

Metaphors and the Social Education Utility in Bob Dylan's Lyrics: Exemplified by *Let Me Die in My Footsteps*

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Abstract:

Bob Dylan's lyrics employ a large number of metaphors which are not only presented in the form of words but also conveyed in the form of texts. The presence of metaphors brings listeners and readers into a more intuitive and rational perspective and more effectively conveys Dylan's anti-war attitude. This composing strategy also reflects Dylan's creative thinking. The quest for innovation and the rejection of mainstream values also drove the American society of the 1960s to think together about real social issues of freedom, peace, and human rights.

Keywords:

Bob Dylan, Lyrics, Metaphor, Social Education Utility

1. Introduction

Bob Dylan has certainly received a great deal of attention as the winner of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. In no time at all, *Blowin' in the Wind* became a worldwide hit. The line "Yes, 'n' how many times does a cannonballs fly/Before they are forever banned?" made people take Bob Dylan for granted as a born anti-war singer, and gradually ignored the deep research on his literary achievements. Instead, the academic world was plunged into a different trend of opinion, namely, whether Bob Dylan's songs could be called literary works. For a time, a large number of discussions and questions arose one after another. Many people studied Dylan's works from the perspective of literary form, but few paid attention to the literary connotation of Dylan's songs. It is true that Bob Dylan's anti-war spirit is coupled with the peace-loving values that have long been promoted, but this does not mean that one can turn a blind eye to his anti-war songs. Rather, a greater focus on how Dylan's songs embody anti-war and what social phenomena his anti-war songs have produced should be the focus of research.

Based on the above status quo, this article includes Bob Dylan's lyrics in the scope of the study. Taking Bob Dylan's song *Let Me Die in My Footsteps* as an example, this article focuses on the specific embodiment of metaphor in Dylan's war narrative and dissects the social education utility value of metaphor in war-themed poetry. The

main finding of this article is that Dylan uses a large number of metaphors in his lyrics to convey his opposition to the war. Meanwhile, these metaphors are transformed into an aesthetic strategy that evokes the collective consciousness of the people in a roundabout way. This spirit drove the anti-war movement in the United States in the 1960s and is also instructive for the world situation today.

2. Social Background and Song Introduction

Bob Dylan's creative career began in the 1960s, a time when the United States was in the midst of internal and external problems. In terms of the international situation, the Cold War that had developed in the aftermath of the Second World War was still severe, with the United States and the Soviet Union at loggerheads and odds with each other. As a result of the rivalry between the two powers, localized hot wars arose around the world, the most typical of which was the Vietnam War. "In the early 1960s the United States grew ever more deeply involved in the war in Vietnam even though President John F. Kennedy never made a clear-cut decision to commit American military forces to a combat role in South Vietnam. He hoped a limited commitment of American advisers and equipment would turn the tide against the Communists [1]". However, the reality was far more complicated. Given the growing strength of the communists in Vietnam, the U.S. government had to send more soldiers to the battlefield. The protracted nature of the war and the harrowing experience of the battlefield continued to grate on the nerves of the American public. In the face of the Soviet nuclear deterrent and the decline of the war in the Far East, the American public was gradually plunged into fear of war. The international confrontation was gradually transferred to the domestic level, and various forms of anti-Vietnam War movements broke out. Bob Dylan quietly watched all this happen in his time, and with a cool touch, he wrote anti-war songs one after another.

Let Me Die in My Footsteps is an early song written by Bob Dylan that did not make it into an early album. It is therefore impossible to determine exactly when the song was written, except to speculate that it was composed in the early 1960s. "According to Bob Dylan himself, he was reluctant to present himself in full on the very first album [2]". The subject of *Let Me Die in My Footsteps* is a war narrative. Unlike the straightforward depiction of war scenes in many novels, Bob Dylan shows more rational thinking about war. At the same time, he avoids giving direct conclusions; instead, his thought process between the lines is presented through numerous metaphors, giving listeners and readers a poetic and aesthetic feeling. This rational and delicate narrative strategy in turn contributes to the further dissemination of the song.

3. Metaphors in *Let Me Die in My Footsteps*

"We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain [3]". It follows that metaphors can often help people to know unknown experiences by known experiences. As a highly refined product of the art of human language, poetry is often rich in metaphors, which is called "metaphorical language [4]". *Let Me Die in My Footsteps* is full of metaphors, which is admittedly a reflection of Bob Dylan's narrative strategy, as metaphors often have an innovative and aesthetic practical effect. There are seven stanzas throughout the song, with up to a dozen metaphors. The first line of the poem opens with a metaphor.

I will not go down under the ground

'Cause somebody tells me that death's comin' 'round

The prepositional phrase “under the ground” is a metaphor. The literal meaning of “under the ground” is a spatial concept, indicating a relative position. But in the context of the times, “under the ground” has at least two metaphorical meanings. The first meaning refers to an entity, namely the fallout shelters that were built on a large scale in the United States during the Cold War. The fallout shelters were built in response to a potential Soviet nuclear strike. During the Cold War, the greatest threat to the United States, and indeed to humanity, was thermonuclear warfare, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 brought humanity to the brink of death. The “under the ground” thus takes on a second metaphorical dimension, as in religious cultures (such as Buddhism) or in folklore cultures around the world, human mortality is often associated with the ground. According to Buddhism, anyone who sins alive is punished after death in the eighteenth circle of hell. From a folkloric perspective, for a long time, people who died were buried under the ground. In this sense, the “under the ground” and death are metaphorically related. For the poet, once the government asks people to go into the fallout shelters, it means the coming of nuclear war and death [5]. The poet’s statement that he does not want to go “under the ground” suggests that going “under the ground” to die is no different from standing on the ground to die, while on the other hand, he does not want to accept a punishment that could have been avoided. “I will not” is a very direct struggle, as if the poet is fighting against the fate of death, but in fact, it is a struggle against war.

The second metaphor appears in the second stanza.

There's been rumors of war and wars that have been

The meaning of life has been lost in wind

Many of Bob Dylan’s songs have religious reflections. This section, for example, is an allusion to the Bible. The poet rewrites the original words of Jesus: “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet [6]”. Jesus goes on to say, “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains [6]”. The writer uses Jesus’ words to express indirectly, by way of metaphor, his view of the world situation: the world was originally at peace, and it is because of human selfishness that warfare continues. When one strife ends, new desires come into play, which in turn invites new strife, and so on, in a vicious circle, eventually reaching the “end”. Christianity, the quintessential religion of the Western world, often has a very effective didactic function. Dylan uses the words of Jesus to highlight the root causes of war, to awake the collective consciousness of the people. If war persists, then the meaning of life will be scattered like the wind.

The author goes on to write.

I don't know if I'm smart but I think I can see

When someone is pullin' the wool over me

The “wool” in this case is both a metaphor and an intertextual expression. “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing” is an ancient Greek Aesop fable that conveys the philosophy of seeing through the obvious [5]. It is this that the poet aimed at and therefore decided to tell his view of the world through metaphor. In response to the

war, the U.S. government has gone out of its way to engage in propaganda. But in the poet's observation, the essence of this propaganda is nothing more than a militaristic demagogue, and so he says, "Even if I am not smart, I can see." The dissection of the metaphor of "wool" further reveals that the "someone" in the lines is also a metaphor. The attempt to cover up the war presupposes that there is a war, and the U.S. government is to blame for its occurrence.

In the fifth stanza, the poet lists a large number of images.

If I had rubies and riches and crowns

I'd buy the whole world and change things around

I'd throw all the guns and the tanks in the sea

For they are mistakes of a past history

Here, the image itself has the function of a prophetic statement, reinforcing the poet's emotional attitude. At the same time, the image itself embodies the phenomenon of metaphor. The "rubies", "riches" and "crowns" in the first line belong to the same category of metaphor, symbolising money and wealth. In addition, the poet's grammatical use of the subjunctive mood highlights his inner desire to possess wealth in a hypothetical manner. The poet hopes to change the world and everything around him by having a lot of wealth and throws the "guns" and "tanks", which are metaphors for war, into the sea. However, it is also the virtual tone that makes the reader understand that this is completely impossible. This harsh reality is reflected in the poet's heart, leaving behind only disappointment and helplessness. At the end of the line, the poet makes a grand metaphor, comparing the war metaphorically represented by the "guns" and "tanks" to the mistakes of past history. Indeed, the negative effects of war on humanity are great enough to scare people when they talk about it. The poet is obviously opposed to war and even fears it, but he is more concerned about sacrificing his own life and the lives of civilians as a result of these unjust and senseless wars. The fact that he likens war to the mistakes of the past history is an indication that he has come to recognise war as a disaster in its very nature. But now this catastrophe is to be carried on because of human entanglements of interests, and the poet thus shows great disappointment and dissatisfaction.

The sombre tone of the poem ends abruptly in the fifth stanza. In the sixth stanza, the poet paints a beautiful idyllic scene.

Let me drink from the waters where the mountain streams flood

Let the smell of wildflowers flow free through my blood

Let me sleep in your meadows with the green grassy leaves

Let me walk down the highway with my brother in peace

As in the previous stanza, the list of the image is the same. There is plenty of idyllic images in this stanza. Together, these images set the scene for a beautiful, peaceful atmosphere in this stanza. This tranquil image is a stark contrast to the tense, frightening scenes of the previous stanzas. But also, admittedly, this tranquility is a figment of the poet's imagination. Ricoeur points out that "History recounts what has happened, poetry what could have happened [7]". It is true that in the global context of the Cold War, the fear behind the "pseudo peace" still made Americans nervous, even though the war did not spread to the United States. What the poet portrays in this stanza is "what could have happened". These carefree moments, which could have

been obtained, are presented through the metaphor of these images. Taken together, these metaphors point to happy, peaceful times, and “peace” finally appears in this stanza. The emotion expressed in this stanza is sincere and, unlike the previous rationalistic reflections, is purely human, reflecting the poet’s humanism.

The song comes to an end.

Go out in your country where the land meets the sun

See the craters and the canyons where the waterfalls run

Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho

Let every state in this union seep down deep in your souls

And you’ll die in your footsteps

Before you go down under the ground

The narrative perspective of this stanza is broader. In contrast to the personal perspective narrative of the previous stanza, this stanza sublimates the main theme of the work through the transformation of the personal pronouns. There are no obvious metaphors in the diction of this stanza, but the text perspective suggests that there is a larger theme behind this stanza. This textual metaphor is, in fact, reflected in the entire song. In this stanza, the poet speaks directly to America and the American public, calling on people to appreciate “sun”, “canyons” and “waterfalls”. On the one hand, the poet hopes to make ordinary people think again, value the beauty of the country’s mountains and rivers, and look positively at the good life they have gained, thus promoting their opposition to war; on the other hand, the poet is also talking to the architects of the war, the warmongers, hoping that every inch of the United States will be able to penitentiary these profit-minded people. If not, their souls would have died before their bodies.

From the expression of personal emotions to the appeal to national interests, these connotations are hidden in the text through the means of metaphor. This not only demonstrates Bob Dylan’s brilliant narrative strategy but also portrays his humanistic sentiments to the fullest. Bob Dylan was undoubtedly progressive, and his anti-war spirit still has considerable social value today.

4. The Social Education Utility of Bob Dylan’s Lyrics

“Rock and roll is considered the ‘soul of 1960s rebel culture’, and some even argue that rock and roll, along with the Vietnam War, shaped the entire 1960s in America [8]”. As mentioned earlier, the 1960s were a tumultuous time in America, with all kinds of ideas rising and movements becoming popular. There is no doubt that the anti-war movement was the hallmark of the American era.

Following the end of the Second World War, the combined national power of the United States rose dramatically. This increased international standing also led directly to the development of the American national economy. As a result of this rise in living standards, more than half of the population of America reached the material level of the middle class. This economic development has led to a change in the mental outlook of the people, with the pursuit of individuality, freedom, and opposition to the mainstream. Behind these ideas were also the thoughts of the American people about the war.

In the 1960s, the student movement in American colleges and universities had a huge impact on American society. As is common in history, the emergence and development of any social movement are influenced by a certain trend of thought, and the student movement in the 1960s was guided by the aforementioned anti-mainstream values culture. From the Beatniks of the 1950s to the avant-garde that emerged in the arts, they together formed the source of the American anti-war movement.

Among these broad art forms are music and poetry; among these great artists is the name of Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan was just starting in the music industry in the 1960s when he was helped by Joan Baez, the famous “Queen of Folk”. As a musician, Joan Baez was an advocate of using music to express political views, so she also took an active role in supporting civil rights and opposing the war. Bob Dylan may have been influenced by Joan Baez in this respect, or perhaps the two of them were in the same. Soon Dylan was gaining attention and his work gradually became an anthem for the American public against the war.

Bob Dylan is highly regarded by the world, with Teng calling him “the spiritual voice of a whole generation of post-war babyboomers [9]”. The social education utility of Bob Dylan’s anti-war songs is not limited to his opposition to the war itself. It has a similar subtlety to Dylan’s strategy on a literary level. In terms of literary strategy, Dylan does not emphasise the meaning of anti-war through straightforward declarations, but uses images and metaphors to guide listeners and readers to rational thinking; on the social level, Dylan’s compositions also demonstrate the endogenous logic of anti-war through criticism of mainstream culture and experimentation and fusion with a new culture, rather than promoting slogans like anti-war for no reason. It was this innovation and fusion that greatly influenced a new generation of young Americans to move away from traditional values and toward thinking about issues such as freedom, human rights, democracy, and fairness. It is a non-linear strategy, but one that does reach people’s hearts and minds. The innovative, anti-mainstream ideas in Bob Dylan’s songs festered in American society and eventually had an immeasurably great impact.

5. Conclusions

The metaphors in Bob Dylan’s songs are rich. Also through the analysis of *Let Me Die in My Footsteps*, it can be seen that the means by which Dylan presents metaphors are also diverse. The use of diverse metaphorical strategies not only highlights the poetic and metaphorical literary character of the poem but also helps the work to better convey the poet’s claims to listeners and readers. At the same time, rational and innovative thinking is also presented to the American public through these metaphors, so that they not only feel Dylan’s anti-war attitude in the words but also inherit Dylan’s concern and thinking about the real society from his thoughts. Dylan’s song is still “blowing” in the world today, and his anti-war spirit remains something for the world to ponder.

Conflicts of Interest

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