

Does Bob Dylan deserve to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature?

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Is American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, now 75 years old, deserving of the Nobel Prize for Literature?

Numerous issues need to be disentangled here, probably too many for one article.

In the first place, there is the matter of the Nobel Prize itself. No one is obliged to accept the awarding process as either entirely objective or disinterested. The prize has been handed out by the Swedish Academy, whose 18 members have tenure for life, since 1901. The winners have for the most part tended to be European, with Swedish writers especially well represented in the first few decades of the prize's existence.

The list of 113 Nobel Laureates includes many writers—however one may feel about the overall thrust of their work—who undoubtedly are serious figures, including Harold Pinter, Günter Grass, Doris Lessing, Gabriel García Márquez, Alice Munro, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Heinrich Böll, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre (who refused the award), Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, André Gide, Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Mann, George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, Anatole France, Knut Hamsun, Gerhard Hauptmann, Rudyard Kipling, Pablo Neruda and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

There have also been numerous mediocrities and nonentities among the award winners, and inappropriate prizes, such as the one in 1953 given to former British prime minister Winston Churchill, “for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values.”

Missing from the list of Nobel Laureates are Leo Tolstoy, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, Mark Twain, Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, Sean O'Casey, Isaac Babel, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Richard Wright, Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, George Orwell, Ignazio Silone, B. Traven, Jaroslav Hašek, André Breton, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Mariano Azuela, James Baldwin, Philip Roth and a host of other intriguing and important writers.

The failure to bestow prizes on Tolstoy and Chekhov (who died in 1910 and 1904, respectively) in the first decade of the prize's existence is attributed to the anti-Russian inclinations of Swedish ruling circles. So much for the Academy's Olympian objectivity!

No doubt politics of one sort or another entered into the 2016 choice. The Academy seems to be making an attempt to widen its definition of literature and perhaps prove its “relevancy” in the 21st century. Beyond that, one has the sense that, in the midst of US-European tensions that can only worsen and an unprecedented, tumultuous American election campaign, this is a signal from sections of the European upper middle class and bourgeoisie to their affluent counterparts in the US—the Obama constituency—so to speak, offering support and the “hand of friendship.”

There is a “political-psychological” aspect of this particular honor as well. The average age of the Swedish Academy members—academics, linguists, poets, critics—is 69 (the youngest member is 44 and the oldest 92). It may be that proceeding as though the American singer, who

belongs more or less to their generation, still represents something artistically innovative and even socially oppositional is a means of convincing themselves that they still do as well, what with their dim memories (in some cases) of a radical youth and their abandoned idealism. In reality, to speak frankly, the prize is handed out by affluent 60- and 70-year-olds who, like Dylan himself, have been thoroughly integrated into the establishment and have not had anything politically interesting or serious, let alone genuinely rebellious, to say for decades.

In any event, leaving the Swedish Academy and the various political considerations out of the picture, the unavoidable question is this: is Bob Dylan worthy of a major literary prize?

Dylan is a singer and popular song writer. Decades ago, high school English teachers in America (and perhaps elsewhere), to inoculate their students against the supposed threat of rock and roll, liked to read out song lyrics and point to their inanity. It is doubtful that this ever accomplished much of anything, because it was largely the energy, the “beat,” the vaguely subversive feeling of the music that young people were responding to.

Bob Dylan has not been a composer of “hit songs,” by and large, but popular songs of any kind have their peculiarities and limitations. Songwriting and poetry are not the same thing. Rhythm and repetition have far larger and more independent roles, even determining roles, to play in the creation and production of popular songs, as the adolescents of yesteryear instinctively recognized. The most profound or cleverest lyric will die on the vine unless it is backed or accompanied by—or counterposed to—the appropriate musical setting. In a truly memorable popular song, the words and music interact to enormous emotional effect.

At least until the late 1960s, many popular tunes were written by duos, one member of which would concentrate on the music and the other the lyrics. To treat Dylan's work as “literature” is unfair to him, because one is then obliged to judge him solely on the basis of his lyrics, of what lies cold and dead on the page, and even in the best of circumstances that will almost always seem inadequate or lacking with vocal music or theatrical works, which are meant to be performed.

So, we have to rephrase our question again: did Bob Dylan, in his popular songs, write lyrics that are worthy of a significant literary prize?

On this score, a good many foolish claims are being made at present. Dwight Garner in the *New York Times* on October 13 contributed a few of them. “This Nobel,” Garner wrote, “acknowledges what we've long sensed to be true: that Mr. Dylan is among the most authentic voices America has produced, a maker of images as audacious and resonant as anything in Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson.”

The *Times* journalist goes on to cite “venerated [British] critic and scholar Christopher Ricks,” who has made “the case most fully for Mr. Dylan as a complicated and complicating poet.” In his 2003 book, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, Ricks “persuasively” compared the singer-songwriter to “personages as distinct” as Yeats, Thomas Hardy, John Keats, Andrew Marvell and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

In an interview following the announcement of the prize winner, Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, placed Dylan in the company of Homer, believed to be the greatest epic poet by the Ancient Greeks, and Sappho, one of the greatest lyric poets.

Historian Sean Wilentz, in the introduction to his *Bob Dylan in America*, was slightly more cautious, suggesting that Dylan belonged to the “tradition” of “Whitman, [Herman] Melville, and [Edgar Allan] Poe, which sees the everyday in American symbols and the symbolic in the everyday, and then tells stories about it.”

Such comparisons are out of place and unnecessary (and speak more than anything else to the debased state of present-day criticism and commentary). In the end, it will not do Bob Dylan any good to be placed in such company.

By any objective measurement, contrary to Garner in the *Times*, the singer and songwriter has not created “images as audacious and resonant as anything” in Whitman (1819-92) or Dickinson (1830-86), two remarkable figures of the “American Renaissance,” the period intimately bound up with the coming of the Second American Revolution, the Civil War.

As literary historian F. O. Matthiessen noted, “The half-decade of 1850-55 saw the appearance of *Representative Men* (1850) [by Ralph Waldo Emerson], *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) [both by Nathaniel Hawthorne], *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852) [both by Herman Melville], *Walden* (1854) [by Henry David Thoreau], and *Leaves of Grass* (1855) [by Whitman].” Matthiessen added: “You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to those in imaginative vitality.”

In his introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote: “Of all nations, the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets, and will doubtless have both the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common reference as much as their poets shall.” This insight was confirmed within a half-dozen years by the elevation of a poet into the White House, Abraham Lincoln, who was also America’s greatest president. Whitman went on to assert that the poet “bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land. ... he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking.”

He continued: “If the time becomes slothful and heavy he [the poet] knows how to arouse it . . . he can make every word he speaks draw blood. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation he never stagnates. Obedience does not master him, he masters it. . . .”

And further: “The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots. The turn of their necks, the sound of their feet, the motions of their wrists, are full of hazard to the one and hope to the other.”

Does this bring to mind Bob Dylan’s body of work? Would *he* even maintain, were he to be honest with himself, that it does?

Of course, in all fairness, not every poet could live up to Whitman’s vision—in fact, probably few have. But his overwhelming ambition points to the complexity and demands of poetry, language concentrated and charged with meaning to the greatest possible extent. Whitman’s own life-work is an illustration. He spent nearly four decades writing and adding to *Leaves of Grass*, expanding it from a slim volume of 12 poems in 1855 to a work of nearly 400 poems in the final edition published during his lifetime in 1892.

It would be false and misleading to suggest that Bob Dylan has been “poetic” in the Whitman-Dickinson meaning of the word. He has been doing something else.

A perusal of *Bob Dylan—Lyrics: 1962-2001*, at least its first half a dozen years or so, reveals a lively imagination at work, and sometimes deep feeling. Dylan can be witty, satirical, insightful and, as well,

genuinely outraged at American society’s injustices. The lyrics are capable of conveying physical and psychic longing, both for “the beloved” and for recognition by society at large.

The songs from 1963-66 possess many appealing characteristics, but there is hardly one that does not suffer, if assessed solely by literary standards, from occasionally sloppy imagery, wordiness, and strained and obscure verbal juxtapositions (borrowed from the Beat and perhaps surrealist schools, among others, with mostly unhappy results). The songwriter passes between genuine spontaneity and informality, at one pole, to mere carelessness, at the other, sometimes within a single tune.

Of course, he *aspires* quite deliberately to be the opposite of rigorously self-disciplined; on the contrary, part of the charm (and social unruliness) of the early music, before a certain self-pity and paranoia set in in the mid-1960s, is often its self-deprecating, breezy, unfettered feel. This was material, one must say forcefully, even at its angriest and most socially focused, that was *not* written and performed with the view in mind of securing prestigious literary prizes. And that is no insult, by any means. This is another reason why the Nobel Prize seems so false and out of keeping.

To his credit, in May 1963, Dylan walked out before a scheduled appearance on the popular “Ed Sullivan Show” on CBS Television, at a time when performing there was one of the preferred routes to stardom, after CBS officials refused to allow him to sing “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues,” which satirized anti-communist hysteria in the US. Would the Bob Dylan of that day have passively and obediently resigned himself to the upcoming Stockholm ceremony?

As noted above, the Swedish Academy’s rather grandiose gesture will only have the paradoxical result of diminishing Dylan’s reputation in many eyes. That would be unfortunate. I think it is an error to dismiss his best work. It meant a great deal to a certain generation, or more than one, and for good reason.

In the early to middle part of the 1960s, but only during that period, as far as I can see, Bob Dylan represented an attitude to life that resonated strongly with many middle class young people in particular.

There was at the time among these same young people a sudden and strong desire for honesty and authenticity. Official America was obviously lying through its teeth about everything. It was lying about its concern for democracy and freedom, it was lying and had been lying for years about “communism.” A dreadful hypocrisy prevailed, which almost no one challenged. Authorized morality, including the rules governing conduct between the sexes, did not begin to correspond to elementary human needs and feelings. And there was terrible anxiety too. In October 1962, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, many people felt the world might be coming to an end.

In hindsight we can see that the growing skepticism about what the government, the corporations and the military were telling everyone had something to do with the unresolved and mounting problems of American capitalist society. But the young people did not see that, they merely felt they might suffocate if things continued as they were.

It was inevitable that someone would articulate some of these earnest but confused feelings in a popular-artistic way.

This is not the occasion to delve into the sociological background of the “folk music revival” in the 1960s and the extent to which it reflected the ideological influence of Stalinist Popular Frontism. The Stalinists’ *modus operandi* consisted in finding “progressive” tendencies in every national bourgeoisie and its cultural traditions, as a means of helping to justify the alliance of workers with—or, in practice, their subordination to—the supposedly liberal, democratic sections of that ruling class.

It would be wrong to view the “folk” outburst as something purely artificial or invented, although it is often challenging to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic in the case of the folk music world as a whole or the career of a given performer.

But there is no question that to the extent that this music was seen in the early 1960s as a center of anti-establishment sentiment and even social opposition it drew into its ranks some immensely gifted and sensitive artists, including Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Joni Mitchell, Odetta, Judy Collins, Fred Neil, Eric Andersen, Gordon Lightfoot, Donovan, Tim Hardin, Carolyn Hester, Ian and Sylvia and a good many others.

The desire for what was perceived to be greater sincerity in popular music meant a rejection, which also had a generational element, of the polished and more easily palatable. There was a resulting interest in “abrasiveness” and “rawness,” in imperfection even and in greater social and personal urgency.

Bob Dylan brought to bear some of these elements. There were no doubt numerous irritating features to his first musical efforts: the inevitable dropping of the final “g” (as in “goin’,” “freewheelin’,” “travelin’,” etc.), the other folksy pretenses, including second-hand and not very convincing Woody Guthrie imitations (and Guthrie’s music already contained an element of not entirely convincing “folksiness”), the self-consciously rough voice, and so on.

Some of the initial “protest songs” are affecting, or contain affecting passages, including “Masters of War,” “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall,” “With God on Our Side,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” and “Chimes of Freedom.”

In the last mentioned, the singer makes an impassioned plea on behalf of “the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones and worse / And for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe.”

There are also heavy-handed and mawkish “socially conscious” songs on Dylan’s first few records.

It is possible to argue that Bob Dylan’s strongest and most enduring tunes are his love songs, and that the latter, for better or worse, contain some of his most pronounced feelings of opposition and protest, although of course expressed in semi-bohemian and “individualistic” tones. In that regard, one could point to songs like “Boots of Spanish Leather,” “All I Want to Do,” “Spanish Harlem Incident,” “To Ramona,” “I Don’t Believe You,” “She Belongs to Me,” “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” “Farewell Angelina,” “Love Is Just a Four Letter Word,” “One of Must Know (Sooner or Later)” and “Just Like a Woman,” along with other personal pieces such as “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues.”

These songs produced some of Dylan’s clearest and “cleanest” lines, including these, from “To Ramona”:

The flowers of the city
Though breathlike
Get deathlike at times
And there’s no use in trying
To deal with the dying
Though I cannot express that in lines

From his music of 1963-64 in particular we come away with the image of the artist in energetic and sensual pursuit of the woman (or women) he adores in the face of the collective disapproval or hostility of official society. In the earliest songs, one has the impression at times that the various warmongers, racists and “John Birchers” (right-wingers, after the ultra-reactionary John Birch Society) provoke the singer’s ire, as much as anything else, because they threaten to deprive him of life with the object of his affections. A little later, in the more sophisticated efforts, family obligations, conventional wisdom and “public opinion” seem the chief impediments.

It is outside the scope of this article to discuss in any depth Bob Dylan’s abrupt “jumping ship” in 1967 or so.

Suffice it to say that given the relative thinness of his own commitment and understanding, Dylan inevitably rejected the role that had been prepared for him by the “left” folk music world, as the new “people’s

troubadour.” He was not wrong to do so. Arch-Stalinist Irwin Silber’s “Open Letter,” published in *Sing Out!* magazine in November 1964, which criticized Dylan’s new “inner-directed ... inner-probing, self-conscious” material, had unmistakably repressive, even threatening overtones. Silber, a longtime member of the Communist Party, went on to an inglorious career in Maoist pseudo-culture and politics.

The musical-lyrical status quo was untenable. It was impossible to go on playing at “hobos” and “freight trains” and “Walkin’ Down the Line,” and so forth. The singer himself recognized that, titling a new album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Inner city riots erupted in New York and Los Angeles. A Democratic Party president, after having promised not to send “our boys” to Southeast Asia, was doing precisely that, in large numbers. Something new and tense was in the air.

Less and less convinced (if he ever had been) by radical politics, ever more attracted by the siren song of commercial success, intensely envious of those who enjoyed that success, and not immune either to “good, old-fashioned” American anti-communism, Dylan used Silber and company and their crude efforts to direct him as a pretext to turn his back on any concerted social involvement or interest. In the time-honored manner, he threw the baby out with the bathwater.

It had all been a terrible misunderstanding, he had never meant to be a “leader” or a “protester,” he now regretted idle talk about “equality” (“Ah, but I was so much older then / I’m younger than that now”). His evolution was rapid and ignominious. There is precious little to show for the past 45 years or more.

Bob Dylan was neither the first nor the last American popular artist, or artist of any kind, to imagine he could outwit historical and social processes—which threatened to “slow down” or even block his rise—by avoiding their most vexing questions and problems. What he didn’t realize was that in turning his back on social life and softening his attitude toward the existing order, he was at the same time cutting himself off from the source of artistic inspiration, that he was surrendering forever what was best in him.

Links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeP4FFr88SQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fB9xqA3eUY>

Other performers singing Bob Dylan songs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJ94iDhF7Cc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y89rmBINAx4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nHwILs8bdo>



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