

Bob Dylan: 'Standing in the doorway'

An analysis by Kees de Graaf

***I'm walking through the summer nights
The jukebox playing low
Yesterday everything was going too fast
Today it's moving too slow
I got no place left to turn
I got nothing left to burn***

We find this song on the album 'Time out of Mind'. One of the themes of the album 'Time out of mind' is permanent movement.

The poet is always restlessly under way to some sort of uncertain destination, hoping maybe to find peace at last. Maybe he will succeed. He started to 'walk through streets that are dead' and finally ends up - though by one step at a time - in the Highlands where his heart is. The only place left to go. But here he walks through the hot summer night, the heat rising in his eyes. He feels terribly bad, his mood is in a minor key, the jukebox playing low, the drum banging slowly, the fife playing lowly, but no song in his heart this time. Once when he experienced the sunny side of love, time was going too fast, but now with all those tears time is moving too slow, nobody around to wipe the tears from his eyes. Time drags when there is agony. She is gone and he is stuck, no place left to turn, all bridges crossed burnt.

***Don't know if I saw you, I would kiss you or kill you,
It probably would not matter to you anyhow,
You left me standing in the doorway crying,
I got nothing to go back to now.***

He really seems to be in a dubious mood. On the one hand he would give anything to be with her. He longs for what once was, he would like to kiss her. But on the other hand there is this irreparable gap which says: "I wish I never met you", you pressed me once, you pressed me twice, you hang the flame, you'll pay the price". He would like to kill her. But what would it matter anyhow? There is nobody there that could push back the clock for him, nobody that could unring the bell. This is that kind of love that really goes from bad to worse. Tears of grief and tears of rage competing while standing in the doorway, no place left to turn.

***The light in this place is so bad
Making me sick in the head
All the laughter is just making me sad
The stars have turned cherry red
I'm strumming on my gay guitar
Smoking a cheap cigar
The ghost of our old love has not gone away
Don't look like it will any time soon
You left me standing in the doorway crying
under the midnight moon***

He is just so sad and depressed that he cannot stand the bright light of joy and cheerfulness of people forgetting their troubles and woes, joining parties, and having fun. Well, he tried his best 'to be just like I am, but everybody wants you to be just like them'. It's just making him sick in the head, insanity is even smashing up against his soul. The sun, the moon and the stars which have turned cherry red continue to show signs of an upcoming disaster, in the meantime he tries to kill time by playing on his gay guitar and smoking cheap cigars. It is true, the memory of his old love has grown dimmer, it does not haunt him in the same way like it did before but that does not mean that this ghost has abandoned him entirely, it keeps on showing up and it will continue to do so, causing all this pain and anguish. What is this ghost of his old love?. It has been a theme since 'Empire Burlesque', the quest for 'freedom from a world that you deny'. It is impossible to come to terms between the new life, representing values from above, and the old love which strongly appeals to the flesh. The old love keeps on nagging to go back to a life where beauty deceives the eye, decays and leaves him standing in the doorway crying.

***Maybe they'll get me and maybe they won't
But not tonight and it won't be here
There are things I could say but I don't
I know the mercy of God must be near
I've been riding on a midnight train
Got cold ice water in my veins.***

Has he come to the ends of his way? Will he get called home? But he feels sure: not tonight and it won't be here. This is no place to end up your life! He feels no urge to explain this as if to say that anybody who understands will see it. I've said enough parables, all those who have eyes and all those who have ears will understand that when you are in the deepest trouble

the mercy of God is near. Only God knows there is a purpose, only God knows there is a chance, only God knows that you may rise above the darkest hour of any circumstance, no matter how lonely you feel on your own in this midnight train with this cold ice water in your vein. Here Dylan represents the best of the Psalmist tradition. In fact the Psalms are full of the word 'mercy' and always when the Psalmist is in the deepest misery and trouble he knows that at the same time the mercy of God is near.

***I would be crazy if I took you back
It would go up against every rule
You left me standing in the doorway crying
suffering like a fool***

Going back to what once was is not only impossible but it will do him no good at all. There are certain rules in life. Moral rules. It may look attractive at first sight to ignore these rules in an attempt to recover the sweet love he once had, but deep down inside he knows that giving in to this urge will turn him into a loser in the end. He has adopted a new set of rules, an entirely new way of thinking and he just can't let go. The joys of passion are always short lived and leave one empty hanging on to shadows and to a hunger that cannot be fulfilled. Well, he would rather prefer to keep on standing in the doorway and to suffer like a fool than to go back and give in to something which will turn him to an eternal loser in the end. Faith and flesh keep on colliding.

***When the last rays of daylight go down
Buddy you'll roll (roam) no more
I can hear the church bells ringing in the yard
I wonder who they ringing for?
I know I can't win
but my heart just won't give in***

He really feels he has come to the end of his way, it is not dark yet but it's getting there, death will come soon. He already hears the church bells ringing, somebody is carried to the grave, it is as if the bells already ring for him. He will be called home soon. It is as if a divine hand is put on his shoulders to comfort him: 'Buddy stop crying, you'll roam no more, you will receive peace and quiet soon, the same hand that led you through seas most severe will kindly assist you home'

And he knows that in this world he will not find peace and happiness, he can't win here: 'what good will it do if a man wins the whole world, and lose himself or be cast away' .(Luke 9:25). The old heart, or the 'old man' is not yet ready to give in. The struggle against the flesh is not over yet.