

Bob Dylan's 'It's alright ma (I'm only bleeding) – an analysis by Kees de Graaf.

Introduction.

There can hardly be any doubt that the Dylan classic *'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'*, written in 1964 for the album *'Bringing it all Back Home'*, is an outstanding masterpiece that ranks among the top five of best songs Dylan has ever written.

In his 2004 CBS 'Sixty Minutes' interview Dylan is asked if he ever looks back at the music he's written with surprise. Dylan answers: *"I used to. I don't do that anymore. I don't know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written.* Then Dylan goes on to quote the first lines of *'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'*, and goes on to say: *'Try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that, and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know? It's a different kind of a penetrating magic. And, you know, I did it. I did it at one time'*. Indeed, the penetrating cascade of words hammering down on you in rhythmic waves, in combination with the fact that, no matter how intricate the rhyme and alliteration scheme is Dylan follows, yet all the words and verses are equally meaningful; all these elements give you the feeling that indeed this song was almost magically written and that because of this Dylan had little or no conscious will power over the composition of this song and that these words were simply given to him.

This song may represent part of a new phase in Dylan's song writing and an important departure from earlier work. Earlier work such as for instance *'The Times They Are a-Changing'* is generally regarded as taking a clear political and social stance, supporting and giving voice to the social counter culture movement of the sixties. However, the focus of this critical counter culture movement had so far limited itself to their opponents, to "them". So far the message had been: "They" –the establishment - are on the wrong side and "we" representing the counter culture are on the right side. But *'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'* completely changes this framework of thinking. Those who criticize and protest, including the poet himself, are now also under criticism. In this song the focus has changed and the protest seems to have been taken to a new and higher level. The American culture – with its taboos: politics, sex and religion – is not spared in this song and it even goes further than that, in fact the whole human condition is under the knife and filleted in this song. It is obvious that the sixties counter culture movement was not amused by this new development. We should not forget however, that Dylan never wanted to be a spokesman for the sixties counter culture movement or for whatever other political or religious organisation: *'it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to'*. Although this song has also some humoristic aspects, the overall timbre of Dylan's song writing had become much darker and pessimistic and therefore it is no wonder that we find some mild undercurrents of nihilism, existentialism and resignation in this song. Mild nihilism for instance in lines like: *"There is no sense in trying"* and *"I got nothing, Ma, to live up to"* and a streak of resignation, if not of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism, in a line like : *'But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only'*. ("Life and life only" was supposed to be the song's original subtitle).

In the song and in the song's title *'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'* we find the same sort of resignation as in Dylan's song *"Don't Think Twice It's All Right"* which recalls Arthur Crudup's song *"That's All Right Mama"* recorded by Elvis Presley. Although *'It's Alright, Ma'* shows resignation and acceptance of the situation we are all in, the subtitle *"I'm only bleeding"* expresses anguish and compassion as if the poet says: 'I am bleeding, I am in great pain because of this (human) condition, but that's all right mama, someone has to bleed and suffer, so don't worry, it is only me who is bleeding but I will somehow survive and even if I won't survive, life goes on'.

As said, the human condition is tackled in this song. The human condition is pictured in such a way that there can hardly be any other conclusion than that we -as mankind - are all in the same dreadful state and that there is no cure available under this sun. In some sort of a way *'It's Alright Ma'* resembles Dylan's 1991 song *'Dignity'*. After all the elaborate but yet fruitless efforts to find human

dignity in this world, the poet concludes: *"So many roads, so much at stake, so many dead ends, I'm at the edge of the lake, sometimes I wonder what it's gonna take, to find dignity"*. The difference between *'It's Alright Ma'* and *'Dignity'* is that whereas in *'Dignity'* the door to find human dignity is still ajar but in *'It's Alright, Ma'* this door is firmly closed. In *'Dignity'* the possibilities to find human dignity are slim but not entirely be ruled out. It will take a lot of pain to find dignity and implicitly the message is that if we are ever going to find dignity, we need interference from another –supernatural – world because in this world dignity is not available.

In *'It's Alright Ma'* the poet ostensibly operates from a more or less closed world view. The message at this stage is that in this present world all *man-made* political systems, philosophies, ideologies, or religions cannot offer any enduring help or solution to get ourselves out of the mess we created. In the end everything disappoints and falls short of one's expectations and you had better accept and resign to that fact. Therefore, the song can be seen as a universal statement about the condition of man and for that reason *'It's Alright Ma'* is never outdated and will always be up to date. It may also be one of the reasons why even today this song means a lot to Dylan and as a result it has never left his live set for any sustained period of time. If this song is almost magically written, at least partly beyond Dylan's conscious control, then Dylan may have written down words of which the full meaning and significance were not clear to him at the time he wrote those words. The meaning and significance of these words may have become clear to him in later years. This allows the analyst some freedom of interpretation. On the one hand, one may therefore argue that a song which is indeed almost magically written cannot be interpreted or analysed, you should just let the words do their work and overflow you and not search for any conscious or deeper meaning. On the other hand however, concentration on the words and focus on the circumstances under which Dylan wrote those words may give you help in understanding at least part of the song. Let's now make a start and take a more detailed look at the lyrics and see what comes up.

Verse 1.

The message of the first stanza is that there is no sense in trying to understand what cannot be understood, that there is no sense in trying to reconcile what cannot be reconciled and what is really too absurd for words. This message is worked out in a number of images. The first image ***"Darkness at the break of Noon"*** echoes the title of Arthur Koestler's anti-Communist novel *"Darkness At Noon"* (1940). In this novel the question is discussed whether the suffering and sacrifice of a few thousand or a few million people during the Stalin regime would be justified in order to realize the happiness of future generations in an utopian communist state. The allusion in this novel is implicitly that the idea that an utopian communist state can be created at the expense of and literal sacrifice of millions of innocent people is too absurd for words. The title of Koestler's novel *"Darkness At Noon"* hints at an- from a human point of view - equally absurd event and that is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Koestler's novel *'Darkness At Noon'* recalls the ***"Darkness at the break of noon"*** which occurred when Jesus Christ was crucified (Mat. 27:45). Here we find that one innocent Man died for the whole of humanity. You know too soon that there is no sense in trying to understand that the biggest crime in history is at the same time the best thing that could ever happen to humanity. Here the question of the interrelationship between human responsibility and divine predestination is hinted at but not resolved because ***"to understand you know too soon there is no sense in trying"***. The interrelationship between human responsibility and divine predestination is further explored in Dylan's song *'With God on our Side'* which Dylan wrote only a few years earlier.

"Darkness at the break of noon" refers to an apocalypse and there is not a single person who is not and will not be somehow affected by the global impact of this apocalypse, therefore it says that this darkness at the break of noon ***"shadows even the silver spoon"***. Not only those mentioned in Koestler's novel, who were **not** born with a silver spoon in their mouth, those many nameless millions crushed by the Stalinist terror in the name of an utopian communist state, underwent the

apocalyptic proportions of this Stalinist terror, but also the lucky few, the rich, the inherited wealth of established upper-class families, those *'born with a silver spoon in their mouth'* will in the end be affected and will suffer because of the apocalypse which is proclaimed by the words **"Darkness at the break of noon"**. No one will escape, that is why it says that darkness at the break of noon casts a shadow even on the silver spoon.

Two groups stand out when this apocalypse occurs. The first group consists of those using extreme violence, they are denoted by and apply **"the hand-made blade"**. They are the masters of war who go to great length and meticulously fabricate **hand-made** weapons to crush the innocent. In the apocalyptic end times they will cover the earth for the battle of the end times (Gog and Magog), they come in such large numbers, like the sand of the sea (Rev. 20:8), and their numbers are so huge that it looks as if they cause a total eclipse, they **"eclipse both the sun and moon"**. The second group is alluded to by the words **"the child's balloon"** representing the weakness, helplessness and open-mindedness of young children who nevertheless play an important spiritual part in universal (end-time) battles like it says in Psalm 8:2 *"Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger"*. So **"the hand-made blade"** and **"the child's balloon"** two opposite phenomena, are two opposing apocalyptic entities and play an important role in causing a total eclipse of both the sun and moon. It is impossible to find out how the interrelationship between these two phenomena exactly works: **"to understand, you know too soon that there is no sense in trying"** Ostensibly minor events like a child's balloon in the sky may cause a chain reaction, in the end causing total eclipse of both the sun and moon. The effect **"The hand-made blade"** and **"the child's balloon"** have, resembles the so-called 'butterfly effect'. The meteorologist Edward Lorenz studied computer simulations of weather patterns in 1961. Later on in an article Lorenz would use the metaphor of a butterfly in Brazil which by a flap of the wing would cause a tornado in Texas: the so-called 'butterfly effect'. In chaotic systems the slightest change in the starting conditions makes the system unpredictable.

Verse 2.

The magic words **"Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn"** have turned out to be prophetic and could therefore just as easily have been written today (2014). These words take us into the sinister world of terrorism and the actions of terrorist groups. Nowadays it takes us to the kind of terrorism to which the world has become familiar ever since 9/11. Just look at a terrorist movement such as IS and their militant videos and see how they spread their ideology in such a way that **"they bluff with scorn"**. They carry out their pointed threats with scorn and behead innocent people. They are so proud of it that they show these beheadings to the world with bluff and scorn, with no other intentions to spread worldwide fear. When Dylan wrote these words these words turned out to be prophetic but that does not mean that there were no **"pointed threats"** when Dylan first wrote this song. On the contrary. This song was written during the summer of 1964. In 1964 the US was still reeling from the blow caused by the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. 1964 was also the year when the USA began to step up its war efforts in Vietnam, in spite of mounting resistance in the US. History has shown that in order to justify a war, most of the time threats are exaggerated. In the eyes of warmongers, the Masters of War, "threats" easily become "pointed threats" and your enemy's "bluff" and "scorn" can easily become an excuse to declare a "justified" war.

The words **"Suicide remarks are torn"** can be understood as belonging to the words that follow: **"from the fool's gold mouthpiece"**, in this way you get the line: **"Suicide remarks are torn from the fool's gold mouthpiece"**. When in 1964 the poet wrote **"Suicide remarks are torn from the fool's gold mouthpiece"** it has appeared that these words were equally prescient as the words **"Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn"**. Six years later in 1970 a group called "The Mash" would release a hit single glorifying suicide called **"Suicide is Painless"**: **"Suicide is painless, it brings on many changes,**

and I can take or leave it if I please". But also in this century some people, in the name of some ideology or religion, are prepared to 'sacrifice' their lives and to commit suicide, to blow themselves up and expect to be glorified in heaven for that. Just think of today's Jihadist Muslim suicide terrorists. Although this kind of sacrificial suicide in the name of religion or ideology has been of all times and ages, nevertheless, the allusion in this song seems to be that when you propagandize, when you are the **"mouthpiece"** of this kind of sacrificial suicide, tearing and absorbing, these **"suicide remarks from the fool's gold mouthpiece"**, you are not only deceived but you will also become no less than the **"mouthpiece"** of a **"fool"**, you will be the spokesman of a fool. You are convinced that you will be rewarded in paradise because the mouthpiece seems to be of **"gold"**, but it will appear that it is only fool's gold, fool's gold like iron or copper pyrites, resembling gold in colour but in fact fake and in the end you will be disappointed and deceived because you will find out that you have followed a **"fool"**. This **"fool"** who promises you paradise but it will turn out to be a **"fool's paradise"**. This fool is someone who promises you heaven but will lead you to hell. A **"fool"** is pictured in the Scriptures as a person who acts contrary to moral and religious wisdom, a wicked person, like it says in Psalm 14:1 *"The fool says in his heart, there is no God"*.

In this verse there is some great pun which results in really fantastic poetry. Great poetry, because it is not only possible to read: **"Suicide remarks are torn from the fool's gold mouthpiece"** like we did and discussed above but one may also start reading at another point in this line and then you may read: **"From the fool's gold mouthpiece the hollow horn plays wasted words"**. If you follow the latter reading, the focus of attention shifts. The focus shifts from a figurative meaning of **"mouthpiece"**, **"mouthpiece"** meaning "being a spokesman for" for a fool to a more literal meaning of the word **"mouthpiece"** meaning 'the part of a musical or other instrument to which the mouth is applied in using it'. Here we are dealing with the **"gold mouthpiece"** of **"the hollow horn"**.

Nowadays a horn is usually a brass instrument played in a brass-band but originally it was a wind instrument made of a horn of an ox or a ram, the so-called ram's horn. In ancient times the horn was e.g. blown as a warning signal for public gatherings to or it was blown as a warning signal to launch an attack in a war (e.g. Joshua 6:5). This **"horn"** here does not do what it is supposed to do and that is to warn, that is why it is said to be **"hollow"** which means that the sound of this horn is deceitful, the sound of this horn wrong foots and misleads you, much in the same way as the futile horn from the one-eyed undertaker from Dylan's song *'Shelter from the Storm'*. The hollow horn plays **"wasted words"**, words never meant to be spoken, empty words without any valuable result. However, the **"the hollow horn plays wasted words"**, the fool who blows this hollow horn does not give society any wise or valuable information or warnings, on the contrary, this fool, like a pied piper, leads society to the brink of disaster, to self-destruction and suicide. Though against his will, the fool's wasted words **"prove"** something else and that is that it is necessary to send out the warning **"that he not busy being born is busy dying"**. This warning is taken to heart only by wise men, wise men will learn from the fool and **"prove"** that the following warning represents a universally true and valuable lesson, the lesson **"that he not busy being born is busy dying"**. Funny that this quote **"he not busy being born is busy dying"** was once used by (the born again) former US President Jimmy Carter in his acceptance speech at the 1976 Democratic National Convention. At the time (in 1964) the thought behind the quote **"he not busy being born is busy dying"** may be the same as Dylan once expressed in his song *'Let me die in my footsteps'* written two years earlier in 1962: *"There's been rumours of war and wars that have been, the meaning of life has been lost in the wind. And some people thinking' that the end is close by, 'Stead of learning to live they are learning to die, let me die in my footsteps, before I go down under the ground"*.

In this quote **"he not busy being born is busy dying"** we may see the further awakening of a moral ground pattern, a pattern of a world view which would become more and more outspoken as Dylan's artistic career progresses. In this worldview humanity is divided into two camps and there is a

constant moral battle going on between those two camps: *“there’s a battle outside and it’s raging”*. Now the moral question Dylan raises again and again is: *“Which side are you on?”*. (Desolation Row 1965). Neutralism seems never to have been an option in Dylan’s worldview. It is true, Dylan has always rejected false *human* claims of authority over him, no matter whether these claims come from individuals or from organisations, whether religious or not, and this is the reason why he would later on in this song state *“that it is not he or she or them or it, that you belong to”*. No human being or (religious)organisation owns him. But that does not mean that the quote: *“There ain’t no neutral ground”* (from Dylan’s 1979 *‘Precious Angel’*) represents a moral thesis which has to be confined to what is generally regarded as Dylan’s Christian phase. On the contrary, in Dylan’s view each human being has to make a personal and moral decision as to which camp he or she wants to belong. There has always been a sharp dividing-line – a polarity - between those two camps in Dylan’s oeuvre. The one camp represents life and the other death, the one camp represents good and the other evil, the one camp represents right and the other wrong. Some examples at random which show this phenomenon: From *“Most Likely You Go Your Way And I’ll Go Mine”* (1966): *“I’m gonna let you pass. And I’ll go last, then time will tell just who fell, and who’s been left behind, when you go your way and I go mine”*. Or from *“Can’t Wait”* (1997): *“there are people all around, some on their way up, some on their way down”*. Even in Dylan’s 2012 Rolling Stone interview this decision seems to shine through when Dylan says: *“You have to change your heart if you want change,”* and *“No kind of life is fulfilling if your soul hasn’t been redeemed.”*. So the radical message seems to be that only those who are on the road that leads to life are *“busy being born”* and if not, if you are on the road that leads to death, you are *“busy dying”*. It is either one or the other road and this seems to be the lesson which wise men can draw from the fool’s gold mouthpiece. These words seem to be contradicted by the words *“the more I die, the more I live”* from 2012 Tempest’s *“Pay in Blood”* but within the context of *“Pay in Blood”* these words are not contradictory. For more details on this we refer to my analysis of [“Pay in Blood” - Part 2](#).

Verse 3.

“Temptation’s page flies out the door, you follow, find yourself at war”. In your imagination it is possible to understand this line in an almost literal sense. As said, this song was written in 1964 when the US were stepping up its war efforts against the communist Vietcong in Vietnam. In your imagination you can see a page, a pamphlet, a flyer recommending, tempting, young people to voluntarily enlist with the American Army for service in Vietnam. Such a ‘temptation’ deludes you with false pretences that voluntary enlistment with the army is a cool and patriotic act of heroism and something to be proud of. Dylan pictured this so-called heroism in a song called *“John Brown”* which Dylan wrote less than two years earlier: *“John Brown went off to war to fight on a foreign shore, his mama sure was proud of him! She bragged about her son with his uniform and gun and these things you called a good old-fashioned war”*. So on the first impulse, you decide to literally follow this *“temptation’s page”* when it *“flies out the door”* and before you realize the full impact of your decision you *“find yourself at war”* in the horrifying jungle of Vietnam. A war which will soon turn into a nightmare for you.

Some understand the words *“Temptation’s page flies out the door, you follow, find yourself at war”* in a more figurative sense. When you follow that interpretation, *“a page”* may denote an “errand boy”. In this case the *“page”* is the errand boy for the personified *“Temptation”*. Temptation entices to cheat on your husband, wife or partner, to follow *“temptation’s page”* and to *“fly out the door”* and indulge into some sexual encounter. In the end, when your cheating comes to light, war will break loose at home: you *“find yourself at war”*.

No matter which interpretation you follow, the result of your actions is the same: you will *“Watch waterfalls of pity roar”*. Repentance always follows sin but always comes too late. There is no

escape, ***“You find yourself at war”*** and there is no turning back. You are out there in the Vietnam jungle and instead of enjoying the natural beauty of a roaring waterfall in the jungle, you now ***“watch waterfalls of pity roar”*** and surrounded by the stench of Napalm bombs and dead bodies buried in the mud, you regret that you ever enlisted. You end up in a valley of horror and tears and you have the same feeling Dylan would later write in his song “Mississippi”: *‘So many things we never will undo, I know you’re sorry, I’m sorry too’*. ***“You feel to moan”***, hear those soldiers holler hear them ***“moan”***. In your wildest imagination you would never have expected this adventure, this war, to end up in a nightmare like this. Your only ‘consolation’ is that you are not the only one who is in this dreadful position because ***“unlike before, you discover that you’d just be one more person crying”***. Your tears and crying will not change anything because you will find out that there so many around you who are also crying. In an ocean full of tears your personal tears are just a few teardrops and just ***“one more person crying”*** will make no difference.

Chorus 1:

When Dylan concludes: ***“So don’t fear if you hear, a foreign sound to your ear, it’s alright, Ma, I’m only sighing”*** this shows resignation. When he says: ***“I’m only sighing”*** this may be seen as an attempt to soften the intensity of pity and grief of the previous verse, he is not crying but only sighing. ***“A foreign sound”*** may allude to the ongoing war in Vietnam. It is as if this sound of pity and grief comes from a “foreign” country, in this case deep down from the jungle in Vietnam.

Verse 4.

The compact structure and build-up of this verse makes this verse a little hard to comprehend. ***“Some warn victory”*** may be those groups or individuals in society who ***“warn”*** that soon, at the end of an evolutionary process, evil will be conquered by good and that ***“victory”*** in the shape of a sort of utopian socialist state is dawning upon humanity, bringing freedom, liberty and brotherhood to all men and society. This socialist, left-wing idealism was very much alive in the fifties and sixties of the last century but seems to have vanished in the 21st century. Some others however, ***“warn downfall”***. When Dylan wrote this song in 1964, the Cuba Crisis was less than two years ago, when the world was at the brink of an apocalyptic nuclear destruction. The assassination of President Kennedy was less than a year ago and the cold war was gaining momentum. If ever there was a feeling of a ***“downfall”***, a period of great political, social and military tension it was in the sixties. For this group which ***“warns”*** for a ***“downfall”***, a downfall which in their eyes would result in a political and social meltdown of apocalyptic proportions, it is ***“doom alone that counts”***.

“Private reasons” are reasons which are not publicly known but deliberately kept secret to the public. These ***“reasons”*** are supposed to give a ground for justification of certain political or military actions. These actions may be interpreted by the public at large as evil, that is why – for political reasons – the real intentions behind these actions are kept secret to the public and are only known in the inner circles of certain politicians, dictators and usurpers. These reasons ***“private reasons”*** may be ***“great or small”***. A reason may be ***“great”*** when there is comprehensive plan of action to effectuate a certain policy or ideology. For instance Hitler’s wicked scheme to murder all the Jews, the holocaust. The details of this wicked scheme called the ***“Endlösung”*** were only known by confidants in Hitler’s inner circles. But also on a lower organisational level, or even on an individual level there may be such wicked schemes, that is why such ***“reasons”*** can be called ***“small”***. These ***“private reasons”***, the real intentions of those usurpers and dictators can only be revealed when you carefully study their doctrines, when you look into the eyes of these oppressors and dictators, you have to look them squarely in the eye and confront them with the consequences, that is the reason why it says that these reasons ***‘can be seen in the eyes of those that call’***. This is what they call: ***“make all that should be killed to crawl”***. They not only practice the Machiavellian ***“I’m gonna do whatever circumstances require”***, they go much further than that. Because for them it is not enough just to kill their political opponents, they want to add insult to injury and humiliate their enemies by

not only killing them but also to make them **“crawl”**. Before killing their opponents, they make them **“crawl”**, that is force them to publicly confess all sort of “crimes” in so-called show trials. Just think of the practices of the Stalinist and Nazi show trials. They force their political adversaries to insinuate themselves, to bereave themselves of their human dignity and sometimes this humiliation goes so far that they have their innocent victims literally **“crawl”** on their belly and beg for mercy. The purpose of **“make all that should be killed to crawl”** is to spread fear and terror in society so that other opponents also start to show “crawling” behaviour, start to insinuate themselves and show servile and obsequious conduct. This is how dictators like Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot have strengthened their power basis. This seems to be an important part of their survival tactics: **“make all that should be killed to crawl”**. In fact their whole ideology and power is based on nothing but hatred. It is as if the first line of this verse **“some warn victory some downfall”** is somehow related to the words **“make all that should be killed to crawl”** because when totalitarian states are **“victorious”** they try to turn this statement **“that all that should be killed to crawl”** into reality, stepping up oppression to the highest level. Those totalitarian states which are on the brink of defeat, which are in a **“downfall”**, do the same in a scorched earth policy and also **“make all that should be killed to crawl”**.

This verse also reflects Dylan’s somewhat hesitant and ambivalent view on the increasingly militant politics in the USA in the sixties. As said, the war in Vietnam was gaining momentum, advocates of the Black Power movement began stirring up trouble against the pacifists in the civil rights movement supporting Martin Luther King. Some fractions on the ultra-Left began to hint that the use of extreme violence to combat those in power was justified, while the pacifists in the civil rights movement and others in the New Left and anti-war movements felt that that resorting to violence is not only wrong but also self-destructive.

Therefore, in contrast to those who are full of hatred and say **“make all that should be killed to crawl”** “there are others - pacifists -who at the same time say: **“don’t hate nothing at all, except hatred”**. Some have argued that **“don’t hate nothing at all, except hatred”** is a double negative and therefore contradictory, if hate is wrong how can you hate hatred? How should we define **“hatred”**? One of the problems for those who advocate the slogan **“don’t hate nothing at all except hatred”** seems to be that what by totalitarian states is classified as **“hatred”** against the state and as revisionism and for that reason prosecuted, can in fact not be called **“hatred”** but may be justified criticism on the state or the system. Another problem is that is quite easy for this group to shout **“don’t hate nothing at all except hatred”** but in practice it is much harder to build a moral and responsible society on this slogan when evil is so deeply rooted in society and when sometimes you have no alternative but to resort to violence to defend and restore democratic rights. Therefore in the eyes of many, this slogan **“don’t hate nothing at all except hatred”** may be quite rightly classified as cheap and unrealistic.

Verse 5.

“Disillusioned words like bullets bark” may refer to the disillusion which soon dawns upon you when the idealistic picture you had in mind does not come true. We’re still very much in the atmosphere of war and antagonism, therefore the words **“Disillusioned words like bullets bark”** may bring back to mind the previous verses where it appeared that temptation can easily lure you into a war, a war in which bullets bark but where you will soon be disillusioned and watch waterfalls of pity roar. At the same time the words **“Disillusioned words like bullets bark”** refer to the **“human gods”** in the following line: **“As human gods aim for their mark”**. The **“human god”** that is portrayed in this verse, is the human god of capitalism and greed. In this respect there is similarity with this other **“human god”**, the human god of communism which is portrayed in the first verse of this song. In this first verse the title of Arthur Koestler’s novel *‘Darkness at Noon’* echoes the atrocities of the Stalin’s communist repressive regime and the disillusion that follows. However, this verse **“proves to**

warn” that not only communism disillusioned you, but also capitalism with its extravagant consumerism is a **“human god”** who will do us no good either and who will throw us in the same hole communism is in. The high priest representing this **“human god”** of this extravagant consumerism is Corporate America and its Madison Avenue advertising industry. They are as good at brainwashing you as any of those communists ever were. They manipulate your brain and psyche and create all sorts of “needs” which must be fulfilled. They successfully influence your spending behaviour only to meet their demands. They **“aim for their mark”** and their mark, their goal, is nothing but money and power. Money and power is their goal, **“they make everything”**, even if this implies exhausting at high speed all natural resources of this earth. To reach their targets they appeal to the basic human instincts, there are many of these basic human instincts (a.o. sex) but here the basic instinct of power and religion is dealt with. **“Toy guns that spark”** in the hands of young children give children the illusion that they will once become as powerful and destructive as all those militant “heroes” on television, and in this way violence and militarism is fed at an early age. At the time when Dylan wrote this song in 1964 this **“toy gun”** industry was still in its infancy and little did he realize that nowadays there are extremely violent computer games in the market, imitating war and cruel blood shedding in the most extreme and realistic fashion.

The **“Flesh-coloured Christs that glow in the dark”** may take our mind to the well-known pilgrim site Lourdes in the South West of France. An estimated 200 million people have visited the shrine in Lourdes since 1860. In Lourdes you can buy all sorts of souvenirs: images of Christ and the Virgin Mary and other saints. These souvenirs are sold there by the millions and a lot of money is drawn from the pilgrim’s pockets. This is the place where the **“sacred”** meets and mingles with the mundane and if you take a good look, it is obvious that what these **“human gods”** sell as **“sacred”** artefacts, in reality is all about making money and profit, that is why it says: **“It’s easy to see without looking too far, that not much is really sacred”**. It is easy to see that Dylan classifies this whole practice of this commercialized pseudo religion as nothing else but the utmost form of hypocrisy and idolatry. Later on in 1983, in his song “Jokerman” Dylan would declare the whole nation to be under the influence of idolatry, when he alludes to the “Statue of Liberty” as an idol: **“standing on the water, the eyes of the idol with the iron head are glowing”**.

Verse 6.

Instead of the ‘official’ lyrics: **“While preachers preach of evil fates, teachers teach that knowledge waits, can lead to hundred dollar plates”** a 1964 rendition of the song has alternative lyrics: **“While teachers teach evil fates, preachers preach that knowledge waits, can lead to hundred dollar plates”**. This latter rendition emphasizes the role of the mass media evangelists who promise you earthly prosperity and riches if you follow them. If you follow them they will lead you to **“hundred dollar plates”**. Today, the television evangelist Joel Osteen may be seen as an example of a preacher who preaches this kind of religious philosophy which promises you earthly wealth and prosperity.

The ‘official’ lyrics: **“While preachers preach of evil fates”** portrays a quite different kind of preacher with an opposite message. For this kind of preacher it is (like Dylan wrote in his song “Shelter from the storm”) **“doom alone that counts”**. It is the same kind of preacher described in Dylan’s 1964 song ‘My Back Pages’: **“Flung down by corpse evangelists, unthought-of, though, somehow”** or the preacher in Dylan’s 1989 “The Man in the Long Black Coat”, the preacher who says that: **“every man’s conscience is vile and depraved”**.

“While preachers preach of evil fates” there are at the same time others who **“teach that knowledge waits”**. Two different meanings of the verb to **“wait”** may be alluded to here. The first meaning of to **“wait”** alluded to here is in the sense of “to wait patiently for an opportunity to occur”. These teachers teach that *real* knowledge always patiently **“waits”** for the best opportunity to get into an affluent, beneficial, or even influential position, a position in the upper echelon where **“hundred dollar plates”** are served. The second meaning of the verb to **“wait”** alluded to here is a

sort of word pun and makes you think of a *“waiter”* who *“waits”* upon guests in a restaurant and serves them *“hundred dollar plates”*. It is noteworthy that the word *“knowledge”* is chosen here instead of what one would expect here, the alliterating word *“wisdom”*. We already have the alliterating pairs *“preachers preach”* and *“teachers teach”* and therefore it would only be obvious if the alliterating *“wisdom waits”* would have been chosen here instead of *“knowledge waits”*. The point is that *“wisdom”* may not lead to the kind of *“hundred dollar plates”* which are meant here. The fact is that *“wisdom”* – unlike *“knowledge”*- does not lead you to earthly fame or riches but only to spiritual riches and blessings, pretty much in the same way like Ecclesiastes 7:12 says: *“Wisdom and money can get you almost anything, but only wisdom can save your life”* (NLT). This does not mean that *“knowledge”* is not desirable, because it is like Shakespeare once said: *“Ignorance is the curse of God; knowledge, the wing wherewith we fly to heaven”*.

So according to those teachers *“knowledge”* may lead you to the rich echelons of our society, enabling you to attend expensive and luxurious dinners, to attend *“hundred dollar plates”* dinners. When this song was written in 1964, compared to the value of the dollar at the time, to spend a hundred dollar for a plate in a restaurant must have been a huge amount to spend, affordable only for the upper echelons of society. When this song was written- back in the sixties - *“hundred dollar plates”* were also offered to the public as a party fundraiser for the Democratic Party. William F. Thompson in his book called : *“Continuity and Change 1940-1965: History of Wisconsin”* writes on page 661 of his book that in 1962 the ticket price for the annual Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner was increased from twenty-five to one hundred dollar a plate. The decision persuaded John F. Kennedy to be the main speaker at the 1962 dinner, which raised \$ 150.000 for the party. A decision which very much antagonized less affluent party members.

Somewhere we found an alternative interpretation of the words *“hundred dollar plates”* which is worth mentioning here. According to this interpretation *“hundred dollar plates”* would refer to the very source, the device by which American dollar banknotes are printed. These plates are in the hands of The Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) which is a government agency within the United States Department of the Treasury. *“A plate”* is the metal cast on which the dollar is engraved for the purpose of being printed. So if you possess these “plates” you are able to print banknotes. So if you would follow this interpretation, *“knowledge”* would lead you to the very source of money, real *“knowledge”* would lead you to the *“hundred dollar plates”* and give you total control over the financial system and if you control the financial system, you control the State.

“Goodness hides behind its gates” means that it often looks as if love, tenderness, kindness, benevolence, righteousness, compassion and solidarity have pulled back from our society and that the only law which is still valid is the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest. *“Goodness”* –here used in its personified form- is brutally violated in our society. It looks as if *“Goodness”* *“offered up her innocence and got repaid with scorn”*. It is a general rule that *“Goodness”* will never accept such bad treatment and if this behaviour continues *“Goodness”* will pull back from civilised society and, disappointed and disillusioned, she hides herself behind gates. And when she is hidden it takes much more pains to find *“goodness”*. In this context the meaning of the word *“goodness”* comes close to the meaning of the word *“dignity”* as used in Dylan’s song *“Dignity”*: *“Sometimes I wonder what it’s gonna take to find dignity”*. Now that *“goodness hides behind its gates”* one might as well say *“Sometimes I wonder what it’s gonna take to find “goodness”*. In a society where *“goodness hides behind its gates”*, where goodness is forced to hide itself, those in power are easily tempted to believe that they have power and influence enough to hide their evil schemes from the public eye. They are wrong. Ultimately nobody will escape judgement, not even the President of the United States. In the end even the President of the United States is as vulnerable as anybody else, cover-up actions to hide wicked schemes will fail, that is why it now says: *“But even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked”*. This one liner once again proves the

universality and the prophetic value of this song. As times went by, under various administrations, these words rang true. This happened for the first time when Dylan hit the road with the Band in 1974. The Watergate scandal was about to reach its climax and President Nixon was forced to resign later that year. A shiver and an audible grim glee went through the audience each time Dylan spat out the words ***“But even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked”***. More or less the same happened almost a quarter of a century later during the Clinton-Lewinski affair and also later when President Bush JR involved America in the second Gulf War.

Chorus 2.

“The rules of the road” in the line ***“And though the rules of the road have been lodged”*** may have different connotations. In slang language ***“the rules of the road”*** expresses certain “payment” rules which may be applied when you do someone a favour by giving him or her a ride in your vehicle. They say that you have the option “to pay” for this favour by cash, by soft drugs or by sex. They say that these three options are called ***“the rules of the road”***. Nowadays ***“the rules of the road”*** stand for the ‘International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea’ issued by the International Maritime Organization or simply for the various traffic regulations in various states and countries. Anyway when, Dylan speaks of ***“the rules of the road have been lodged”*** he may have had in mind that there is a certain consensus in society about certain social standards of how we should behave and what is regarded as right or wrong in this respect. This consensus is sometimes sustained by written but most of the time sustained by unwritten laws, social codes and customs. These rules also constitute a certain structure of power and responsibilities on which a society is built. These rules ***“have been lodged”***, which means that these rules are fixed. Therefore it is not the ***“the rules of the road”*** on their own which pose a problem and which you have to dodge but the wicked way in which people deal with these rules. People tend to play games with these rules and you have to watch out for these people. It is the reason why it says: ***“It’s only people’s games that you got to dodge”***. Not only all kinds of political and social organisations but also ordinary people may drag you into their hidden agendas – called here ***“people’s games”***- and they lure you into believing or doing things which you never intended to believe or do in the first place. But the poet sees through all of this, therefore he now says: ***“And it’s alright, Ma, I can make it”***. It is as if he says: “I can see through their games, I know what they are up against, don’t worry I can handle this problem, I can make it through”.

Verse 7.

When it says ***“Advertising signs they con, you into thinking you’re the one”*** the deceitful advertising industry in general and the American Madison Advertising industry in particular, is tackled here. The powerful advertising industry makes you believe that you have freedom of choice, but in reality their sales techniques so subtly appeal to the common human basic instinct of greed and grandeur, that you must be a very strong personality if you are capable to escape from their tentacles. ***“They con you into thinking you’re the one”*** means that the advertising industry deceitfully intends to make you believe that if you buy their products or services, you will become somebody special, a special person exempted from the normal wear and tear of the masses and that you are one of the chosen few ***“That can do what’s never been done, that can win what’s never been won”***. For example, the advertising industry says that If you use this particular brand of drug, medicine or vitamin pill, you will be stronger, prettier, more vital and live longer than anybody else. Or ,if you buy this lottery ticket, you will be the one that wins the hundred million dollar jackpot. The human nature is such that man has a natural tendency to believe that whatever the advertising industry tells you is true, and tends to ignore a voice deep down inside that says that these promises are just plain lies. However, what the advertising industry does not tell you is that ***“meantime life outside goes on, all around you”***. Even when you are among the “lucky few” and have won this hundred million jackpot, even when you are successful and become a big star, you will find out that you will never escape

from the decay of every day's life. Everything in life is temporary. Money, fame and honour, will only ask for more and cannot fulfil you. In the ***"meantime life outside goes on, all around you"***, time catches up on you, life goes on and death's 'honesty' – as it will be called later on in the song - will reach all of us. Therefore it is true what Dylan wrote in his song 'God knows': *"God knows you ain't gonna be taking nothing with you when you go"*.

Verse 8.

When it says: ***"You lose yourself, you reappear, you suddenly find you got nothing to fear ,alone you stand with nobody near"*** we see that the focus shifts to a more personal, individual, level. We have to keep in mind and not forget that individualism is a fruit of the Enlightenment and it is this kind of individualism that shines through in this verse. In the previous verses we have e.g. seen what will happen to you when you are a follower. When you are a conformist and "follow" the government, the system, you pretty soon find yourself at war. You may be a follower of the human gods that can make everything but you will find out that they also desecrate everything, they even desecrate the most sacred icon of all, Christ, and turn it into a state of the art consumer gadget. When you are a trend follower you will find out that unbridled consumerism, symbolized by the deceitful advertising industry, will drag you in an equally deep hole. All of this is designed to make you lose your individuality and personal freedom to decide what is good for you. The result of all of this is that ***"you lose yourself"***. Often without realizing it, you will completely lose your individuality and freedom of choice. It was one of the attainments of the Enlightenment that human individuality and freedom of choice was rediscovered. It may be the reason why it says: ***"you reappear"***. The philosopher Immanuel Kant once described Enlightenment as *"man's release from his self-incurred tutelage"*, tutelage was described as *"man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another"*. Kant saw Enlightenment as *"mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance"*. One of the positive elements of the rediscovery and reappearance of your individuality is what is described here as that ***"you suddenly find you got nothing to fear"***. In the end no self-fabricated ideological or religious system is able to chain the human mind for ever. Nevertheless, it takes great personal courage to free yourself from any repressive ideology- whether so-called religious or not - and to stand up for basic human rights. Once you have committed yourself to demonstrate this courage –sometimes at the peril of your life or of your "good" reputation and fame - ***"you suddenly find you got nothing to fear"*** from the authorities or the establishment. Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster once wrote *"freedom is just another word for having nothing left to lose"*. Having lost everything is a necessary precondition for your ***"reappearance"*** and your ability to abandon all fear.

However, there is also a downside to the Enlightenment. Once you have decided to become a non-conformist you will find out what is described here as ***"alone you stand with nobody near"***. You enter into a sort of no man's land, into a sort of vacuum of thought where nihilism can easily creep in. In such a vulnerable position you need companions and friends for reassurance that you are on the right track. But because you are a non-conformist, you stand and feel alone and there is nobody there to support you. Subsequently, you need to have a strong personality and conviction to stay strong and withstand the mounting pressure to conform and to go back from where you came. The pressure mounts to conform and go back to the demons of conformism which you had just left, pretty much in the same way as it says in Matt. 12: 43-45: *"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first"*.

In your solitude, you enter a cross-roads and on this cross-roads all sorts of voices pop up and are allowed to try and pull you into an unknown and untrodden path. On this cross-roads you stand

alone with nobody near ***“When a trembling distant voice, unclear, startles your sleeping ears to hear that somebody thinks they really found you”***. The question is who is that voice? Is it the same mysterious voice Dylan hears in *‘Ballad of a Thin Man’*? where it says: *‘Who is that man? You try so hard but you don’t understand, because something is happening here but you don’t know what it is’*. Is it maybe Jesus calling at his door? This cannot entirely be ruled out because most of the time He is said to come to you when you are in a weak, and vulnerable state of mind and in such a humble position, when you have ***“sleeping ears”***, you are more prepared to open up your mind for Him. Also, when Jesus presents Himself to you, He usually wears a cloak of weakness, He comes to you in ***“a trembling distant voice, unclear”***. It is not a robust, compelling, strong voice full of conviction, but a weak, ostensibly insignificant voice for which you have a natural tendency to resist it and it is certainly not a voice you are prepared to obey unconditionally.

However, whatever, or whoever this voice may be, what stands out and makes the difference is that there is a personal approach here. No massive appeal by the government or the advertising industry but a strictly personal voice directed to you personally which singles you out to tell you that this time it is no lie, it is the real thing, ***“they really found you”***. This personal approach, which is designed to give you the idea that you are a special person, may be just another, more successful, sort of tactics to turn you once again into a follower of a certain political, social or religious organisation. ***“They really found you”***, may mean that whoever or whatever this organisation represents, it comes to you, *only* to you, at the right time and place and claims to know exactly what you need, and for you this private attention should feel as a sort of home coming. However, in the back of your mind there is a warning signal that something is wrong and that you should not accommodate and this where the next verse deals with.

Verse 9.

In the previous verse we have seen that although there is a personal approach to have you accommodate, yet alarm bells start ringing and this verse elaborates on this idea when it says: ***“a question in your nerves is lit”***. The question that is lit in your nerves is: can I trust this voice and follow it?. Deep down inside of me there is a part of me that says: yes I can trust and follow this voice because it is a weak, humble, distant and trembling voice. And this very humbleness and weakness of this voice is proof of its authenticity and truthfulness. But there is another part of me that says: no, I cannot and will not follow something or somebody that seems weak and humble. If I would follow that voice I will be seen as a loser, I will lose everything, I will lose control over myself. The result of all of this may be that in your mind the question is unresolved: ***“Yet you know there is no answer fit to satisfy, insure you not to quit”***. For you there seems to be no ace in the hole. There is no comprehensive solution available. Either way is not satisfactory, there seems to be no answer ***“to satisfy”***, no answer that really satisfies and gives you inner peace and complacency.

However, ***“To satisfy, insure you not to quit”*** may at the same time also refer to the words that follow: ***“to keep it in your mind and not forget, that it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to”***. If we follow that interpretation, ***“to satisfy”*** may mean that you will only find satisfaction when you ***“keep it in your mind”*** and ***“insure”***, that is make sure that you will not ***“quit”***. You will only have satisfaction when you will not give up ***“quit”*** your independent and free mind. Your independent and free mind is only satisfied and guaranteed when you do not have yourself boxed in by any individual or any so-called organisation or religion and when you stand by the concept that nobody owns you, ***“that it is not he or she or it that you belong to”***. The poet makes it very clear that he never wanted to be a spokesman for any individual or organisation, not for a ***“he”*** and not for a ***“she”***, nor for a ***“it”***. However, again there is a downside to all of this. This is expressed in the next chorus.

Chorus 3.

“Although the masters make the rules, for the wise men and the fools” is typical Biblical language. In the Book of Proverbs and even more so the Book of Ecclesiastes there are many references to and

comparisons between what in daily practice is regarded as a **“wise man”** and or a **“fool”**, e.g. Proverbs 14: 16 says: *“A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless”*.(NASB). What it says here resembles Ecclesiastes 2: 19 : *“and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity”*.(ESV). What the poet may have had in mind here is that every social institution, political party or religious organisation has a Master. A Master, in the sense of a set of rules, a common line of conduct, a group code which the members of such a social, political or religious organisation obey, abide by and find support and security in. Here the question what such an organisation is doing or aiming at is irrelevant. Here it is irrelevant whether the aim of such an organisation can be classified as useful and therefore as **“wise”** or as harmful and therefore as **“foolish”**. Therefore the question whether the members of such an organisation can be seen as **“wise men”** or as **“fools”** is also irrelevant for that matter. The fact remains that they have a Master who makes the rules for them, either wise or foolish, and that they find comfort and consolation in them. What really matters here is that the poet, unlike the wise men and the fools, does not have a Master who tells him what to do, he does not belong to any of these social, political or religious organisations”. He **“stands alone with nobody near”** to support him, nothing to rely on and to find comfort or consolation in. That is why he now concludes: **“I got nothing, Ma, to live up to”**. Those who believe in the doctrines of an ideology or a religion look forward to the realization of their utopian ideas and beliefs. At this stage the poet has none of that all. Here he has entered lonely nihilistic waters. The price he has to pay for his independent and free mind is that he has nothing to look forward to. **“I got nothing, Ma, to live up to”** expresses disappointment and self-criticism. You may be proud to be an independent non-conformist, but the only thing that seems left is (Nietzsche’s) nihilism and it is as if the poet intends to express that in the end this does not satisfy either.

Verse 10.

The verses 10, 11 and 12 and chorus 4 are usually not performed in concert and are therefore lesser known to the public at large. This verse elaborates on the conclusion of the previous chorus **“I got nothing, Ma, to live up to”** as if he says: “It is true, I stand alone empty handed and I have nothing to live up to, but what about all those people who do belong to a social group in society, are they any happier than me, are they any better off?. No they are not. These people obey the social code of the group they belong to, they obey the instructions of their Masters who make the rules for them. They obey but against their will, that is why it says: **“For them that must obey authority, that they do not respect in any degree”**. These people follow leaders but without any deeply- rooted inner conviction or faith. On the contrary, they only accommodate and obey because they have no other choice but in their hearts they disrespect the authorities. This capitalistic society is driven by the multi- nationals, they are the Masters who are in control of you and who make you earn your living, they supply you with jobs and you’ve got to go where your bread is buttered. They have you trapped in a meaningless monotonous cycle, a never ending conveyer belt of production and consumerism, from which death seems to be the only escape. No wonder that these are people are without any hope, and that they are people **“Who despise their jobs, their destinies”**. Deep in their hearts, some of them want to break free but for the vast majority of them such a step would take too much courage. The vast majority of them rather prefers to remain boxed in because that is the easy way out and in the meantime, on the rebound, they **“Speak jealously of them that are free”**. They criticize and condemn those who are autonomous and independent and free as unworldly people but deep in their hearts they envy them and wish they had the same courage to break free.

When it is said of this group of people that they **“cultivate their flowers to be nothing more than something they invest in”**, the more poetic words **“their flowers”** can best be interpreted as “their children”. There is a 1964 live bootleg recording of this song, recorded before the studio version,

which has the alternative lyrics that they: ***“raise what they grow up to be, nothing more than something they invest in”***. These earlier lyrics make clear what Dylan may have had on his mind. There is a certain reciprocity in these words. The capitalistic industrial society, driven by the multi-nationals, sees human beings as ***“nothing more than something they invest in”***. The capitalist system dehumanizes people and turns them into production material in which you just invest, invest only with the purpose of making as much financial profit as you possibly can. But what is so baffling is that those same people who are dehumanized and reduced to just production material, do the same thing with their children. They ***“raise what they grow up to be”*** means that basically these people raise their children in the same way as they themselves are “raised” by the capitalist society to be ***“nothing more than something they invest in”***. When it is said of these people that they ***“cultivate their flowers”*** is a more poetic, extenuating, way of saying the same thing. It is not pure love for ***“their flowers”***, their children, by which these people are driven but rather by their own interest. They want to glorify themselves by investing in the careers of their children. By doing so from generation to generation they perpetuate a system of which they are both victim and perpetrator.

Verse 11.

When it says: ***“While some on principles baptized, to strict party platform ties”*** a social phenomenon is described which makes it clear that, although we live in a free and democratic society, the room to manoeuvre freely within organisations such as political parties is very much limited by party discipline. A ***“party platform”*** is a document stating the aims and principles of a political party. ***“While some on principles baptized”*** intends to say that commitment to a political party’s platform may be so rigid and tied that it almost takes the shape of a religious vow which is taken in Christian baptism. There is some word pun too in ***“party platform ties”***. A ***“tie”*** may therefore also be an allusion to a dressing code in the shape of a necktie. Blind obedience to a political party’s orders may not only require consensus of opinion and thought but also uniformity in outward appearance.

A ***“social club”*** is said to be “a group of people and to the place where they meet, generally formed around a common interest, occupation or activity (e.g. hunting, fishing, science, politics, or charity work)”. The Union Club in New York is the oldest social club in New York and was founded in 1836. You also have social clubs where people dress in drag, for example the Albuquerque Social club in Albuquerque (NM). Such a club may be alluded to when it says: ***“Social clubs in drag disguise”***. Dressing in drag may be an expression of Transvestism which is the “practice of dressing and acting in a style or manner traditionally associated with the other sex’. When it says ***“in drag disguise”*** the use of the word ***“disguise”*** implies that - in the same way people dress in drag in social clubs – certain institutions or organisations hide their real identity or purposes so that they can freely criticize outsiders without being unmasked or criticized themselves and without anybody ever knowing what goes on behind their closed doors. It may be the reason why it says: ***“Outsiders they can freely criticize”***. Every club or organisation, or even a State, may have a sacred bull which they idolize and they urge you to idolize the same sacred bull, that is why it now says: ***“Tell nothing except who to idolize”***. It is like Dylan wrote in his 1990 song ‘Unbelievable’: ***“Every nerve is analysed, everything is criticized when you are in need”***. The words ***“And then say God bless him”*** may be used here in an ironic way. Worshipping an idol seems attractive and beneficial at first glance but it involves great risks, because once the beast, the idol, has caught you in its tentacles, there is no turning back, and it will kill you both physically and spiritually. When you are faced with the bitter consequences of your infatuation with the idol, the idol washes its hands of you and says: ‘fare thee well, may God bless you’. For example, when you idolize the State, America or any other nation, you are inclined to endorse whatever policy the State follows, you may even support a completely unjustified war and when crippled veterans come back from such a war (you may think here of Dylan’s song ‘John Brown) the State washes its hands of you ***“and then say God bless him”***.

Verse 12.

In this verse with the opening words: ***“While one who sings with his tongue on fire, gargles in the rat race choir”***, it seems that the mega church ‘prosperity gospel’ preachers and their followers are criticized for their rather ambiguous attitude towards secular matters. It looks as if the poet intends to say that some influential preachers of the prosperity gospel and their followers more or less run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, as if they try to make the best of both worlds they live in. This is metaphorically expressed as if they sing in two different types of choirs, each choir represents a quite different world. In the one –spiritual – world or choir, within their own mega church, they seem to sing ***“with their tongue on fire”***. Now the words ***“While one who sings with his tongue on fire”*** may be a biblical reference to Acts 2: 3: *“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them”*.(NIV). Therefore when they sing ***“with their tongue on fire”*** they sing through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

However, some of these mega church ‘prosperity gospel’ preachers and their followers simultaneously seem to live and indulge in another world, in the real world outside their own community or church. Here they also – metaphorically - sing in a choir. But this is a worldly, a secular choir. Singing in that secular choir hints at the fact that some of these prosperity gospel preachers and their followers also fully participate and indulge in our modern society. This modern society is metaphorically qualified here as a ***“rat race choir”***. A ***“rat race”*** is defined *“an endless, self-defeating, or pointless pursuit. It conjures up the image of the futile efforts of a lab rat trying to escape while running around a maze or in a wheel”*. A ***“rat race”*** society is a sort of social competition to get the best and most affluent position on the social ladder at the expense of others, at the expense of the social poor and the weak. But in the end such a rat race is fruitless and unsatisfactory because in this rat race love and compassion is eliminated. Now the ambiguity the poet hints at here is that although some of these influential prosperity gospel preachers preach love, compassion and companionship from the pulpit, they so to say ***“sing with their tongue on fire”***, yet at the same time they preach and advocate a sort of ‘prosperity gospel’. They say that if you follow them God will bless you and make you very rich and wealthy and prosperous. However, the consequence of all this is, that in order to get rich, wealthy and prosperous, you will find yourself participating and indulging in the social ***“rat race choir”***. It is obvious that such preachers speak with a double tongue and find themselves in a splits. It may occur that within their own church or community they are full of the Spirit and they ***“sing”*** with their tongue on fire, whereas in society their singing is reduced to a ***“gargle”*** in the rat race choir. A ***“gargle”*** may be a kind of warbling, in this case more likely a yodel. A yodel is a “songlike cry in which the voice fluctuates rapidly between the normal voice and falsetto”. The contrast here between this singing and gargling may be expressed here to show that some of those these mega church prosperity gospel preachers and their followers feel at ease when they sing within their own community with their tongue on fire but they feel alienated when they ***“gargle” in the rat race choir”*** in this modern society.

When some of these prosperity preachers ***“gargle in the rat race choir”*** it is as if they sing out of tune, as if they are not feeling at ease and do not have a free conscience when they indulge in this rate race of ultra-consumerism. This rat race of ultra-consumerism they indulge in, seems not to match with the humble message of the Kingdom of God. It may be the reason why the poet now goes on to say that they are ***“bent out of shape from society’s pliers”***. A “pliers” is “a kind of small pinchers with long jaws, -- used for bending or cutting metal rods or wire, for handling small objects such as the parts of watches”. Now it is common knowledge that you cannot serve two Lords. You cannot serve the Lord in your own church or community and at the same time serve the Mammon – the god of money - in this world, all under the pretext that your riches is God’s blessing. Because, when you try to serve both Lords, the ***“pliers”*** of a society full of ultra-consumerism will get you in its tentacles and ***“bend you out of shape”***. What happens next is that instead of transforming society

through your message of the coming of the righteous Kingdom of God, society will transform you and **"bend you out of shape"** and you may end up as a distorted and split personality and the final outcome will be that this **"pliers"**, fully absorb you. It seems obvious that you will have to make a choice between these two worlds, otherwise your ambiguity will more and more bend you out of shape.

But there is a third way, and this way is outlined when Dylan continues to say that such a mega church prosperity preacher: **"cares not to come up any higher, but rather get you down in the hole that he's in"**. **"To come up higher"** may be used here in both an ironic and a metaphorical sense, meaning that he cares not to see things from a "higher", which means a "heavenly" point of view. If he would have done so he would have realized that participating in and enjoying this modern welfare society is not an aim in itself but rather a means to spread the message he advocates. If he would have realized this it would have stopped him from participating in the rat race choir. It would have prevented him from joining the rest of the world in the social rat race to acquire as much prosperity and riches as one possibly can, all under the pretence of God's blessing. There is also an ironic undercurrent in this line. If there is one person of which you may expect that he would care **"to come up any higher"** and to see things from a "higher" that is heavenly and divine point of view, it is this prosperity preacher. But surprisingly, he doesn't. On the contrary: he **"rather get you down in the hole he's in"**. When it says that he is in **"a hole"** it means that he is in an awkward situation. This awkward situation is caused by the fact that – as we outlined above - he wants to make the best of two conflicting and contrasting worlds and by doing so he drags thousands if not millions of followers into the same hole he is in. Yet it seems as if the poet appreciates the awkward situation these people are in and therefore his criticism on this phenomenon is subdued by some compassion. This compassion is expressed in the fourth chorus which now follows.

Chorus 4.

The words **"But I mean no harm nor put fault on anyone that lives in a vault, but it's alright, Ma, if I can't please him"** show benevolence and goodwill on the part of the poet and may be an attempt to subdue some of the criticism on those who were tackled in the previous verse. Now there seems to be some intentional word pun between the **"hole"** some people mentioned in the previous verse are in, and those who live in a **"vault"**. A **"vault"** is an underground arched structure – a **"hole"** in the ground - of masonry, forming a ceiling or a canopy. When you think of **"living in a vault"** it reminds us of the fallout shelters which were built in the sixties and later years to protect occupants from radioactive debris or fallout as a result of a nuclear explosion. We have to bear in mind that this song was written in 1964, less than two years after the Cuba Missile Crisis with the Soviet Union. The nuclear threat was very much tangible at that time.

Now what may be hinted at here is that those who, in the previous verse, were dragged in a **"hole"** are the same group of people who are now portrayed as **"living in a vault"**. If that is correct, **"anyone that lives in a vault"** may in a metaphorical sense, be every person who strives for maximum and total protection or security in this life and in hereafter. Protection against all hazards of life from the cradle to the grave. Such a person even seeks protection against a nuclear threat when he has the money and the means to take refuge in a private fallout shelter when there is a serious nuclear threat.

However, **"anyone that lives in a vault"** may also refer to those individuals in society who take refuge to total seclusion. The earlier note in the song that **"It is not he or she or them or it that you belong to"** may refer to such a person. He or she does not feel at home in any organized social or religious organisation and lives in total isolation from the rest of society with only a free mind and conscience as a compass. When the poet says: **"But I mean no harm nor put fault on anyone"** he shows understanding for this kind of alienation from society. A lot of individuals are indeed **"bent out of shape from society's pliers"** and – in a metaphorical sense - feel themselves forced to retreat to

their vaults. On the other hand, the poet cannot offer any solace to such a person, he is unable to please him and has to resign to that fact, that is why he says: ***“but it’s alright, Ma, if I can’t please him”***.

Verse 13.

“Old lady judges watch people in pairs, limited in sex, they dare to push fake morals, insult and stare” exposes yet another taboo in the American society in the sixties: sex. This song dealt with this taboo only a few years before the sexual revolution in America – and in a lot of other western countries – would break loose. A taboo is said to be a *‘strong social custom forbidding an act or the naming of certain things’*. Now this *not* openly naming but instead silently and hypocritically watching and condemning certain sexual practices, of which everybody knows that they nevertheless exist in society, is metaphorically expressed in an image of ***“old lady judges”*** who ***“dare to push fake morals, insult and stare”***. The poet lashes out against these hypocritical elderly women who think that they are entitled to act as moral ***“judges”*** over other – younger – people. The sexual drive of these ***“old lady judges”*** has died a long time ago, the result is that they are ***“limited in sex”***, which makes it all the much easier for them to criticize the (sexual) behaviour of young people who are still in their sexual prime. In the attitude of these ***“old lady judges”*** we may see a caricature of the last remaining remnants of the 19th century Victorian sexual morality. This Victorian morality – which also spread to America – preached a.o. sexual restraint, however, this kind of morality would soon be wiped away by the sexual revolution which would begin a few years after Dylan wrote this song.

These old lady judges ***“watch people in pairs”***. In your imagination you can see these old ladies sitting on a bench in a park watching the frivolous (sexual) behaviour of young couples. ***“In pairs”*** may be just a poetical way of saying that these ladies watch young couples. From the way in which these old ladies ***“insult”*** and ***“stare”***, they make it clear that they condemn this new sexual morale. ***“They dare to push fake morals”*** means that the Victorian moral principles which these ladies push on young couples, are only preached by the mouth. In reality however, when these ladies were in their prime themselves, they did not obey and practice these sexual principals either, be it that during the Victorian era all sexual practices were covered under *‘a cloak of decency’*. That is the reason why the morals which these old ladies push on younger couples are hypocritical and therefore called ***“fake morals”***.

The words that now follow have become one of the most famous (Dylan) quotes: ***“While money doesn’t talk, it swears”***. In this line ***“While money doesn’t talk, it swears”*** money is personified. Whereas these old lady judges ***“insult and stare”***, Mr ***“Money”*** does not do any better, on the contrary. Mr ***“Money”*** would have done better if only have he would have restricted himself to talking, however, that is not enough for him, he doesn’t talk but he ***“swears”***. ***“Money talks”*** which means that money has a voice, that money has influence in society. Although an earlier version of the song seems to have ***“money screams”*** instead of ***“money talks”***, ***“Money talks”*** is said to be an old financial saying, found in various printed records before the year of 1700.

However, but not so according to Michael Gray’s work *‘The Bob Dylan Encyclopaedia’* (New York, NY: Continuum Internat. Publ. 2006, Pg. 464) where Gray says that the line ***“While money doesn’t talk it swears”*** was inspired by a 1903 Victor catalogue of “darky ditties” of which one has the title ***“If Money Talks, It Ain’t On Speaking Terms With Me”***. Years later this resulted in a blues song called: ***“I can’t make a nickel, I’m flat as I can be, some people say money is talking, but it won’t say a word to me”***. Anyway, when it says that money ***“swears”***, these words tend to warn you that there is a curse on the craving for money, no wonder that I Timothy 6:10 says that ***“the love of money is the root of all evil”***.

Although it was Pope who said that ***“No pardon vile obscenity should find”***, the naked truth is that money rules the world and all obscenities seem to stem from the unbridled love of money and as far

as sexual morality is concerned, when you peel off the Victorian layer of decency, there is nothing but obscenity below the surface and ultimately- in spite of all decent language- nobody in society really seems to care: **"Obscenity who really cares?"**. There is nobody you can trust and nothing is what it seems: **"Propaganda, all is phony"**. When Dylan wrote the words **"Propaganda all is phony"** you may a.o. think of the propaganda the US government used at the time Dylan wrote this song, to volunteer for recruitment to serve in the Vietnam war. All this sort of propaganda proved **"phony"**; you may easily be misled, because once enlisted and sent to war you may soon end up in a body-bag.

Verse 14.

This verse, as well as the following final verse, deals with death and the consequences thereof.

The words **"While them that defend what they cannot see with a killer's pride security, it blows the minds most bitterly"** are interpreted by some as an atheistic statement. This is however not necessarily the case. It is true that when you follow this interpretation the words **"What they cannot see"** may refer to faith and religion. However, it seems not to be the intention of the poet to lash out against believers for having faith as such but against those who defend faith **"with a killer's pride security"**. It is the very nature of faith is that you cannot see it with your natural eyes and you cannot scientifically prove to others that faith is a metaphysical reality. Otherwise faith would be no longer faith. True faith is all a matter of trust, confidence and surrender. Therefore it is also against the very nature of true faith to force faith upon others. But that is exactly what some of those preachers do: they defend *their* faith **"with a killer's pride security"**. Some of those preachers (see for example Matt. 23:15) go to great length by forcing *their* faith upon people by indoctrination and they are not driven by modest wisdom – as may be expected of them - but they look more like hunters who take great pride in killing as much game as they possibly can and within the shortest period of time. They take pride in it, but it is only the cheap and shallow pride of a killer who outnumbers his victims in strength by a million to one, it is therefore only called **"a killer's pride security"**. It looks as if these preachers are sure of the case they plead but the louder they shout the more they prove that deep down inside they are not so sure, because they somehow feel that this way of evangelizing- demonstrating a **"killer's pride security"**- is cheap and against the very nature of the gospel. This method of proselyting only fills the human mind with repugnance and bitter resentment, that is why it says that **"it blows the mind most bitterly"**.

The words **"For them that think death's honesty won't fall upon them naturally, life sometimes must get lonely"** may be interpreted in various ways. **"Death's honesty"** means that death makes no distinction. Death is irrespective of persons and may in this sense be called **"honest"**. Death therefore falls on every human being, no matter who or what you are. Death falls upon all of us, very much in the same way as Dylan outlines in his song "Tempest": **"The good, the bad, the rich, the poor, the loveliest and the best"**, in the end we are all going to die. Some think that this line leads us back to the battle fields of the war in Vietnam. As said earlier, at the time when Dylan wrote this song in 1964, the US were stepping up their war efforts in Vietnam. Those sent to war in Vietnam stood a great chance of being killed in combat. If that is the case, they will not die of natural causes, **"death's honesty won't fall upon them naturally"**, but they will suffer a violent death in combat. This knowledge can make you pretty lonely and isolated, that is why it says that for this group of people **"life sometimes must get lonely"**.

Another interpretation may be that Dylan uses apocalyptic language here taken from the Bible. Revelation 9: 6 says **"And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them (KJV)**. Within the context of this passage, these people seek death to escape from extreme pain and suffering but no matter how hard they try, they are unable to find death: **"death's honesty won't fall upon them naturally"**. However if you follow this interpretation it is hard to explain how such dreadful circumstances would make life feel so lonely for these people. Therefore, the most likely interpretation of the words **"For them that think death's honesty won't**

fall upon them naturally, life sometimes must get lonely” is that these words refer to the extreme loneliness a lot of aged people in our society suffer from. Old people put away in old people’s homes or homeless people wandering about the streets in our big cities, aged people bereft of family and social contacts, full of infirmities and ailments, rotting away in loneliness, nobody looking after them, nobody caring for them, unwanted and spit out by society they feel so lonely that they long to die and put an end to it all, but death does not come and life drags on: ***“death’s honesty won’t fall upon them naturally and life must get lonely***”. This verse exposes the cities of the lonesome fear and the lack of social cohesion which causes extreme loneliness in our big western cities.

Verse 15.

This final verse takes the song to its culmination, to a head on collision with the poet’s worst nightmare of all: death and the inevitability of it. The polarity between life and death has always been on Dylan’s mind (two years earlier, in 1962, Dylan wrote *“Let me die in my footsteps”* which elaborates on the same subject). The importance of this stanza is stressed by the fact that for the first time in the song, the poet shifts to the first person and now seems to speak from his own experience. When he says: ***“My eyes collide head-on with stuffed graveyards”*** it is as if the poet says: ‘There is simply no escape from death, we are all heading in the same direction and that is to the grave. You may claim that all society’s anomalies, abuse and atrocities which I exposed in all the previous verses of this song are not as bad as I pictured them, you may even deny that all these anomalies and atrocities represent an integral part of our human existence, but one fact will always remain undeniable and that is that we are all going to die. We are all on a ninety miles an hour drive down a dead end street. At the end of this dead end street we will all meet death. Do you want to have proof? Look at those ***“stuffed graveyards”***. Death is where it all ends up’.

These graveyards are ***“stuffed”***, which means that they are full of dead bodies and bones, death is all around the place. But ***“stuffed graveyards”*** may have another connotation. You may think of a ***“stuffed”*** animal, for instance a stuffed bird. If this stuffing is carried out professionally, the stuffed bird very much looks like a real bird. But it is all fake because there is no life in this bird. You see some of this same phenomenon to disguise the harsh reality of death when you enter a graveyard. All these beautifully decorated tomb-stones, all the flowers and bouquets, all these well-written epitaphs for beloved ones, are in the end unable to take away the sadness and misery of death’s ugly face. The poet wants us to realize that this is what all these ***“stuffed graveyards”*** are all about and the poet’s eyes collide head on with them, there is simply no escape.

His eyes not only collide head on with stuffed graveyards, but also with ***“false gods”***. The official release on *‘Bringing it all back Home’* and some live renditions seem to have ***“false goals”***, instead of ***“false gods”***. The world is full of those ***“false gods”***, idols which promise you instant inner peace and riches but in the end will leave you empty handed. ***“False gods”*** may also be linked to the words that follow: ***“I scuff”*** making it into ***“false gods I scuff”***. To ***“scuff”*** has various meanings. Within the context ***“to scuff”*** may mean the shuffling of your feet in embarrassment or contempt. The poet is full of contempt for those ***“false gods”*** who promise but do not deliver. To ***“scuff”*** also has the meaning ***“to poke at with the foot or toe”***. It reminds us of some comic stock footage from Stan Laurel’s Vintage Silent 1920s movie called *“Not a well built house”*. When in this footage somebody pokes at a newly built house, when somebody ***“scuffs”*** at that house, we see this house immediately collapse. When you poke at those ***“false gods”***, when you ***“scuff”*** those gods, it immediately is apparent that they are nothing but empty idols which collapse and turn into dust the minute you touch them. However, the words ***“I scuff”*** may also be linked to the following words ***“at pettiness which plays so rough”***, making it into ***“I scuff at pettiness which plays so rough”***. No doubt, ***“pettiness”*** refers to the bourgeois narrow-mindedness of the American public opinion in the sixties. This pettiness ***“plays so rough”*** which means that if you do not accommodate to these narrow minded prevailing opinions and stand up for your free way of thinking, they will play it rough, society

will stone you, and in this respect the poet speaks from his own experience.

As outlined in the introductory remarks, Dylan once said about this song: *'Try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that'*. It seems impossible to compose a song like this in 'ordinary' way. This song was not composed in an ordinary way, but was 'magically' written. ***"Walk upside-down inside handcuffs, kick my legs to crash it off"*** is likewise an attempt to try and do the impossible to come to terms with the dreadful state of the human condition of which the poet himself represents an integral part. ***"Walk upside down"*** which means walking on your hands with your legs up, is by no means an easy thing to do. However, ***"Walk upside down inside handcuffs"*** is simply impossible because these handcuffs make forward movement impossible and yet the poet makes an attempt. ***"Walk upside down inside handcuffs"*** may be a metaphor to express the absurdity of the world we live in. In this world it looks as if there is no distance at all between right and wrong. ***"Walk upside down inside handcuffs"***, absurd as it sounds, is in this world regarded as legitimate a way of walking, as walking in the "ordinary" way with your feet on the ground. As outlined in all the previous verses of this song, in this world all moral standards are easily turned ***"upside down"*** for political purposes, to suit those in power and often just for financial gain. But the poet is honest about himself. He is not only ***"handcuffed"***, misunderstood, silenced, ridiculed by the press, hampered to express his free mind. He admits that he too represents an integral part of the political and social system which he criticizes and is unable to escape, he is not only handcuffed, muzzled, by others but he also handcuffs himself, he has himself ***"locked in tight"*** just like anybody else. *"If my hands are tied, must I not wonder within who tied and why and where must I have been"* he would quite rightly admit much later in 1989 in his song *"What good am I?"*. The absurdity of life Dylan portrays here comes close to the absurdity of life he describes in his concert stalwart *"Things have changed"*. What is more absurd and preposterous than *"falling in love with the first woman I meet, putting her in a wheelbarrow and wheeling her down the street?"*.

However, he tries to get away from the absurdities of life which on the one hand he criticizes and of which on the other hand he cannot deny that he is yet a part of. That is why he ***"kicks his legs to crash it off"***, he tries to get away from those absurdities but he knows that his attempt is doomed to fail. You may stand in a handcuffed position, on your hands with your legs up, in that position you may kick your legs as long as you please but you will never be able to crash off your handcuffs and free yourself. The only possible conclusion therefore must be: ***"Say okay, I have had enough, what else can you show me?"***. This final line shows resignation and has an ironic undercurrent. The poet has reached the end of his trail. Like once Ecclesiastes, he draws the conclusion that there is simply no cure under the sun for the hopeless condition the human condition is in, everything is vanity.

When Dylan wrote this song in 1964, the sixties cultural counter movement was not amused by the dark mood of resignation Dylan's song writing had adopted. The message of his song writing is clear: nobody under the sun has an answer, not even the cultural counter movement from the sixties, and as far as he himself is concerned, he admits that he too represents a part of the human condition and that he himself does not have a comprehensive solution either. But he has now reached a point where he says: 'Stop, there is no sense in arguing any further, enough is enough'. ***"What else can you show me?"*** is therefore an ironic rhetorical question as if he says: 'there is nothing else you can show me'. Basically the poet delivers here the same message he would deliver 33 years later in his song "Mississippi": *"I got nothing for you, I had nothing before, don't even have anything for myself anymore"* and *"There is nothing you can sell me"*.

Chorus 5.

The final chorus: ***"And if my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine, but it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only"*** is the most personal and therefore at the same time the most revealing statement of all. It may be called a blessing in disguise that fallen mankind does not have the ability to read thoughts, because if people could read each other's thoughts, any

enduring social life on this fallen planet would be impossible. If thoughts or **“thought-dreams could be seen”** a cesspit full of dirt would open up and all the dirt would flow out into the open. If **“thought dreams could be seen”** it would appear how selfish, vicious and murderous a creature we all have become, nobody excepted. What we praise to be benevolence and goodness is nothing else but restrained evil, and if there were no such restraint we would kill each other instantly and life would end. *“That’s how it is when things disintegrate”* Dylan wrote in *‘Can’t Wait’* in 1997 and that is how it is when the poet’s **“thought-dreams could be seen”**. But there is another, personal side to this. If the poet’s **“thought-dreams could be seen”** the public would a.o. immediately have found out that he never wanted to be a spokesman, neither for the sixties cultural counter movement, nor for any political or religious organization. The public would have seen that he is not is not a puppet on a string and that he is prepared to swim against any popular stream or whim. If you are prepared and have the courage to do that – and the poet speaks from his own experience, not only in the sixties but also later when he ‘emerged to find Jesus’ in 1979 - you will pay the price and they will publicly behead you, that is why he says: **they’d probably put my head in a guillotine**. The guillotine, a sort of machine for beheading a person by one stroke of a heavy ax or blade, is well known for its use during the French Revolution (1789) when thousands of contra-revolutionaries were beheaded by it. For that reason, the method of killing by a **“guillotine”** may be deliberately chosen here because during the French Revolution it was *the* typical instrument to kill contra-revolutionaries and as the sixties progressed Dylan’s song writing more and more took distance from the silent revolution as expressed by the cultural counter movement.

To wrap things up, this is what the poet has done in this song: on the one hand he criticizes society for its inherent failures but on the other hand he admits that he too represents an integral part of the very society he criticizes and for that reason he is under the knife himself. The awareness of this twofold reality may very well be the beginning of a process which can ultimately set a man free, but that horizon is not further explored in this song. Although those who see in the final words **“but it’s alright, Ma, it’s life, and life only”** a streak of Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism and a sort of mild resignation, may have a point. However, the words **“but it’s alright, Ma, it’s life, and life only”** may at the same time herald an awakening of the idea that if for life there is ever going to be a decisive turn for the better, it cannot come from life as it is here and now but it has to come from somewhere else. For the moment the poet resigns to this status quo and that is why he concludes by saying: **“but it’s alright, Ma, it’s life, and life only”**