

Bob Dylan 'I and I' – lyric analysis by Kees de Graaf

Dylan wrote this song in 1983 during the so called 'Infidels sessions' at a time when as Paul Williams observed Dylan had 'gotten back in touch with an intrinsically vengeful part of his nature and has found agreement for it in the Holy Book and is just letting fly'. The question is whether indeed the lyrics of this song back up this stance or is it that Dylan's immersion into the New Testament led to a new understanding, a new look into justice's beautiful face to discover that in fact the golden rule from the New Testament 'Do right to me (do unto others)' is little different from the 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' from the Old testament?

Verse 1

Been so long since a strange woman slept in my bed.

Look how sweet she sleeps, how free must be her dreams.

In another lifetime she must have owned the world, or been

faithfully wed to some righteous king who wrote psalms beside moonlit streams.

First an ethereal image is drawn of a sleeping woman who is very close to him and at the same time at a great distance, as from another world, from another lifetime. The unspoiled beauty of a woman God created, the future bride to be, waiting to be revealed when the world will come to an end. Silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair. The same woman that gave him shelter from the storm. This woman is not bothered or touched by sin, that is why her dreams are free and she may own and will own the world like once Adam did in the garden of Eden and will do.

It is also the image of that faithful bride of that righteous king Solomon who wrote those beautiful psalms beside moonlit streams and who represented the King to come Christ who will meet this bride again at the end of all times, c.f. Rev. 19:7: 'let us be glad and rejoice for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His wife has made herself ready'. But here in this verse we are not ready yet for this wedding. 'Sometimes the silence can be like thunder' also applies here. At the same time there is a lot of suspense in this quiet almost surrealistic image. In fact it is the same suspense pictured in 'Cat's in the well' where also the 'gentle lady is asleep and silence is sticking her deep'. It is like 'the stillness in the wind before the hurricane begins'. The silence and suspense of Zech 1:11 and Rev. 8:11 which are omen that the apocalyptic judgement day is nearby and will finally come. The refrain of the song breaks at least some of the suspense:

Refrain:

I and I

In creation where one's nature neither honours nor forgives.

I and I

One says to the other, no man sees my face and lives.

'I and I' is somewhat homonymous with 'an eye for an eye' and it may represent a divine dialogue where within the Trinity God communicates with God. We find such a divine communication e.g. in Gen. 1:26: 'Let US make man in our image. Someone wrote me the following:

” ‘I and I’ is basically a substitute for ‘we’ and indeed a very significant one. It expresses at once the individualism that characterizes the Rastas and the unity which they see among themselves by virtue of their unity with Jah...- from Reggae International by Davis and Simon.

One refers to oneself as ‘I and I’ to express the divinity of God that is ever present and within the individual - from Bob Marley: ‘Reggae King of the World by Whitney and Hussey’.

Bob certainly knew of the Rasta meaning though his use is probably not limited to it. In some interview, asked who he wished he had met (or played music with) Dylan mentioned Bob Marley. And of course Reggae’s greatest rhythm duo (Dunbar and Shakespeare) play on Infidels’.

Paul Williams however, feels that God’s nature is described here who’s nature it is neither to honor nor forgive. I would feel it is very unlikely that Dylan would mean such a thing here. He knows that the Scriptures, also in the Old testament describe God as full of mercy and clothed with honor and majesty, c.f. Ps. 112:9 ‘LORD You are very great, You are clothed with honor and majesty’. Ps. 96:6: ‘Honor and majesty before Him, strength and beauty are His sanctuary’.

I would feel attention is drawn rather to the sixth day of creation (Gen.1:27) when God created man and to the subsequent fall of man into sin as described in Genesis 3. Honor was bestowed upon man: ‘For You have made him little lower than the angels and has crowned him with glory and honor (Ps. 8:5). Man however abused this honor, disobeyed the will of God and fell from his glorious position to become a spiteful, vengeful, merciless creature, his nature defiled, unwilling and unable to either honor his creator or to forgive his neighbour and by doing so burning the bridge of communication with God who is now unapproachable for man. The same God who made man now says ‘No man sees my face and lives’ (Ex 33:20).

Verse 2

Think I’ll go out and go for a walk

Not much happening here, nothing ever does,

Besides if she wakes up now , she just want me to talk

I got nothing to say , especially about whatever was.

This verse is very much written in Dylan’s apocalyptic vision. A notion taken from the Scriptures that Judgement Day will be preceded by a time of peace during which ostensibly nothing happens. (c.f. 2 Peter 3:4, Zech 1:11, Rev. 8:11). We find this more often in Dylan’s work:

-the stillness in the wind before the hurricane begins (‘When the ship comes in’)

-The gentle lady is asleep, silence is sticking her deep (‘Cat’s in the well)

- People are expecting a false peace to come (‘Solid Rock’)

-Many say:’ what’s lost has been found, what’s to come has already been’ (‘Pressing On’)

- They look me squarely in the eye and say: ‘All is well’ but can they imagine the darkness etc’ (Precious Angel)

- I tell myself something’s coming but it never does (“Floater, too much to ask”)

Both the poet and this woman (bride) have to wait for the final revelation of all things. There is no creature that is able to reveal the secrets of existence and history. How could it happen

that man set himself up for a fall that caused him 'neither to honor nor forgive'? The poet does not know the answer and has nothing to say to this woman 'about whatever was'. We have to find consolation in the next verse:

Verse 3

Took an untrodden path once , where the swift don't win the race,

It goes to the worthy, who can divide the word of truth.

Took a stranger to teach me , to look into justice's beautiful face, and to see an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth.

'Where the swift don't win the race' is literally taken from Eccl. 9:11 'I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all, for man also not knows his time' It is as if the poet says: this is an untrodden path, people do not like to walk on it, they rather walk on the highways which in the end will prove to be highways of regret. The answer is given in the Word of God and given to the worthy- to those who abide by the Word of God. They 'can tell you what's wrong from what's right'.

For Dylan it took a stranger to teach him something important. Who is this stranger?. Jesus calls himself this stranger (c.f. Mat 25:35). The same stranger those on their way to Emmaus (St. Luk. 24:13) met and who taught them how it had to be, it was written in the cards (the Scriptures) that Jesus had to die. That stranger was Jesus and is Jesus here .He invited the poet to take a look into justice's beautiful face.

Apparently the poet had always thought that the rule 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' is a harsh and vengeful rule but now he came to understand that it was Jesus Himself who took the sting out of this rule by His self sacrifice, by taking all the blame, He paid the price. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was fully applied to Him, He completely drained the cup of wrath and anger once and for all. He turned the face of justice from an avenger into a beautiful face of justice, full of mercy, righteousness and complacency. Jesus taught him to see what an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth really means. It is only makes sense through the fulfilment of its demands through Jesus.

Verse 4

Outside of two men on a train platform there's nobody in sight, they're waiting for spring to come, smoking down the track.

The world could come to an end tonight, but that's all right.

She should still be there sleeping when I get back.

Basically the same idea as expressed in the third verse is repeated here in other words. There seems to be hardly any action, it seems life has almost come to a standstill. Yet there is this suspense as if a large thunderstorm may break out at any moment. However, nobody in sight, only those two men waiting quietly for the train that will take them to spring, walking to and fro and smoking a cigarette down the track. The image is somewhat different from the one in 'Trying to get to Heaven' when there are also people on the platform waiting for the train. But in their hearts there is unrest because that train bound for heaven will not accept gamblers or midnight rambles, but this train is one that will take these two men to safety. This is a Slow Train, it will come up around the bend. It approaches slowly but it will reach its destination

suddenly: the world could come to an end tonight, but you need not worry, it's all right as long as you are on this train.

Verse 5

Noontime, and I'm still pushing myself along the road, the darkest part, Into the narrow lanes, I can't stumble or stay put.

Someone else is speaking with my mouth, but I'm only listening to my heart.

I've made shoes for everyone, even you, while I still go barefoot.

We find the same idea here as expressed in 'Series of Dreams': 'Into the path you are hurled, there is no exit in any direction except the one you can't see with your eyes'. Mat. 7:14 says: 'Because strait is the gate and narrow is the lane, which leads to life, and there are few there be that find it'. The poet struggles, there is much in life that cannot be explained, he looks in dark and empty skies, there is no escape in any direction, I Cor, 13:12: 'For now we see through a glass darkly'.

'Someone else is speaking with my mouth'. There are so many false prophets. They use my words but their intentions are not the same, they come to you in sheep's clothing but inside they are wolves. Listen only to your heart and don't trust them. Trust yourself. I made shoes for everyone. I gave a lot of ideas and hints to help people find a way along this dark and narrow lane but I am still barefoot. I need help as well. On the hills of mystery, in the foggy web of destiny there are many things which I could not resolve. One mystery is that of creation where one's nature neither honors nor forgives.

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