

As Dylan Went Out One Morning

By Oriana Schällibaum and Marcel Grissmer

As I went out one morning may strike the casual listener as one of the more insipid songs Bob Dylan ever wrote. Recorded for the 1967 *John Wesley Harding* album it has never been very important to Dylan; he recorded the song in only five takes and, to date, has performed it in concert only once (in 1974).ⁱ Yet, “As I went out one morning”—apart from being a joy to listen to—is worth a thorough reading. Among other things, the lyrics touch on fundamental aspects of literary interpretation.

In *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s* John Hughes, a literature professor in the United Kingdom, fittingly describes Dylan’s singing of the *John Wesley Harding* songs as being like “someone passing through a song rather than presiding over it, with no responsibility for the questions triggered by his words.” The “urgent vocals, their “unswerving casual conviction,” together with the “enigmatic scenarios,” convey a sense of mystery and yet at the same time lead one to believe that there is a deeper meaning to the songs.ⁱⁱ The English pop-music historian and Dylanologist Clinton Heylin also notes that Dylan, having recognized that “with a ballad, you don’t necessarily have to think about it after you hear it, it can all unfold to you,” chose to “write songs that obeyed balladic forms but required the listener to think about” them afterwards.ⁱⁱⁱ This resonates well with our reading of “As I Went Out One Morning.” We believe that the fundamental characteristic of the song lies in the simultaneity of its invitation to interpret and its constant rejection of interpretation.

Meanings, Messages, and the Bible

Meanings and messages have always been a kind of a red rag for Dylan. Although he became famous in large part thanks to his 1963 protest songs—“Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” and “Oxford Town”—by the mid-60s, most infamously with his switching to an electric guitar in the summer of 1965, he was rejecting these roots. This from an **interview published by *Playboy*** the following year:

Playboy (*Village Voice* music critic and columnist Nat Hentoff): You’ve said you think message songs are vulgar. Why?

Dylan: Well, first of all, anybody that’s got a message is going to learn from experience that they can’t put it into a song. I mean it’s just not going to come out the same message. After one or two of these unsuccessful attempts, one realizes that his resultant message, which is not even the same message he thought up and began with, he’s now got to stick by it; because, after all, a song leaves your mouth just as soon as it leaves your hands. Are you following me?

Oriana, a German Literature PhD student with great interest in high energy physics, has been listening to Bob Dylan since the age of 15. Marcel spends his time with performing arts and guitar playing, the former professionally, the latter for self-amusement.

Playboy: Oh, perfectly.

Dylan: Well, anyway, second of all, you've got to respect other people's right to also have a message themselves. Myself, what I'm going to do is rent Town Hall and put about 30 Western Union boys on the bill. I mean, then there'll really be some messages. People will be able to come and hear more messages than they've ever heard before in their life.

Playboy: But your early ballads have been called "songs of passionate protest." Wouldn't that make them "message" music?

Dylan: This is unimportant. Don't you understand? I've been writing since I was eight years old. I've been playing the guitar since I was ten. I was raised playing and writing whatever it was I had to play and write.

It should be noted that the **unedited tapes of the conversation**, which are currently available online, are rather less lucid and meaningful than the originally published text. To such an extent that this interview made number 1 on a list of **The Ten Most Incomprehensible Bob Dylan Interviews of All Time**.

After the 1966 *Blonde on Blonde* album and the break from touring provided by his motorcycle crash that year, Dylan returned to acoustic music and created the simpler, shorter songs of *John Wesley Harding*. "What I'm trying to do now," he said, "is not use too many words. There's no line that you can stick your finger through; there's no hole in any of the stanzas. There's no blank filler. Each line has something."^{iv}

We will now take him at his word, or at these words, by exploring possible meanings and allusions of "As I Went out one Morning" verse by verse. We do this in the spirit of an observation made by the American music journalist and cultural critic Greil Marcus: "Dylan's music is about possibilities, rather than facts . . . , a gateway to a vision."^v

Our reading is also informed by a sense—which comes out clearly in the song itself, but which can also be found in the biographical record^{vi}—that Dylan was a big reader of the Bible. Dylan has said that *John Wesley Harding* was "his first biblical rock album."^{vii} In *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, Bert Cartwright cites more than sixty biblical allusions over the course of the thirty-eight-and-a-half-minute album. Some commentators have found religious significance in the initials of the album title: JWH, i.e. Yahweh. An Old Testament morality also colors most of the songs' characters.

The Lyrics, Verse by Verse

"As I Went Out One Morning" is composed of six quatrains with the rhyme scheme abcb, as in a classical ballad. There is no chorus. (No song on *John Wesley Harding* has a chorus.) Dylan uses only two adjectives in the song and one adverb. The song thus consists mostly of actions, and the images are stripped down to their narrative core.

- 1 As I went out one morning
- 2 To breathe the air around Tom Paine's
- 3 I spied the fairest damsel
- 4 That ever did walk in chains

In his notes on this song, Heylin writes: “There is no greater commonplace than ‘As I went out one morning,’ the folk equivalent of the classic blues opening, ‘Woke up one morning.’”^{viii} Still, the opening line makes room for a story—we expect something to happen. But, instead, the next line tells us more about the person speaking: He went out “to breathe the air around Tom Paine’s.” Two elements dominate this line. First, there is the intention to breathe someone else’s air. Keeping in mind that the album’s lyrics are replete with biblical citations (some of which we will encounter later), we should not overlook the emphasis that lies on the air or the breath. The breath of life is a central concept in Judeo-Christian thought, and in both Hebrew (רוּחַ or *ruach*) and in Greek (*pneuma*), the words for breath (and wind) are also used in the sense of “spirit.” At the very opening of Genesis, when “the Spirit of God” moves upon the face of the waters, this is *ruach*, God’s breath. In the New Testament, John 20:22, Jesus breathes on his disciples so they can receive the Holy Ghost. By extension we might say that Dylan’s narrator may be seeking to be imbued with some sort of holy spirit connected with Tom Paine.

And thus the second element: Tom Paine as the name of the character whose breath the narrator seeks out. On the one hand, the listener or reader is referred to the historical Thomas Paine, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States and author of the pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776). On the other hand, Dylan may be speaking about his mixed emotions after receiving the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee’s Tom Paine Award four years earlier. His, thereafter infamous, acceptance speech got booed.^{ix}

Walking around breathing the air also suggests freedom—in sharp contrast to the damsel that walks in chains. The “fairest damsel” is a medieval notion, thus putting the scene into a yet more distant past or blurring two pasts: revolutionary America and a medieval knight’s narrative. Her being the “fairest damsel” that ever walked in chains is also to say that the narrator’s love object is a woman in chains.

- 5 I offer’d her my hand
- 6 She took me by the arm
- 7 I knew that very instant
- 8 She meant to do me harm

The gallant gesture of offering one’s hand (which might be understood as an offer of marriage) is not met adequately by the chained woman. She wants more and grabs the narrator instead by the arm. The words “arm” and “hand” are clearly juxtaposed in Dylan’s singing. At that moment she changes in the narrator’s eyes from a fair damsel to an

aggressive, provocative, and dangerous woman. It is the touch of the woman, not her proximity or her words, that sparks the narrator's fears. It is almost a supernatural touch, immediately infusing the narrator with the knowledge that the damsel might have an ulterior motive.

Again, we can find a biblical connection. In Mark 5:41 Jesus raises a little girl from the dead, the King James text reading: "And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise."^x But, in Dylan's version, the narrator does not say anything, nor does he attempt to free the girl. Instead, he urges her to leave.

9 "Depart from me this moment"

10 I told her with my voice

11 Said she, "But I don't wish to"

12 Said I, "But you have no choice"

Matthew 7:22-23 reads:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?^{xi} and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

In that light, the song's damsel has, from the point of view of the narrator, not understood his gesture correctly and has acted wrongly. Or worse, she is falsely appealing to his goodwill.

Note also the emphasis "I told her with my voice," in contrast to the desire invoked by sight as well as the purely corporeal offering of the hand. This indicates how language and reason may take over as the dominant paradigm, in contrast to the power (or sin) of the flesh. The parallels of lines 11 and 12 highlight the antithesis between the woman's desire and social rules ("you have no choice"). But who makes the rules? The narrator's words are reminiscent of a spell or an exorcism.

13 "I beg you, sir," she pleaded

14 From the corners of her mouth

15 "I will secretly accept you

16 And together we'll fly south"

On the album it sounds as if Dylan has in fact delivered this line from the corners of his mouth. An open conversation does not seem possible anymore. The woman does not have the narrator's command of language; even her mouth is not able to fully engage in speaking. Although the damsel has been identified as dangerous, her situation and her

submissive language begin to arouse compassion in the listener. This adds to a sense of cruelty and drama in the song, also reminding us of a homonym for Tom's last name: pain.

The line "I will secretly accept you" seems to be at once an attempt at seduction as well as a genuine plea. However, the biblical echo of the line, indicate the women's intentions are reprehensible. Job 13:10 reads: "He will surely reprove you, if ye do secretly accept persons."

The notion of "south" brings an uneasy disorientation. Flying south might allude to a place where slavery and human property is sanctioned. Following that train of thought, the question arises, a slave to whom? The obvious answer would be the narrator. Yet we should keep in mind that the words "south" and "chained" do not necessarily allude to historical slavery in the US, especially as the damsel is characterized as "fair," which can also mean of light hair and skin color. It has also been suggested that Dylan was alluding to the feminist movement or to the world of political protest that he was wanting to escape.

While the woman aggressively grabs the narrator's arm, her words are of submission: wish, beg, plead, accept. The narrator, for his part, does not desert his position of power: he knows (line 7), he orders (9). But at the same time he is shown to be vulnerable (8). Yet, from another perspective, his words "But you have no choice" do not need to imply his approval of the situation; it could as well be an impartial or a regretful statement. Ultimately, his feelings remain unknown. In the third strophe (or the final two quatrains), the narrator slips into obscurity as his voice limits itself to observation. He has become a passive subject to whom things happen.

17 Just then Tom Paine, himself
18 Came running from across the field
19 Shouting at this lovely girl
20 And commanding her to yield

Tom Paine here is an emblem of authority and power: His shouting and commanding have an effect on the girl that the narrator's words might not have had. His running takes place over six lines, exemplifying the time he needs to arrive and allowing us to appreciate his power before he arrives and we hear his words. The juxtaposition of the words "shouting" and "lovely" in line 19 once more arouses compassion for the girl and implies that Paine's aggressiveness might be out of place or bullying.

21 And as she was letting go her grip
22 Up Tom Paine did run,
23 "I'm sorry, sir," he said to me
24 "I'm sorry for what she's done"

Paine's shouting takes effect: the girl lets go of the narrator. Paine diligently

apologizes to the narrator, in a way reminiscent of how parents apologize for the wrongdoings of their children. The men are portrayed as subjects who can converse. We can infer that free men in this society make the rules and agree on them. Their language wields power; they are free to move and to decide their own fate. The woman in this triangle is portrayed as the dangerous and aggressive one to be harnessed and silenced. Paine, in apologizing for her deeds, assumes responsibility for her. The woman disappears from the text after Paine arrives. The only thing we hear is that she is letting go of her grip—slowly fading away. The entire last strophe takes place while she is letting go. So the song seems to end in the moment the contact between her and the narrator ceases, an inversion of the opening: the narrator discovering her.

Paine's apology is in some ways the opposite of what happened in 1963 when Dylan himself wrote an apology to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee for his behavior at the Bill of Rights Dinner where he was awarded the Tom Paine award. In the song the narrator not only succeeds in breathing the air around Tom Paine's, he is directly addressed by Paine and even collects an apology. Recalling the Judeo-Christian notion of the breath of life mentioned earlier, we could hypothesize that the narrator finally gets imbued with the Holy Spirit.

Ambiguities

Contradictions and ambiguity are at the core of Dylan's text. The narrator rejects his role as a white knight saving a damsel in distress. Thus, should we say, he is not able to free the woman (or to resurrect a dead child as Jesus did)? Or does he simply not want this role? At the same time he seems to be struggling to resist her (devilish) seduction.

Insofar as the song is about slavery, we are left with the following question: Why is Tom Paine portrayed as a slave owner? The historical Thomas Paine is believed to have written an early anti-slavery essay and to have been an outspoken opponent of slavery throughout his life. Herewith two divergent views. In 1968, the Dylanologist Alan Weberman, interpreting Dylan's song in his usual way, namely mostly reducing the lyrics to biographical references, proposed:

“As I Went Out One Morning” has to do, I think, about what happened when Dylan got the Thomas Paine award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. . . . He said some things at the award dinner the audience didn't like; they booed him; . . . He went to the grand ballroom of the Americana Hotel where the award dinner was being held and spied the fairest damsel that ever did walk in chains. Dylan is talking about the old line leftists who were gathered there; he is saying Yeah, they're in chains also—dogma's chains—except they're trying to put good deeds on their chains. You know, he flipped out when he saw all those people at the dinner wearing mink coats and everything. They were supposed to be fighting for the poor, and yet here

they were enjoying the benefits of capitalism to the extent they were decadent bourgeoisie. Dylan offered them his world view—"I offered her my hand." And the leftists wanted to have Dylan as their exclusive possession—"She took me by the arm."^{xii}

In a 1970 *Rolling Stone* piece, Greil Marcus, after summarizing Weberman's position, proposed, alternatively:

I sometimes hear the song as a brief journey into American history; the singer out for a walk in the park, finding himself next to a statue of Tom Paine, and stumbling across an allegory: Tom Paine, symbol of freedom and revolt, co-opted into the role of Patriot by textbooks and statue committees, and now playing, as befits his role as Patriot, enforcer to a girl who runs for freedom—in chains, to the *south*, the source of vitality in America, in America's music—away from Tom Paine. We have turned our history on its head; we have perverted our myths.^{xiii}

The Paine character's ambiguousness as a slave owner and as a proponent of emancipation seems to ultimately suspend the possibility of a consistent and definite allegorical interpretation of Dylan's lyrics. But it stands to reason that more than simply being ambiguous, the contradictory nature of the Paine character points explicitly toward the fact that there are many ways of reading. It can thus be seen as an ironic comment on interpretation.

Keys, Truth and Broken Windows

In the liner notes of the *John Wesley Harding* album, Dylan re-tells the parable of the three kings from the Christmas story.^{xiv} Dylan's narrative is quite distorted: "one had a broken nose, the second, a broken arm and the third was broke." Instead of bringing gifts to the newborn savior, they end up at the house of Frank and Vera (both names referring to truth). They are looking for help regarding a Dylan album:

"Frank," [the first king] began, "Mr. Dylan has come out with a new record. This record of course features none but his own songs and we understand that you're the key.' 'That's right," said Frank, "I am." "Well then," said the king in a bit of excitement, "could you please open it up for us?" Frank, who all this time had been reclining with his eyes closed, suddenly opened them both up as wide as a tiger. "And just how far would you like to go in?" he asked and the three kings all looked at each other. "Not too far but just far enough so's we can say that we've been there," said the first chief. "All right," said Frank, "I'll see what I can do," and he commenced to doing it. First of all, he sat down and crossed his legs, then he sprung up, ripped off his shirt and began waving it in the air. A lightbulb fell from one of his pockets and he stamped it out with his foot. Then he took a deep breath,

moaned and punched his fist through the plate-glass window. Settling back in his chair, he pulled out a knife, “Far enough?” he asked. “Yeah, sure, Frank,” said the second king. The third king just shook his head and said he didn’t know. The first king remained silent.

Then the kings leave, happy and healed, while Frank is left to contemplate the fixing of his broken window.

This short episode makes fun of the apparent opacity of Dylan’s songs, which seem to need a key to unveil their meaning. The key to understanding is mocked and its value clearly downplayed by Frank performing a weird show. At the same time, the recipients of the key are shown to be happy with the results.

It was just before the break of day and the three kings were tumbling along the road. The first one’s nose had been mysteriously fixed, the second one’s arm had healed and the third one was rich. All three of them were blowing horns. “I’ve never been so happy in all my life!” sang the one with all the money.

Now are we? A careful reading of “As I went out one Morning” has revealed a number of different stories or possibilities in the lines. The process of interpretation has been fruitful and slightly frustrating at the same time. We are happy with the variety and multiplicity of narratives that the song offers. At the same time the song keeps its enigmatic character. It shows how interpretation is a never-ending process where certainty and stability are never reached.

The only constant seems to be how Dylan’s lyrics—or those written after his protest songs had made him famous—came to parallel his evolving public persona. Both are adamantly unwilling to be of service to any one meaning, interest, or point of view. In fact, it seems it is Dylan’s songs, even more than his public appearances, that demonstrate his reluctance to be the prophet of his generation or to be used by anyone as spokesperson.

ⁱ Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan 1957–1973* (Chicago Review Press, 2009), 371.

ⁱⁱ John Hughes, *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s* (Ashgate, 2013), 182.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heylin, *Revolution*, op. cit., 371.

^{iv} Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades. A Biography* (Touchstone, 1991), 185.

^v Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan: Writings 1968–2010* (Public Affairs, 2010) 26.

^{vi} In a 1968 interview, Dylan’s mother, Beatty Zimmerman, mentioned his growing interest in the Bible, stating that “in his house in Woodstock today, there’s a huge Bible open on a stand in the middle of his study. Of all the books that crowd his house, overflow from his house, that Bible gets the most attention. He’s continuously getting up and going over to refer to something.” (Heylin, *Behind the Shades*, 285).

^{vii} Hughes, *Invisible now*, 181.

^{viii} Heylin, *Revolution*, 362.

^{ix} The award was given once yearly since 1958 in recognition of distinguished service in the fight for civil liberty. Dylan was the 1963 recipient. The [Bob Dylan and the NECLC](#) website has been offering: the text of Dylan's extemporaneous speech, probably typed from an audio tape; an eloquent letter in defense of Dylan and of youth itself from Corliss Lamont, who was then Chairman of the organization; and finally, a poetic explanation by Dylan himself analyzing and expressing his tumult of feelings on the occasion.

^x Here and throughout this piece, the King James translation of the Bible is being used. Talitha means "little girl" in Aramaic. Interestingly, it was among the names taken from the Bible that were used by Puritans in the American colonial era.

^{xi} This mirrors the attempted co-opting of Dylan's oeuvre by his following.

^{xii} Alan Weberman, [Bob Dylan: What His Songs Really Say](#), *Broadside* #93, July/August 1968, 7.

^{xiii} Greil Marcus, [Bob Dylan: Self Portrait](#), *Rolling Stone*, June 8, 1970, as reproduced in Marcus, *Bob Dylan*, 26.

^{xiv} From [commercial website for the album John Wesley Harding](#), consulted September 2017.