Day has arrived and although the smoke of the fire which accompanies this day is still visible and hurts people's eyes, people draw a frozen smile, as if they are unwilling to admit defeat. Jesus goes on to speak through the mouth of Dylan and says: **"From the fireplace where now my letters to you are burning, you've had time to think about it for a while"**. Dylan may have had in mind the seven letters which Jesus sent to the seven angels of the seven churches of which we read in the book of Revelation, chapter 2 and 3. These letters were sent and meant to admonish and encourage these churches –in fact all churches of all ages - to keep on following the Lord, but it appeared that over the centuries, these warnings of Jesus were thrown to the winds and disregarded, these letters were thrown into the fireplace where they were burnt to such an extent that Jesus had to complain: "But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?" (Luke 18:8). Now almost two thousand years have passed since Jesus sent these letters and that is why Jesus says: **you've had time to think about it for a while** which means: "I gave you time enough to repent but you chose not to do so, time has run out now, now I'm telling you that **I've walked two hundred miles, now look me over, It's the end of the chase and the moon is high**". "I've walked two hundred miles" is really a metaphorical expression meaning: "I've gone a long way, I've gone to great lengths to salvage you, I did not only walk two hundred miles, I have even waited two centuries and now you see me coming across the fields and from the skies, **look me over**, see how majestic I am, I've come to the end of my trail, **it's the end of the chase**, the game is through, it is time for the few to judge the many". **"The moon is high"** serves to indicate that the celestial bodies are involved at the Latter Day. Although the moon will be high at the Latter Day, yet it will be darkened as Jesus says in Matthew 24:29: "Immediately after the anguish of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken". **"It don't matter who loves who, either you'll love me or I'll love you"**. Here Dylan quotes the Humphrey Bogart film "Maltese Falcon" in which is said "I don't care who loves who...maybe you love me and maybe I love you"; Dylan

however, seems to use this quote for his own purposes in the song, i.e. to express what will happen with love as soon as time turns into eternity, on and after the Latter Day, when the night comes falling from the sky. As long as we live under the sun, there are all kinds of 'love'; matrimonial love, love between brothers and sisters, parents and children etc. In eternity however, a completely new situation will arise as we may read in Matthew 22:30: *"For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven"*. In eternity love will be of one kind, love will fulfil all people, not the kind of love we are used to but a love which will be much deeper than we ever can experience on earth, a love which will reflect the eternal love and friendship and companionship which has existed for all eternity between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It may be the reason why the poet says that in eternity love will be such an overwhelming phenomenon that one may truly say that ***"It don't matter who loves who, either you'll love me or I'll love you"***, love will be all around us. This is what will happen to the children of God ***'when the night comes falling from the sky'***. The 'night' may be a metaphor for the Latter Day here. This night will not come gradually, like the twilight, but it will come suddenly, it will literally fall from the sky. It will come –as I Corinthians 15:52 says – *"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed"*, this is exactly what will happen ***"when the night comes falling from the sky"***

'I can see through your walls and I know you're hurting. Sorrow covers you up like a cape. Only yesterday I know that you've been flirting with disaster that you somehow managed to escape'. The poet sees his beloved in hell. She cannot see him but he can see her, he ***'can see through her walls'***, he experiences a vision which you normally cannot see on earth with your natural eyes. It is as if the camera now zooms into a scene which is very much reminiscent of the parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man as written in the gospel of Luke (16:19-31). It is as if we are invited to *'look into the fiery furnace and to see the rich man without any name'*. If there is any place where you are covered with sorrow and where suffering fits you like a glove, this place is in hell. The tormented rich man in hell begs: *'send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue for I am tormented in this flame'*. The rich man may add: *'All I see is heat and flame'* But it is as if Abraham says: *'there ain't no going back when the foot of pride comes down'* Communication is no longer possible: *'Don't look for me, I see you, there is this great gulf fixed between you and me'* Oh yes, it was only yesterday, in this life on earth that everything seemed quite the opposite, but the rich man had been ***'flirting with***

disaster' when he did all this injustice to the poor Lazarus. It looked as if the rich man somehow **'managed to escape'** judgement and disaster when after his luxurious life, he had that exuberant funeral but it is now time to face the bare facts. Elsewhere Dylan writes: *'God knows you ain't gonna be taking nothing with you when you go'*. Whether you are rich or poor in this life, in the end it does not matter anymore. The same thing the rich man has experienced now seems to have happened to the poet's beloved. That is why the poet goes on to say **' Well, I can't provide for you no easy answers. Who are you that I should have to lie? You know everything, my love. Down below and up above, when the night comes falling from the sky'**. Jesus once said: *"For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all"* (Mat 10:26). There is no need to beat around the bush any longer, the time for easy solutions has passed, the truth has to be faced. There is no sense in telling lies anymore because when the night comes falling from the sky, the truth will be known to all. Here on earth, **'down below'**- just like the rich man- you were able to keep up appearances, you thought you had it all and - just like the rich man did to poor Lazarus, even here in hell **'up above'**, you think you can order me to do things for you, but you have to keep in mind that now there is a large gulf between you and me, there is nothing left I can do for you , now is time for your tears, the night has fallen from the sky.

"I can hear your trembling heart beat like a river and recently you thought you'd seen it all. But you're disappointed now in those who did not deliver, but it was you who set yourself up for a fall". In this episode the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke Chapter 16) still lingers in the background. There is a wall between the poet and his beloved. He can not only see but also feel her pain, fear and agony; he can even feel her troubled heart beat like a wild river. Only yesterday she was living a life full of wealth and luxury and she thought she had everything under control, she needed nothing from anyone, she had seen it all and apparently was in a position to order people to do things for her. But now, up above here in hell, she has lost the high position which she recently had on earth. Also the rich man in hell was no longer in a position to give orders to poor Lazarus. Abraham repudiated the rich man and said to him: *"Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish"* (Luke 16:25). It is as if Abraham says: 'you have no reason to be disappointed that Lazarus no longer delivers. During your lifetime you had all the opportunities and all time in the world to help and to do justice to poor Lazarus but you refused to do so. Your contempt for poor Lazarus and your continuous refusal to help him is the reason for your downfall and that is

entirely your own fault; ***it was you and no one else who set yourself up for a fall***". You cannot go on for ever defying doing justice on earth, when you do that you set yourself up for a fall and the outcome will be that *'one day you open up your eyes (in hell), and you'll see where you are'*, but then it will be too late.

"I've seen thousands who could have overcome the darkness, for the love of a lousy buck, I've watched them die. Stick around, baby, we're not through, don't look for me, I'll see you, when the night comes falling from the sky".

It is said that 'Achluphobia', or the fear of the dark, puts many children and even some adults into terror. While many children grow out of it, some 28% of adults still have some sort of anxiety-related disorder. True as this may be, it is not this kind of darkness and fear, which the poet has in mind here. 'Darkness' here reflects what is said in Colossians 1:13 *"For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son"*. The kingdom of darkness represents hell. I Tim 6:10 says: *'the love of money is the root of all evil'*. Ultimately, the love of money, the love for a lousy buck caused the rich man to end up in hell. Nowadays the poet sees the same thing happening all around him. Many people could have been saved but the love of money prevented them from overcoming the kingdom of darkness and entering into the kingdom of love and light. It is true what Dylan wrote many years earlier: *'he not busy being born is busy dying'*. ***'The love of a lousy buck'*** seems to be inspired by a film called 'On the Waterfront'. 'On the Waterfront' is a 1954 American drama film about union violence and corruption among longshoremen. There is a dialogue in the film in which Karl Malden says: *"You want to know what's wrong with our waterfront? It's the love of a lousy buck. It's making love of a buck---the cushy job---more important than the love of man!"*

'Stick around' means "Stay put in the corner here!"; "Stick around and you will learn something!, ***we're not through***, we are not finished yet. Over here in hell, the tables are turned. You cannot bully me any longer like you once did when we were on earth, I can't hear you anymore, and from now on you have to listen to what I say. ***Don't look for me I'll see you***, is again a quote from the Humphrey Bogart film "Maltese Falcon" here it means that there is a large gulf between you and me, I can see you in hell but you cannot see me, you cannot communicate with me, for all eternity you're completely stuck. This is exactly what is going to happen ***'when the night comes falling from the sky'***.

"In your teardrops, I can see my own reflection, luck was with me when I crossed the borderline. I don't want to be a fool that's starving for affection, I

don't want to drown in someone else's wine". You can see your own reflection in the mirror. Her tears are so big and intense that he can see his own reflection in those tears, like looking into a mirror. It is really all buckets of tears here. He sees his own reflection also means that he sees his own sorrow and grief, about the situation she is in now, reflected in her tears. ***'Luck was with me when I crossed the borderline'***, the Empire Burlesque version has: ***'It was on the northern border of Texas where I crossed the line'*** is a metaphor to show that at a certain point during her lifetime, he was lucky enough to get away from her and to set himself free. On border towns Dylan is said to have said *"You feel things and you're not quite sure what you feel. But it follows your every move."* By crossing the borderline the poet was lucky enough to break away from her physically, yet mentally he is very much attached to her.

"I don't want to be a fool that's starving for affection" reminds us of the poet Spenser who once said: *"Most wretched man, That to affections does the bridle lend"*. The Scriptures say that a ***fool*** is a person who acts contrary to moral and religious wisdom and who ends up dead. The poet seems to struggle with this misplaced affection, lust which will ultimately lead him to death. He cries out the same warning as in *'Don't fall apart on me tonight'*: *'No more decadence and charm, no more affection that's misplaced girl'*.

"I don't want to drown in someone else's wine" may either mean that he is not willing to fall victim to the delight of others –the satanic powers that urge him to give in to the powers of the flesh –or some vague reference to the blood of Christ. In *'Tight connection to my Heart'* Dylan wrote *'Never could learn to drink that blood and call it wine'*. In Matthew 26:27 it says: *'And he (Jesus) took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said, "Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people"*. The meaning here may be that if he gives in to her, the blood of Christ will do him no good. The blood (the wine) which was meant to salvage him will be the cause of his ultimate spiritual death.

"For all eternity I think I will remember that whirlpool of light that's in your eye".

Again, the poet focusses on what will happen in all eternity. In eternity there is a large gulf between the two them which cannot be fixed. Yet it will be a narrow escape from her. Her life – some hear 'life' instead of 'light' here – is like a whirlpool that sucks all life out of him, just like a black hole in universe absorbs all energy of a galaxy. This whirlpool is like that temptation's angry flame which tried to drag him into the morals of despair. He did not give in, but it was a narrow escape and for all eternity he will remember the power of force she had on him.

“You will seek me and you'll find me in the wasteland of your mind, when the night comes falling from the sky”. He fears that she will end up in hell. And just like the rich man in hell (Luke 16), in vain reached out to poor Lazarus for help, her attempts to reach out for him will fail. Yes, she will find him, but it will be in ***‘the wasteland of her mind’***. A wasteland is an uninhabited wilderness that is worthless for cultivation. She will find him but she will be unable to get into contact with him and reap the fruits of such an encounter, it will all be in vain. Dylan may have been inspired by T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" of which the critic Joseph King wrote that it *‘demonstrates a religious sentiment about the increasing lack of restraint in human sexuality. The reader experiences a morose overtone from the title of the poem to its almost nonsensical conclusion as Eliot describes this fantastic yet hauntingly familiar wasteland. The oncoming sexual revolution appeared imminent as a reaction to the repressive Victorian society of the past generations. Eliot sensed the changing world and forged this poem to strike at the heart of this growing trend of immorality.’*

“Well, I gave to you my heart like buried treasure, but suffering seems to fit you like a glove, I’m so tired of those who use forbidden pleasure, who think they've got a monopoly on love”.

Some hear here: Well I gave to you my heart without bad intention. Since there is no alternate transcription of the song, this may also be possible.

‘A buried treasure’ is usually defined as a surprising piece of code found in some computer program. The expression ‘A buried treasure’ may be used sarcastically, because what is found is anything but a treasure. Anyway, ‘buried treasure’ almost always needs to be dug up and removed. In slang ‘buried treasure’ may denote yet-to-be burnt weed found at the bottom of a deep bowl, usually covered by layers of ash. Furthermore Jesus speaks of a ‘buried treasure in Matthew 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field. When a man discovered it, he buried it again”.

Within the context of the song ***‘buried treasure’*** may mean that in the poet’s heart there is something very precious. This treasure may be faith in God. The treasure is buried deep in his heart, so it is not easy to dig it up but if she would have done her utmost, she would have found it. But she refused to do so and now it is too late, all that remains for her is eternal suffering, a suffering which is all around her and ***seems to fit her like a glove***. Whereas peace, joy and delight fit those who are in heaven like a glove, those who are in hell fit suffering like a glove. Which one will fit you is a matter of choice, a choice you have to make here on earth. It is either one or the other (but one cannot say neither of the two).

“ I’m so tired of those who use forbidden pleasure, who think they've got a

monopoly on love". Some hear Dylan sing: "*I'm so tired of those who use you for their own pleasure*", but this seems less appropriate. **'Forbidden pleasure'** reminds us of the forbidden fruits of paradise. In "TV Talking song" Dylan warns us that watching TV will "*Lead you to the land of forbidden fruits*". The forbidden fruits of paradise were a delight to the eyes and very tempting. Eve fell for the temptation of the devil and ate the forbidden fruits and by doing so dragged all mankind into sin. The core of all sin is separating the gift from the Creator of the gift and using the gift for one's own pleasure, as a stand-alone item. This is exactly what those do who use **forbidden pleasure**. They have sex without love and without an embedding in a relationship of enduring love, loyalty and companionship, and that is what **forbidden pleasure** really is all about. Those advocates of forbidden pleasure make matters worse by claiming that this way of practising love is the only way of expressing love, **they think they've got a monopoly on love**, they look down in contempt on those prudish people, who reject free sex and who still connect love and sex. The poet is sick and tired of those advocates of free love and sex and that is why he ends the song with an unequivocal statement.

"Well, this time I'm asking for freedom, freedom from a world which you deny. And you'll give it to me now, I'll take it anyhow, when the night comes falling from the sky. This last verse has the force of an ultimatum; it is full of apocalyptic fire. The song reaches its climax. For him it is a matter of life or death. He does not want to abandon her but at the same time he demands freedom. He demands freedom to serve the Lord. He lives in a quite different world than she does. She constantly refuses to accept the existence of the spiritual world he lives in. He feels he has to make a choice. She must accept the reality of this spiritual world and if not he has to leave her. One thing is clear to him: he will **not** abandon his faith and if she is not willing to accept that, he must leave her, no matter how painful such a decision is. The bottom line is that if he has to make a choice between her and God, he will chose for God. **When the night comes falling from the sky** – the Latter Day is on the doorstep –he wants to make a clear statement about his dedication to God, this dedication is straightforward, plain and irrefutable and if he has to give up his beloved for this dedication he will do so, no matter how suffering and agony it will cost.