

Bob Dylan's "High Water (for Charley Patton)" – an analysis by Kees de Graaf-

This song from the album *"Love and Theft"* (2001) is a typically Dylanesque song and without any doubt a masterpiece. The song – in its apocalyptic menace- is closely tied to another masterpiece on the same album: *"Mississippi"*. One could also say that "High Water" is Dylan's late-career new-millennium equivalent of *"A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall"*. The flood overwhelms doomed people, and there is no help as the structure of society breaks down like in the days of Noah's great flood. Although "High Water" is vividly metaphorical and full of apocalyptic conceit, it focuses on the story of the great Mississippi Flood of 1927. This devastating flood caused death and widespread destruction throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, from Arkansas to Louisiana, from Cairo, Ill., to the Gulf of Mexico. The number of casualties is not known exactly. Historians estimated the death toll at about 250 victims, but deaths due to the following disease and exposure were estimated to exceed 1,000 deaths. The Flood of 1927 affected an area of 27,000 square miles, about the size of all the New England states combined. The song is full of references to old blues songs and although it focuses on the Great Flood of 1927, it is not entirely restricted to that era, as we will outline below.

Dylan was not the only one who composed a song dealing with this catastrophe. In terms of music the flood aroused a hype which produced a lot of songs depicting the tragedy and, as may be expected, most of these songs had their roots in the blues. The songs included Bessie Smith's "Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)," Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues," Memphis Minnie's "When the Levee Breaks" and Vernon Dalhart's "The Mississippi Flood." Dylan dedicated the song to Charley Patton (1891-1934). Patton was at one time seen as the father of the Mississippi Delta Blues. Patton zigzagged between sacred church music and blues. One of his strongest songs was **"High Water Everywhere"** which he recorded in two parts in 1929, and of which we may say that it has been Dylan's major source of inspiration when he composed "High Water". Patton performed "High Water Everywhere" in a special way. It sounded as if he were some reporter, breaking news of some big catastrophe in a live broadcast, shouting over his guitar as if at any moment he himself could be swept off his feet by the disaster.

Although Dylan made it clear in the song *"God knows"* from the album *"Under the Red Sky"* that: *"there's gonna be no more water but fire next time"*, (hinting at the fire by which the world will be purified at the Latter Day) "water" has always been one of his main elements to express apocalyptic judgment and doom, e.g. in the songs. *"Down in the Flood"* and *"The Levee's gonna break"*. Dylan's singing on *"Down in the Flood"* sounds more like a warning; here his voice sounds more like a menace, emphasized by David Kemper's drum rolls at the start of each verse, which sound like a wave of water.

The question is what message the poet intends to convey in this song? I think that the message of the song is that no matter how hard the world is hit by calamities of apocalyptic proportions, the lewd basic instincts of man remain intact. On the ruins of civilization and amidst all the hardships catastrophes cause, looting, stealing and sexual orgies and dissipations go on, as if nothing has happened. Let's see how this works out in the lyrics of the song.

“High water risin’—risin’ night and day, all the gold and silver are bein’ stolen away, Big Joe Turner lookin’ east and west from the dark room of his mind, he made it to Kansas City Twelfth Street and Vine, nothin’ standing there, high water everywhere”. When the water rises night and day you and the threat of flooding comes closer and closer and in the end becomes inevitable reality, you may expect people to help and support one another in this dreadful circumstance. However, during every big catastrophe there are always some people who take advantage of the situation. They enrich themselves by stealing and robbing from people when they are in a vulnerable position: ***“all the gold and silver are bein’ stolen away”***. We see this happening on a local, micro, level; like in the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 Dylan deals with here, but also on a global level, where 20% of the world population has stolen all natural resources, at the expense of 80% of the world population that lives in poverty.

“Big Joe Turner lookin’ east and west from the dark room of his mind” introduces Big Joe Turner. Born Joseph Vernon Turner (1911-1985), Turner was an American blues shouter from Kansas City, Missouri. Some say that "Rock and roll would have never happened without him." Although he reached the top of his great fame in the 1950s with his innovating rock and roll recordings, particularly *"Shake, Rattle and Roll"*, Turner's career as a performer stretched from the 1920s into the 1980s. Turner's songs rocketed to the top of the rhythm-and-blues charts. However, his records were sometimes so down to earth and pedestrian that some radio stations refused to play them. It may be the reason why his moral principles are questioned here and why it says that Turner operated ***“from the dark room of his mind”***. A “dark room” is a room in a gay bar or adult movie theater where customers engage in sexual activity of some kind. Turner, as an adult, operating ***“from the dark room of his mind”*** is in strong contrast with the young Turner, who, as a child, first discovered his love of music through involvement in the church. Turner's father was killed in a tragic train accident when Joe was only four years old. This tragic accident may account for the dark room in his mind. He began singing on street corners for money, leaving school at age fourteen to begin working in Kansas City's nightclub scene, first as a cook, and later as a singing bartender. ***“Big Joe Turner lookin’ east and west”*** may mean that Turner “had” it. He was very successful and had all the possibilities to go either to the east or to the west. ***“He made it to Kansas City Twelfth Street and Vine”***. Turner not only made “to” Kansas City, he also made it “in” Kansas City. The period between the 1940s and the 1970s was a heady time when Kansas City was sometimes considered the crossroads of the world. This was fueled by the Presidency of hometown boy Harry Truman from 1945 through 1953, followed immediately by Kansas Dwight D. Eisenhower from 1953 to 1961.

“Kansas City Twelfth Street and Vine” refers to the City's 12th Street, which became nationally known for its jazz clubs, gambling parlors and brothels, earning the city the name, "The Paris of the Plains." At its top, 12th Street was home to more than 50 jazz clubs. No matter how big and famous Joe Turner might have been, he would ‘never be greater than himself and in the end would have to surrender to the forces of nature: ***“nothin’ standing there, high water everywhere”***. Kansas City was hit by the Great Flood of 1951 causing massive devastation.

“High water risin’, the shacks are slidin’ down, folks lose their possessions—folks are leaving town”. As said above, the Great Flood of 1927 caused massive devastation. Over 130,000 homes were lost and 700,000 people were displaced. Property damage was

estimated at 350 million dollars, equivalent to approximately 5 billion dollars today.

“Bertha Mason shook it—broke it- then she hung it on a wall, says, “You’re dancin’ with whom they tell you to or you don’t dance at all”, it’s tough out there, high water everywhere”. These lines have been inspired by Patton’s song *“Shake it and Break it”* which starts with the following lines: ***“You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall, throw it out the window, catch it 'fore it roll, you can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall, ...it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls, my jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall”***.

Bertha Mason is an insane character in a well-known novel with the title *“Jane Eyre”*, written by the English writer Charlotte Brontë and published in 1847. Dylan wants to make it clear that no matter how much devastation of apocalyptic proportions is immanent in America’s society, it is nevertheless the rules and ‘moral’ principles of the violent, the insane, the madmen and the cruel - like Bertha Mason – who pull the strings, and by which rules we all have to abide. All that is shattered, shaken and broken, all that is ugly, is presented to the nation as the best we can ever produce; it is hung on the wall for everybody to see. It is like Dylan once wrote in *‘Political World’*: *“We live in a political world, everything is hers or his, climb into the frame and shout God’s name, but you’re never sure what it is”*. When houses are destroyed and thousands of people are displaced and forced to flee, leaving all their possessions behind, there are always some maniacs left who really thrive on insanity – like Bertha Mason once did – and they have an unholy glee over all those unfortunates and they force you into a macabre dance, to dance in accordance with their rules or principles, to fulfill their wishes, and if you are unwilling, you are excluded from society and from the upper ten and you are told that you will not ***“dance at all”***.

“I got a cravin’ love for blazing speed, got a hopped-up Mustang Ford, jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties overboard. I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind, I’m no pig without a wig, I hope you treat me kind, things are breakin’ up out there, high water everywhere”. When the world is under threat of being wiped out, one may expect that man will repent. But that is usually not the case. On the contrary, in the Apocalypse, the low natural tendencies of man seem to thrive like never before. The saying *“let’s eat and drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die”* (1 Corinthians 15:32) rings true. This is expressed in various ways in the song. First in ***“a cravin’ love for blazing speed”***; the word ‘craving’ indicates that this love for blazing speed has something of a compulsion neurosis.

The words ***“A hopped up Mustang Ford”*** in combination with ***“craving love”*** and ***“blazing speed”*** is a brilliant pun. A Mustang Ford is said to be a ***“speedy”*** car, but “speed” is also a drug for which you may be ***“craving”***. So you may be ***“craving”*** for the drug “speed”, but you may also have a craving love for blazing “speed” – that is for driving very fast. The reason why the Mustang Ford is called “hopped up” is because it is a very “speed-y”, fast car. By the way, speed (methamphetamine) is a dangerous and unpredictable drug, sometimes lethal, representing the fastest growing drug abuse threat in America today. Speed is a potent and addictive central nervous system stimulant, closely related chemically to amphetamine, but with greater central nervous system effects. “Hopped up” means ‘high’ or ‘stoned’, the word is derived from “hop”, a nickname for heroin and/or opium, but it can refer to the effects of any drug, e.g. ‘everyone got all hopped up at the concert and the after party’

Chuck Berry’s influence is apparent on the album *“Love and Theft”*. The lines in *“Summer Days”* about having eight carburetors and a stalling motor seem to be inspired by Berry’s

"Maybelline". Also the lines in "Lonesome Day Blues" about "dropping it into overdrive" and the "**hopped up Mustang Ford**", seem to be influenced by Berry's song. "**The Mustang Ford**" was initially based on the second generation North American Ford Falcon, a compact car. The first generation of the Mustang Ford was introduced in 1964 and has undergone several transformations to its current fifth generation.

In this verse an atmosphere is created of drugs use in combination with fast cars, wanton women and sexual orgies, that's why it now says: "**jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties overboard**". The concept of sex as a last stronghold in the face of a nearing apocalypse may be called a classic lyrical device, a last resort when "**things are breaking up out there,**" when everything is lost and there is no hope left, why shouldn't you surrender, jump into the wagon and throw your panties overboard and have sex, no matter how hard the world burns all around you?

"I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind, I'm no pig without a wig, I hope you treat me kind, things are breakin' up out there, high water everywhere" "All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime, could never do you justice in reason or rhyme" (from "Mississippi") in some sort of a way seems to be the counterpart of "**I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind**". It is true, Dylan is indeed a great poet, and the Nobel Prize in Literature should have been awarded to him a long time ago. His poetry is so powerful that it may "make **a strong man lose his mind**". He is a public figure – a pig with a wig (a "pig without a wig" may be taken from some nursery rhyme, where it reads: "as I went to Bonner, I met a pig without a wig, upon my word and honor". In private – without his wig – the poet is no pig but a gentle person, who deserves to be treated kindly, as he would treat her. We may conclude that whether you are a person with public acclaim or not, whether you are a great poet or not, no matter who or where you are, when you are stuck and "**things are breakin' up out there**", man is inclined to take refuge to low and lewd survival mechanisms.

"High water risin', six inches 'bove my head, coffins droppin' in the street like balloons made out of lead. Water pourin' into Vicksburg, don't know what I'm goin' to do, "Don't reach out for me," she said, "Can't you see I'm drownin' too? "It's rough out there, high water everywhere".

The narrator is now completely stuck. The water rises above his head and many people drown. What was first thought to unbelievable, like a lead balloon, now becomes virtual reality, indicating that the full impact of the apocalyptic disaster will be worse than anyone could ever imagine. "**Coffins dropping in the streets**" but soon enough there will be no coffins left for the many who will die in the catastrophe, nor will there be any dry land left for them to be buried. "**Water pourin' into Vicksburg**" is inspired by Charley Patton's song "High Water Everywhere" who has: "Boy, I'm goin' to Vicksburg, well, I'm goin' to Vicksburg, for that high of mine". Vicksburg, Miss., is on higher grounds than the rest of the Mississippi Delta, so it was a place that could provide refuge, and at the time of the 1927 flood there was a refugee camp at Vicksburg. In 2002, it was the 75th Anniversary of the Great Flood of 1927 and on March 12th 2002 there was a gathering at Vicksburg, commemorating the event. The narrator is at his wits end, he thought he would be safe at Vicksburg but now "**Water's even pourin' into Vicksburg**", the poet has to admit: "**we're trapped in the heart of it; we're all boxed in, nowhere to escape**". The poet is 'Down in the Flood' and has no alternative but "**to find himself another best friend, somehow**". But in vain, when he reaches out for help to

her he is refused ***“Can’t you see I’m drownin’ too?”*** Everybody is thrown on his own resources for help, and there will be no mercy for you once you’ve lost like Dylan once said in ‘Down in the Flood’: *“It’s sugar for sugar and salt for salt, it’s king for king and queen for queen, this is the meanest flood anybody has ever seen”*. That’s how it all ends in this world, when things start to disintegrate. We live in a world of the end times, where – like Dylan once wrote in the song ‘Political World’ – *“mercy walks the plank, life is in mirrors, death disappears up the steps into the nearest bank”* and where he cannot draw any other conclusion but: ***“It’s rough out there, high water everywhere”***.

“Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew, “You can’t open your mind, boys to every conceivable point of view” They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway Five. Judge says to the High Sheriff, “I want him dead or alive, either one, I don’t care”, high water everywhere”

Who is this George Lewis? Some have suggested that it may be George E. Lewis (born in 1952 in Chicago) who is a trombone player, composer, and scholar in the fields of jazz and experimental music and a pioneer of computer music. Others say it may be George Lewis (1900-1968) who was an American jazz clarinetist who achieved his greatest fame and influence in the later decades of his life.

The problem is however, that the lyrics seem to suggest that there is a connection between George Lewis and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) but neither of these two musicians do have this link, nor are they known to have stated something as philosophic as: ***“You can’t open your mind, boys to every conceivable point of view”***, a statement which obviously has kindled the anger of the Judge to such an extent that a death or alive warrant is issued. However, if you spell Lewes instead of Lewis there is definitely a connection. (“Lewis” is the spelling which is used on the official Bob Dylan website, however, one may wonder if there is any “official” spelling which is authorized by Dylan himself).

So there can hardly be any doubt that George Henry Lewes (1817-1878), a contemporary and correspondent of Charles Darwin is referred to here. George Henry Lewes was an English philosopher and critic of literature and theatre. He became part of the mid-Victorian flow of ideas which boosted discussion of Darwinism, positivism, and religious skepticism. Influenced by positivism, Lewes abandoned all faith in the possibility of metaphysics, the idea that there is more to this world than we can see and feel, in fact he refuted the idea that there might be a God who planned it all and who is in control of all things, also of the faculties of the intellect. He laid down this abandonment in his ‘History of Philosophy’. To suggest and to stimulate the mind, but certainly not to supply it with any complete system of knowledge, may be said to be Lewes’s main contribution to philosophy. Lewes once said¹ : *“We must never assume that which is incapable of proof”*. In his ‘Foundations of a Creed’ he pronounced all inquiry into the ultimate nature of things fruitless. This is the reason why the poet has Lewes say: ***“You can’t open your mind, boys to every conceivable point of view”***. From Lewes’s stance, the concept of believing in a God who created all things and controls all things, may be nothing more than ***“a conceivable point of view”***, for which it is no use opening up your mind because this would go far beyond the limitations of the human mind and is therefore completely fruitless. Lewes said this ***“to the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew”***. The Englishman represents the Protestant, the Italian represents the Roman Catholic and the Jew represents Judaism. Protestantism and Catholicism, representing the main stream of Christianity, have something in common with Judaism. They all share the Old Testament.

¹ The Physiology of Common Life (1859-60; repr. New York: D. Appleton, 1867) vol. 2, p. 349

The doctrines of the Bible in the Old Testament which declare God, Jaweh, as the Creator of all things and as the Origin of all Species is denounced by Lewes as something to which you cannot open up your mind. Because of this denouncement the Judge is very angry with Lewes and wants him "**dead or alive**". These words seem to be inspired by an old traditional called "Po' Lazarus", which has the following lyrics: "*Well, the High Sheriff, he told his deputy, want you go out and bring me Lazarus, bring him dead or alive*".

To make sense of all of this, we feel that it is absolutely essential to understand that the words "Judge" and "High Sheriff", which are used here, are a metaphor for God and/or Jesus. God does not accept to be denounced, outmaneuvered, and His omnipresence darkened by Lewes' philosophy. God shows his wrath to Lewes, and for that matter also to Charles Darwin and to the whole world, by allowing apocalyptic catastrophes to take place: "**High Water Everywhere**". It is like C.S. Lewis (British Scholar and Novelist, 1898-1963) once wrote: "*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world*".

The message Dylan wants to convey can be read between the lines: There is no salvation in George Lewes' philosophy of the autonomy of the human intellect, nor is there salvation in Charles Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species. This does not mean that Dylan intends to say that there is no truth in the theory of the evolution of the species. The point Dylan seems to make is that it is all about the harsh qualities of life governed by natural selection, and Dylan seems to refute Darwin's thesis that there is only one eternal law in the universe and that is the law of the jungle which is at the basis of Darwin's theory of natural selection. When you accept the consequences of natural selection to the very end, the only truth in the universe is a world, which is driven by mere chance and heartless competition. The result is a disenchanting world without the active presence of an Almighty God who is above all and everything, a God who is always ineffably much more than any theory a man can ever conceive. This result is unacceptable to God and that is why Dylan has Darwin convicted by God.

The irony in the picture Dylan draws is that a world which embraces the consequences of the theory of natural selection is not only battered but in the end even destroyed by its own theory. Within the reasoning of this theory the Flood: "**High Water Everywhere**", is only caused by mere chance and self-centered egoism, expressed by "**Don't reach out for me, can't you see I'm drowning too**", is morally justified as the only means of survival of the fittest. In this song we see what happens if (as Dylan says in "Jokerman") the law of the jungle is our only teacher: a harsh and self-centered world, where mercy walks the plank. Fortunately, it is not the law of the jungle but the love and mercy of God that will ultimately win and rule the earth.

There is irony too in the fact that it is Charles Darwin himself who is trapped in the flood. Within his own theory a devastating flood happens by mere chance and enables only the fittest to survive by the process of natural selection. However, by trapping Darwin, God makes it clear that He rules and allows catastrophes to occur and that he is able to intervene in any process, also in the process of natural selection, and use it for His Own purposes. The lyrics say that "*They got Charles Darwin trapped out there **on Highway Five***". Highway 5 might have been chosen to make it rhyme with the following "alive". However, one would rather have expected that Dylan would have had Darwin trapped on Highway 61. Highway 61, sometimes called the "Blues Highway," stretches from New Orleans through Memphis and from Iowa through Dylan's birthplace, Duluth, to the Canadian border. But Highway 61 also runs through the Mississippi Delta, which was devastated by the Great Flood of 1927.

Along Highway 61 a lot of strange and harrowing things have happened. Bessie Smith was killed in an automobile accident on that roadway; Robert Johnson is said to have sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of Highway 61 and Highway 49; Elvis Presley grew up in the housing projects built along Highway 61 and Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at a motel just off Highway 61. Darwin would have fitted in very well in this category. In your imagination you can see it happen quite vividly: Charles Darwin trapped in his carriage on Highway 61, struggling to survive, unable to move on because of the ever rising waters which encircle him and block up the road ahead of him, while at the same time The High Sheriff and his servants close in on him.

Highway 5, however, is a long way from the disaster area. Highway 5 stretches from Washington State, down through California, and the only reason I can think of why Dylan chose Highway 5 for this scene, is for rhyming purposes.

“I want him dead or alive, either one, I don’t care”. One would expect the lyrics to read: ***“I want them dead or alive”*** because the following ***“either one”*** suggests that ***both*** George Lewes and Charles Darwin are wanted by the Judge. The Judge doesn’t care whether they are delivered up dead or alive, as long as both of them are handed over to Him.

We already said that we have solid reasons to assume that when Dylan says: ***“Judge says to the High Sheriff”*** he uses these words as a metaphor for God and/or Jesus. In the Bible God is often called “Judge”, both in the Old and in the New Testament; e.g. Psalm 7:11 says: *“God is an honest Judge. He is angry with the wicked every day”*. Jesus is also called Judge in the Bible. Acts 10:42 for example says *“that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead”*. The High Sheriff is ordered here in the song to execute the Judge’s verdict. This comes close to when Jesus is called “the ruler of all the kings in the world” (Revelation 1:5) who executes God’s verdicts (Acts 17:31). In his 2004 CBS Television [interview](#) Dylan correctly calls Jesus “the Chief Commander, in this earth and in a world we can’t see”. There is one other reason why the words “Judge” and “High Sheriff” are used as a metaphor for God and/or Jesus. If one would take the words “Judge” and “High Sheriff” in a literal sense, one must assume that both George Lewes and Charles Darwin had committed crimes on this earth which would justify a dead or alive warrant put out against them. But that was not the case, so we have to understand these words in a figurative, metaphorical sense.

“The Cuckoo is a pretty bird, she warbles as she flies, I’m preachin’ the Word of God, I’m puttin’ out your eyes. I asked Fat Nancy for somethin’ to eat, she said, “Take it off the shelf—as great as you are a man, you’ll never be greater than yourself”. I told her I didn’t really care, high water everywhere”.

Undoubtedly Dylan was inspired here by the song “The Coo Coo bird”, a traditional Appalachian lyric which was originally recorded in 1927, the year of the Great Flood, by Western North Carolina banjo musician Clarence Ashley. Some of the lyrics read: *“Gonna build me a log cabin on a mountain so high, so I can see Willie, as he goes on by, Um hmm hmm...Oh **the coo-coo is a pretty bird, she wobbles when she flies, she never hollers coo-coo, ‘til the fourth day of July”***. Dylan’s own rendition of the song called “The Cuckoo” can be found on the single CD *“Live at the Gaslight 1962”*.

In many traditions, hearing the cuckoo’s call is a first harbinger of spring time and for that reason identified with the warmth and promise of that season. At the same time, the roving bird is a symbol of adultery, infidelity and deceptive love. This is caused by the fact that some female species of the cuckoo have the particularity to deposit their eggs in the nest of

other, smaller, birds, leaving the eggs there to be hatched by a bird of totally different species.

As such, the image of the cuckoo fits in well with the apocalyptic atmosphere of the song. The cuckoo on the one hand represents spring, a brand new season with its promises of new life and warmth, and on the other hand the cuckoo represents adultery, infidelity and deceptive love. Both these two notions find their way in the song. First, it is said that ***“The Cuckoo is a pretty bird, she wobbles as she flies”***, outwardly the cuckoo is a gracious and an attractive bird to look at and to listen to. But the bird has a hidden trait when she deposits her eggs in the nest of other birds to be hatched there. She does not take any responsibility for bringing up her own breed and leaves that arduous task to other birds. It is like Dylan once said in the song “Heart of Mine”: *“If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime, heart of mine”*. Dylan sees the same things happen in the end times of this world. Amidst the catastrophes which batter this world (“High Water Everywhere”) sexual dissipations are sold to this world as true “love” and encouraged: ***“jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties overboard”***. This kind of love outwardly looks like ***“a pretty bird”***, which sings songs of love: ***“she wobbles as she flies”*** but in reality, behind the scenes, it is all just a fake. This kind of “love” is all deceit because it is only based on lust and is not accompanied by true love which is based on fidelity, loyalty and perseverance. Just like the cuckoo, our modern society does not take any responsibility for its own immoral deeds and shifts the burden to the society, to the public at large. The result of all this adultery is that we live in a world of broken promises of love, staggering divorce rates leading to broken families and where children are victimized. Dylan earlier said in his “T.V. Talking song”: *“Your mind is your temple, keep it beautiful and free, don’t let an egg get laid in it by something you can’t see”*, warning us, that in the end times you’ll have to open up your eyes and not surrender to those who want the pleasures but not the problems and to those who say “Darwin Loves You” but who in the end leave you behind with the bleak consequences of the law of the jungle.

For a world which has fallen so deeply and which is at the brink of total collapse, there is only one remedy left and that is: ***“I’m preachin’ the Word of God, I’m puttin’ out your eyes”***. Putting out a person’s eyes may be a token of complete humiliation, like once happened to Samson when he was captured by the Philistines. We read of this in Judges 16:21: *“But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house”*. At the same time, putting out a person’s eyes results in total blindness and this blindness is an illustration of ultimate divine wrath and judgment. We see this phenomenon in the story of the destruction of the city of Sodom as described in Genesis 19. The men of Sodom demanded to have sex with the two angels who were staying at Lot’s house. When this was refused the men of Sodom lunged towards Lot to break down the door of his house and to force themselves in. Then the angels interfered and we read in Genesis 19:11: *“Then they blinded all the men, young and old, who were at the door of the house, so they gave up trying to get inside”*.

The message of the ***‘the Word of God’*** which Dylan preaches here is, that a world may become so decadent and defiled that the only way to stop this process of total self-destruction and annihilation is to blind people so that they cannot carry out their wicked schemes. God does not rejoice in taking hard and tough measures such as putting out people’s eyes, but sometimes there is no alternative left when there is ***“High water everywhere”***.

“I asked Fat Nancy for somethin' to eat, she said, “Take it off the shelf—as great as you are a man, you’ll never be greater than yourself”. I told her I didn’t really care, high water everywhere”. The gallery of disasters which passes by in this song is not over yet as Fat Nancy bursts upon the scene. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Dylan was inspired here by a song called *“The Wreck at the Fat Nancy Trestle”*— a song by Phil Audiber: Phil Audibert guitar and vocals; Alex Caton, banjo and vocals; Jeff Romano, harmonica.

This is a song about a train disaster that occurred on July 12, 1888 outside the town of Orange in the state of Virginia. In 2007 an [inscription](#) was erected at the sight of the disaster which says: *“Here, on 12 July 1888, occurred one of Virginia's largest train disasters, the wreck of the Virginia Midland Railroad's Train 52, the Piedmont Airline. As it crossed the 44-foot-high, 487-foot-long trestle, called the ‘Fat Nancy’, for a local African American woman who served as a trestle watcher and reported problems, the trestle collapsed. Nine passengers were killed etc...”*. When you watch the [video](#) of the song and the accompanying commentary you will indeed find out that the story is rife with ironies. Strange things happened there like never before.....The refrain of the song reads:

“Wave Fat Nancy, wave that train goodbye. Save us dear Nancy, save us from our plight, where were you Nancy when the trestle fell down last night”.

Fat Nancy, the washerwoman, reported that there were problems at the trestle, but, just like Noah in the days of the sin flood, her warnings were ignored and the trestle collapsed. Ironically it says about Fat Nancy that “she just got too heavy to hold up her own weight”. This is exactly the same word pun Dylan uses when he says: ***“as great as you are a man, you’ll never be greater than yourself”***. Now how can we all piece those things together? The Bible says that that we can tell a true prophet from a false prophet by the fact that whatever a true prophet prophesizes will come true (Deuteronomy 18:21, 22). Noah, through building the Ark, prophesized that the sin flood would come, the sin flood which would destroy the whole world and his prophesy did come true: ***“High water everywhere”***. For that reason Noah can be called a true Prophet. In a certain sense, Fat Nancy was a true prophet too. She predicted that the trestle would collapse and it did come true. The Bible also teaches that false prophets can be manipulated and that they play up to you, (I Kings 22:6, 7) they’ve got to go where their bread is buttered. A true Prophet (I Kings 22:8) however, cannot be manipulated and such a prophet can truly say: ***“I’m preaching the word of God”***. Fat Nancy was such a true prophet. She couldn’t be manipulated; she didn’t play up to you. It is the reason why when, Dylan ***“asked Fat Nancy for somethin' to eat”***, she refused to obey and replied ***“Take it off the shelf—as great as you are a man, you’ll never be greater than yourself”***. A true prophet acts irrespective of persons. Even if you are a celebrity, like Dylan is, you don’t get any preferential treatment. God treats all men as equal. The apocalyptic catastrophe will strike the rich and the poor, the famous and the humble. The prophet Fat Nancy is nobody’s well trained maid and she will not give you any material benefits upon demand. ***“As great as you are a man, you’ll never be greater than yourself”*** puts man in the right perspective. You may be a V.I.P. in the eyes of the world but you will never reach beyond the limitations God has imposed on you and like Dylan wrote elsewhere:

"God knows you ain't gonna be taking nothing with you when you go".

Fortunately the poet accepts Fat Nancy's refusal to give him any preferential treatment: **"I told her I didn't really care, high water everywhere"**. In the face of the high tides that are rising, the narrator now seems to realize that he'd better concentrate on the global, devastating consequences of the flood, rather than on his own personal interests.

"I'm gettin' up in the morning—I believe I'll dust my broom, keeping away from the women, I'm givin' 'em lots of room. Thunder rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue, I just can't be happy, love, unless you're happy too. It's bad out there, high water everywhere"

"I'm goin' get up in the mornin', I believe I'll dust my broom, I'm goin' get up in the mornin', I believe I'll dust my broom, girlfriend, the black man you been lovin', girlfriend, can get my room" is from an old blues lyric called *"Dust my broom"* best known from Robert Johnson who recorded the song for the first time in 1936. **"Dust my broom"** is an old expression derived from "get up and dust" which means to leave in a hurry. Earlier "dust" was commonly used as a synonym for "depart". In fact, the expression has Biblical roots. In the Gospel of Matthew, 10:14, Jesus Christ says: *"If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave"*. Dylan uses the same Biblical expression in the song *"Pressing On"* where it reads: *"Shake the dust off of your feet, don't look back"*. We may conclude that the expression has the connotation of "leaving for good", just like Dylan once expressed in *"World Gone Wrong"*: *"Pack up my suitcase, give me my hat, no use to ask me, baby, 'cause I'll never be back"*.

The line ***"Keeping away from the women, I'm giving them lots of room"*** was inspired from a traditional song called *"Bald Headed End Of A Broom"*, the chorus of which goes: *"Oh boys, stay away from the girls, I say, Oh give them lots of room. They'll find you and you'll wed, and they'll bang you till you're dead, with the bald-headed end of a broom."*

"Thunder rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue" is a reference to Clarksdale (MS). It was just above Clarksdale where, during the Great Flood of 1927, the levee broke and water inundated the State of Mississippi. Clarksdale is not only the birth place of a.o. Sam Cooke, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker but also the place where, according to the legend, Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the Highway 49/61 Crossroads. In Clarksdale we find the famous Delta Blues Museum. Clarksdale is seen as the birthplace of the blues, ***"everything is looking blue"*** is, amidst the catastrophe Dylan describes here both an appropriate and an ambiguous expression; it is a reference both to the 'blue', dreadful situation Clarksdale was in during the Great Flood and although Clarksdale may be called the cradle of the "blues" music, it couldn't escape from the menace of the flood: ***"Thunder rolling over Clarksdale"***.

This last verse of the song may be seen as an epilogue and regarded as some sort of a penance from the narrator. In spite of the rising waters and the nearing Apocalypse as described in the first verses, stealing and looting and sexual dissipations go on, and even the narrator took part in it: ***"Jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties on the board"*** but

in this final verse the narrator seems to have come to his senses, just like the prodigal son once, when he went abroad and was hit hard by the hand of God but in the end repented and went back home.

“I’m gettin’ up in the morning—I believe I’ll dust my broom” shows that the poet realizes that *“this place doesn’t do him any good”* he is ready to hastily leave the doomed place he is in, so that the rising waters will not overtake and overflow him. He is now in an obedient and remorseful mood and seems willing to follow instructions and leave. The whole scene is somewhat reminiscent of what happened to Lot (Genesis 19) who was urged to leave the doomed city of Sodom in a hurry; the city which was on the verge of being destroyed through fire from heaven.

In the face of the approaching calamity he is ready to give up his wanton lifestyle full of sexual dissipations and there is only one way out of it and that is: ***“keeping away from the women, and givin’ ’em lots of room”***. He knows that this won’t be easy because *“these bad luck women stick like glue”* and he must have realized too what it meant, what he would write elsewhere in this album: *“There ain’t no limit to the amount of trouble women bring”*. He knows he has to hurry now because already ***“Thunder is rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue”***; everything looks very ominous and heavy weather may break lose any minute now and if he stays on he may find himself trapped in it, and nowhere to escape.

“I just can’t be happy, love, unless you’re happy too” is a veiled and alternative wording of the so-called “Golden Rule” and proves once again that the narrator is willing to repent. The Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity basically says that ‘one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself’ (Matthew 7:12). In a sense ***“I just can’t be happy, love, unless you’re happy too”*** is the antipode of ***“Don’t reach out for me, can’t you see I’m drowning too”***. When a man is locked in tight, the instinct of self-preservation becomes predominant and only heavenly aid can alter this natural tendency of man and make him loving meek and lenient, so that he can only be happy if his beloved is happy too, even when ***“It’s bad out there, and there’s high water everywhere”***.

We’ve come to the end of the analysis of this song. We may conclude that in the face of the nearing Apocalypse the main theme of this album, which is “Love” and “Theft”, is fully expressed in this song. By love we mean both deceptive “love” –*“jump into the wagon and throw your panties overboard”*- and true love –*“I just can’t be happy, unless you’re happy too”*-. But at the place where love is, either deceptive or true love, there is ‘theft’ too. Stealing and looting go on, no matter how high the waters rise.