

Bob Dylan: “THINGS HAVE CHANGED”- AN ANALYSIS BY KEES DE GRAAF

This song firmly stands in the Dylanesque tradition of song writing. Some of the features of his song writing have been all along:

1. The world may come to an end at any moment now. This notion was fuelled by the teachings in the schools of the Vineyard Christian fellowship in the late seventies. All attention is focused on what is to happen on the latter day, when the thousand year rule of Christ in Jerusalem will commence immediately after His return to earth.
2. Because of this focus on the nearby thousand year rule of Christ the present world is abandoned and given up. All Christian action in this world is paralyzed by this notion. The world has gone wrong, man – and also Dylan- is a stranger in this world. He is out of range, it is no use trying, you should get out of it as soon as you can. The light in this place is bad, man walks through a lonesome valley in a strange land. In a certain way this line of thinking is Biblical. (Cf. Hebr 11:13) Christians should indeed be strangers in this world in so far as they stay away from sin and that their hope should be fixed upon the coming kingdom of God. But there is also something very unbiblical in this way of thinking. We should not give up this world. Our renewed life should urge us not only to pray for this world but also to accepting responsibility in this world. Jesus says that we should be the salt of the earth. The Christian notion of mercy should work through in all circles of life, in politics, in education, in legislature, so that the rule of Christ becomes visible in this world and not only in the future world. I would feel it a great pity that this concept was never really grasped by Dylan. Salvation in Dylan’s mind has in this way become a very private matter. Sometimes he sings of it “Hallelujah I’m ready to go’ or ‘Don’t pass me bye oh gentle Savior’ but his own song writing has been dominated by this ‘world gone wrong’ pessimistic notion of ‘I used to care but things have changed’. Dylan’s observations as to where the world stands and is moving to is very much to the point from a Biblical point of view but is at the same time very much ‘out of range’ as far as his own – and for that matter- our responsibility is concerned. We should care because He cares for this world.
3. Having said this the lyrics of this song are not posing any problems, so next time I hope to focus on the specific lyrics of this song.

***A worried man with a worried mind
No one in front of me and nothing behind
There’s a woman on my lap and she’s drinking champagne
Got white skin, got assassins eyes
I’m looking up in to the sapphire tinted skies
I’m well dressed waiting on the last train
Standing on the gallows with my head in the noose
Any minute now expecting all hell to break loose***

The feeling the song transmits is very much like the TOOM atmosphere. It is true, the song was written for a secular movie but it does not prevent the author from sticking to the TOOM theme: a worried man who is on his last legs, the feeling that he has come to the end of his way. On the one hand he seems not to care anymore about what his

going in the world around him and on the other hand he is still very much involved: 'I know I can't win but my heart just won't give in'.

He has no one in front of him and nothing behind : There is no need to take special precautions.' Accept my words or discard them, I've got nothing to hide, there is nobody in front of me, I'm out here all alone, there is nobody behind me, in fact I've burnt all bridges behind me, therefore I'm not biased by anybody, consider my words on their own merits'.

'There's a woman on my lap and she is drinking champagne'. That may be the same woman as in 'Jokerman' the harlot who dressed a prince in scarlet, this is likely inspired by the harlot of Rev. 17:3-6, the drunk woman, type of the big Babylon. This is the land of the forbidden fruits the author has always been attracted to and at the same time has to struggle against, the pretty face, the white skin, the long white shiny legs at the same time has assassins eyes. He knows that when he gives in to her he is lost. The only way to seek a remedy has always been for him to look up into the skies. We see in so many of his lyrics the continuous movement from the secular down to earth feelings – a woman whoever or whatever he may be- to the higher apocalyptic notions of forthcoming doom. The celestial bodies -the sun, the moon, the stars, the skies- have always played a large part in expressing these feelings. Also here. No doubt he has learnt this from the Scriptures where the (last) judgment is invariably attached to the signs in the skies. He already sees though in a tempered way the sapphire colors of the foundations of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:20) coming down from the heavens on the latter day reflected in the skies above him now.

We feel again the suspense of the latter day. He tries to get away on the last train. He is well dressed in his Sunday clothes to show that he is well prepared and is not coming back and that this is his last journey. You feel the stillness in the wind before the hurricane begins. 'Outside of two men on a train platform there's nobody in sight' Only very few men are waiting on this last train. A midnight train that does not pull any gamblers nor midnight rambles. He is waiting on this last train, well prepared and yet with cold ice water in his vein, a train that will carry him as far away from himself as he possibly can. Then there is again this awkward moment of suspense when he stands on the gallows with his head already in the noose . Hell may break loose any minute now. Here in the back of his mind –maybe even unconsciously- is this feeling of Armageddon- the last battle of the end times when all powers from hell – this last fire truck- will explode in one final outburst of violence.

***People are crazy and times are strange
I'm locked in tight, I'm out of range
I used to care, but things have changed***

This is how Dylan describes the final days of these times. We live in a crazy world. It is unbelievable, it's strange but true. We live in times where man commits crime and crime don't have a face. He is locked in tight. He does not feel at ease at all in this world where the hatred never ends and yet there is no escape. He feels like a prisoner in a world full of mystery, like a stranger in a strange land, out of range like a spaceship way out of its orbit.

Then this typical expression: 'I used to care but things have changed'. He does not explicitly say what it was he exactly used to care for and what has changed. Things

have changed but which things? He leaves this question to the imagination of the reader. This makes the song very intriguing. 'I used to care' may refer to:

1. The fact that he is locked in tight and out of range. A worried man with a worried mind, tired of looking every morning to 'the same old page, the rat race, the life in the same old cage'. He used to care about that but not any more. He has resigned himself to his desolate situation of living a life 'in a square' and all hope is now focused on life in the other world.
2. The fact that 'People are crazy and times are strange'. On the one hand he no longer cares for this world which cannot stand very long anymore. He focuses on personal salvation and has no message for this world left. On the other hand his manner and the absurdity of his reasoning invites you to think just the opposite: that he still cares a lot. We also hear this same absurdity of reasoning in the song 'World gone wrong'. It is true this song was not composed by Dylan but it is very much in line with his world view. I mean the line : " I can't be good no more, like I did before, honey because the world gone wrong'. This is an absurd way of declining personal responsibility for one's own deeds through a reason which is no reason at all. This absurdity invites you to do the opposite of what the song says: accept responsibility. Well this may be the case here as well. 'Things have changed' is no reason not to care any more.

***This place ain't doing me any good
I'm in the wrong town, I should be in Hollywood
Just for a second there I thought I saw something move
Gonna take dancing lessons do the jitterbug rag
Ain't no shortcuts, gonna dress in drag
Only a fool here would think he 's got anything to prove
Lot of water under the bridge, lot of other stuff too
Don't get up gentlemen, I'm only passing through***

The same feeling is expressed here as in 'Standing in the doorway': 'The light in this place is so bad, making me sick in the head, All the laughter is just making me feel sad'. At the one hand he envies those people 'drinking and dancing, wearing bright coloured clothes, forgetting their troubles and woes'(Highlands) and at the other hand he cannot stand to be among them and being part of them. It is as if he is a million miles away from normal social life in this world. Continued lifelong feelings of alienation. Mockingly and with a sense of humour saying that he should have been in Hollywood, maybe with an eye on the movie he wrote this song for.

'Just for a second I thought I something move' is reminiscent of ' I'm walking through streets that are dead' Life seems to be a still life painting to him, dead in itself, he expects to see no movement at all and yet he imagines to see an occasional spark of life. 'Everything stays down where it has moved in and has come to a permanent stop' seems almost true here.

The absurdity of life restraints him and yet compels, drives and urges him to indulge into it and to make him do things he normally loathes: take dancing lessons to do the jitterbug rag and dress in drag. Jitterbug is sometimes called the 'East Swing' . Swing is a repeating pattern of four steps. Men start with a left step and the ladies start with the right step. Regardless of where you may be turning (or being turned) the feet keep the

same pattern and rhythm. In 'jitterbug' timing is unisex – the same for man and woman. There are three rules:

1. Keep all steps small
2. Fake it for a few seconds and you find it again when you lost the beat
3. Don't worry about anything.

Ain't no shortcuts, there is no easy way out, you have to go the whole way, even to the ludicrous obscenity and absurdity of dressing in drag. A meaning in slang for the noun 'dress' may be: 'travesty'. The meaning may then be that he is disguised as in travesty, an idea equally ludicrous and ridiculous as the woman later on in the song who is put in a wheel barrow and wheeled down the street. In a society where the weirdest anomalies are portrayed on Television (Jerry Springer) as normal behaviour there is nobody left –not even a fool – who has to prove anything. There seems to be no limit in portraying the most intimate sexual details and make them suitable for consumption to a large public that it becomes painfully true what Dylan elsewhere wrote in 'Unbelievable': every urge has to be satisfied' and every 'sweetheart that don't come back with stories untold are hanging on a tree'. A lot of water under the bridge and a lot of other stuff too'. Much ado about nothing and yet do not tempt to criticise or else they get up and they will stone you. But the author of the song politely takes the sting out:' Don't get up gentlemen, I'm only passing through' I'm only a spectator, an observer who will leave you alone and will be gone quickly. It does not make sense arguing, I only observe, I used to argue but 'things have changed'.