

## Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" in the Light of Frederic Jameson's Theory of Pastiche

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### Abstract

This paper examines Bob Dylan's song "Desolation Row" through the lens of Fredric Jameson's theory of Pastiche with a postmodernist perspective. It contends that Dylan's use of Pastiche reveals a more profound commentary on the limitations of contemporary art and the collapse of cultural boundaries. By analyzing the literary and cultural references within the lyrics, the study argues that Dylan's work exemplifies Jameson's notion of the "death of the subject" and the "aesthetic dilemma" faced by modern artists. Dylan's intertextual approach, drawing from high culture, popular culture, and historical figures, reflects a postmodern condition creating something genuinely new is seen as unattainable. The paper further explores how Dylan's depiction of an unreachable utopia and his subversion of traditional characters underscore the postmodern critique of art, aesthetics, and individual autonomy.

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Postmodernism, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Fredric Jameson

This paper attempts to interpret Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's theory of "pastiche". Jameson argues that postmodernism is "a specific reaction against the established forms of modernism", especially in academics, arts and aesthetics. Jameson states that it is challenging to express postmodernism as a whole or in its entirety, but one thing is sure: it tries to displace modernism. The second is "the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separation," especially "between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture", termed as "contemporary theory". Jameson discusses the obsession of "the newer postmodernism" with current forms of expression like advertisements, commercial movies and fiction, and "paraliterature". According to him, "the new postmodernism" reveals the "inner truth" of the contemporary social structure within "late capitalism", namely "pastiche", often confused with parody and "schizophrenia" (Jameson 111-113).

Jameson defines Pastiche as a "blank parody" that lacks a "sense of humour". It constitutes the "death of the subject", meaning the end of specificity or uniqueness in an individual. This annihilation of the subject comprises two facets: one grieving the loss of what once existed in the "bourgeoisie" as the dominant class and the other a "poststructuralist" stance that "the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type" (114-115).

Hence, this study aims to closely read Bob Dylan's lyrics from the latter position that is subject as a past but has a mythical construct. Crucially, one of Pastiche's core themes will be the inevitable shortcomings of art and aesthetics—the inability to create something genuinely new, resulting in confinement to past influences as "an aesthetic dilemma". Jameson uses the example of "postmodern films" to explain this dilemma.

This study undertakes Bob Dylan's lyrics to discuss this phenomenon. His lyrics "Desolation Row" is a prime example of that "aesthetic dilemma". Desolation row as a utopia, meaning "nowhere", indicates its imagined past

existence. Dylan warns those who wish to visit this imaginary place through the following lines:

And the Phantom's shouting to skinny girls  
"Get Outa Here If You Don't Know  
Casanova is just being punished for going  
To Desolation Row" (Dylan)

The inaccessibility of place is depicted through the lines: "Check to see that nobody is escaping / To Desolation Row". There is a harsh warning to people who desire to escape through the borders to Desolation Row. Dylan may imply a border row between North and South America. He ghastly pictures the fate of those trespassing. The description of Kafkaesque dealing with those who unsuccessfully try to flee the borders is gross.

Now at midnight all the agents  
And the superhuman crew  
Come out and round up everyone  
That knows more than they do  
Then they bring them to the factory  
Where the heart-attack machine  
Is strapped across their shoulders  
And then the kerosene  
Is brought down from the castles  
By insurance men who go  
Check to see that nobody is escaping  
To Desolation Row (Dylan)

Ironically, when one deconstructs the title "Desolation Row", Desolation suggests a gloomy and uninhabited place and Row is a wordplay, one meaning "rebuke severely" and the other suggesting "travel by rowing a boat" (Oxford Dictionaries). The phrase "Desolation Row" is hence a pun on America as a gloomy and fictional place and about its bureaucratic control. Despite these conditions, people want to be part of America. The inspiration for the work

might have come from Steinbeck's "Cannery Row", which Dylan was enthusiastic about in his early years, and it likely also drew from Kerouac's "Desolation Angels" (Polizzotti).

Jameson suggests that "the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds-they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already" (115). The ensemble characters remind readers of various characters from various works right, from children's books to Eliot's poem "The Waste Land". Indeed, characters from the novels "The Phantom of the Opera" by French author Gaston Leroux, "The Hunch Back of Notre Dame" novel by Victor Hugo are conspicuously present in the lyrics. Shakespeare's characters Romeo and Ophelia are in his famous plays "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet" respectively. The parables of even Cain and Abel, Noah and Good Samaritan from the Book of Genesis are mentioned in the lyrics.

"As far back as "Desolation Row," he sang of "Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot / Fighting in the captain's tower / While calypso singers laugh at them / And fishermen hold flowers." His emphatic nods to the past on Time Out of Mind, "Love and Theft," and Modern Times probably can best be apprehended as instances of Modernist collage" (Sheehy and Swiss 147). The argument against the above statement is that instead of Modernist collage, this constitutes a postmodern feature because, in a world where creating new styles is no longer achievable, all that remains is to mimic old styles, to express ourselves using the personas and voices of styles preserved in an imaginary museum (Jameson 115). Heylin notes that Dylan draws on Nietzsche, Kafka and Kierkegaard to draw a gloomy and "dystopian worldview" but says that mention of Ophelia, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, TS Eliot and Ezra Pound in the lyrics do not confirm his intimate knowledge of Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Pound and Eliot (sec. 1965). However, this statement is contradictory because the characters in the lyrics of Desolation Row, like the fortune-telling lady, remind of "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante" (Eliot sec. I).



Dylan uses the children's story's famous character, Cinderella. However, Cinderella displays a carefree attitude in the lyrics. Thus, Dylan presents her in a popular avatar, comparing her style with that of the famous Hollywood actress Bette Davis. This comparison is starkly similar to "The Waste Land", where the line "Shakespearean rag borrowed from the lyrics by Gene Buck and Herman Ruby and music by Dave Stamper, which achieved modest popularity in 1912. This transition from Shakespeare's works to contemporary popular music symbolizes the cultural decline depicted in "The Waste Land." Notably, Eliot adds an "O O O O" to the song's beginning, evoking the closing lines of Hamlet: "The rest is silence. / O, o, o, o" (Poetry Foundation)." Eliot incorporates nursery rhyme in his poem: "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (sec. V). Whereas Dylan uses the famous children's story character Cinderella. The character of Cinderella, which Dylan "installs and then subverts", from timid to confident reflects in the lyrics of Dylan when he mentions:

Cinderella, she seems so easy  
 "It takes one to know one," she smiles  
 And puts her hands in her back pockets  
 Bette Davis style (Dylan)

Eventually, Romeo leaves her to sweep the Desolation Row on someone's persuasion. Her fate is very similar to Ophelia in Shakespeare's play, although she commits suicide after jilted in love.

Eliot refers to Shakespeare in The Waste Land:  
 O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—  
 It's so elegant  
 So intelligent  
 'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'  
 'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
 'With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
 'What shall we ever do?' (Eliot sec. II)  
 Though this reference is to "...Shakespearean Rag,

If we consider Ophelia standing beneath the window in a morbid society where perhaps she is suffering from some venereal disease, she seems to be old at the young age of twenty-two. This position can be juxtaposed against Romeo, who stands for Juliet beneath the window, wooing her at a tender age. The nurse in the play confirms when asked by Lady Capulet:

"Lady Capulet. Nurse, where's my daughter? call her forth to me."

"Nurse. Now, by my maidenhead, at twelve year old,

I bade her come. What, lamb! what, ladybird!

God forbid! Where's this girl? What, Juliet!"

(Shakespeare sc. 1.3.1-4)

Here, in Dylan's lyrics, Ophelia's position subverted against Juliet. She is standing beneath the window instead of on the window, and her age is mentioned like Juliet's on several occasions in the play.

O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art

As glorious to this night, being o'er my head

As is a winged messenger of heaven

Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes

(Shakespeare sc. 2.2.29-31)

Ironically, Ophelia stands beneath the window not as a "winged messenger of heaven" but as "an old maid": "On her twenty-second birthday / She already is an old maid". In Shakespeare's play, Juliet's chastity is described by Romeo as:

And, in strong proof of chastity well arm'd,

From love's weak childish bow she lives unharm'd.

She will not stay the siege of loving terms,

Nor bide the encounter of assailing eyes,

Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold:

O, she is rich in beauty, only poor,

That when she dies with beauty dies her store.

(Shakespeare sc. 1.1.218-224)

However, Ophelia in Dylan's lyrics is described as:

To her, death is quite romantic

She wears an iron vest

Her profession's her religion" (Dylan)

Here Dylan is pointing to her profession as a whore but at the same time remarks that she follows her profession as religion. Dylan also points to her chastity using the phrase "iron vest", perhaps mocking the chastity band. Hence, "Desolation Row" is all about contradictions and adoption from the past and constructs a myth around it that exposes the "inner truth" of the lyrics.

As Hutcheon argues, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that simultaneously employs and undermines the concepts it critiques, whether in literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, television, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography.

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