



## Handout 1a - Dylan's Literary Inspirations

### Allen Ginsberg

In 1961, Bob Dylan dropped out of college and moved to New York City. There he met poet Allen Ginsberg, and the two became close friends. Before meeting Dylan, Ginsberg helped establish the "Beat" movement, a literary movement whose guiding principle was to bring poetry "to the streets," usually with a unique mix of slang, obscenity, descriptions of everyday life, and spiritual (often Buddhist) concepts.



Ginsberg and Dylan

Ginsberg and Dylan shared a mutual admiration. Dylan was familiar with Ginsberg's poetry before arriving in New York City, stating that he didn't start writing until after he discovered Ginsberg (among other writers). Ginsberg, whose Beat poetry challenged literary conventions and social norms, saw a kindred spirit in Dylan, whose music also pushed boundaries. He stated in an interview that when he heard Dylan's song "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall," he wept, feeling that "the torch had been passed to another generation."

Inspired by jazz, beat poetry regularly features an improvisatory use of language and imagery, often in an attempt to point out the ridiculousness of everyday existence. This might be best seen in Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," which portrays life itself as an absurd to-do list.

#### *Lyric Comparison:*

<p>"Subterranean Homesick Blues" Bob Dylan</p> <p>Ah get born, keep warm Short pants, romance, learn to dance Get dressed, get blessed Try to be a success Please her, please him, buy gifts Don't steal, don't lift Twenty years of schoolin' And they put you on the day shift Look out kid They keep it all hid Better jump down a manhole Light yourself a candle Don't wear sandals Try to avoid the scandals Don't wanna be a bum You better chew gum The pump don't work 'Cause the vandals took the handles</p>	<p>"Howl" Allen Ginsberg</p> <p>I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,</p> <p>angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,</p> <p>who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,</p> <p>who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated. . .</p>
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## Handout 1b - Dylan's Literary Inspirations

### Blues and Folk Music

In multiple interviews, Dylan expresses he was most influenced by American folk and blues musicians. Many of his songs are ballads recounting the tales of heroes and villains, similar to those that were performed by travelling singers and poets in centuries past. Other songs, like “Maggie’s Farm,” simply describe the life of working class, disenfranchised people, similar to topics often addressed in American Blues music. In his acceptance speech for the 2015 MusiCares Person of the Year award, Dylan makes this association with these types of music clear:

“[My] songs didn’t come out of thin air. I didn’t just make them up out of whole cloth. . .there was a precedent. It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, traditional rock & roll



Blues Musician Muddy Waters

and traditional big-band swing orchestra music.

I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs. And I played them, and I met other people that played them, back when nobody was doing it. Sang nothing but these folk songs, and they gave me the code for everything that’s fair game, that everything belongs to everyone. For three or four years, all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere, clubs, parties, bars, coffeehouses, fields, festivals. And I met other singers along the way who did the same thing and we just learned songs from each other. I could learn one song and sing it next in an hour if I’d heard it just once.

If you sang ‘John Henry’ as many times as me – ‘John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain’t nothin’ but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I’ll die with that hammer in my hand.’ If you had sung that song as many times as I did, you’d have written ‘How many roads must a man walk down?’ too.’

#### Lyric Comparison:

<p>“Maggie’s Farm” Bob Dylan</p> <p>I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more No, I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more Well, I wake in the morning Fold my hands and pray for rain I got a head full of ideas That are drivin’ me insane It’s a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more</p>	<p>“Burr Clover Farm Blues” Muddy Waters</p> <p>Well now, the reason that I love that old Burr clover farm so well [X2] Well now, we always have money and we never raise no hell</p> <p>Well now, I’m leaving this morning, and I sure do hate to go [X2] Well now, I’ve got to leave this burr clover farm, I ain’t coming back no more</p>
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## Handout 1c - Dylan's Literary Inspirations

### Arthur Rimbaud

In his autobiography *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan writes that he first discovered the work of French poet Arthur Rimbaud when he read one of his letters, entitled “*Je est un autre*,” or “I is someone else.” “When I read those words, Dylan writes, “the bells went off. It made perfect sense. I wished someone would have mentioned that to me earlier.”

Born in 1854 in Northern France, Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud created his entire body of work before the age of 21, when he ceased writing altogether. His poems, mostly written when he was a teenager, were scandalous in content and form. He openly mocked the romanticism of the poetry of his day by incorporating “distasteful” places such as bathrooms and butcheries in his work. He also rejected practically every institution popular in his time: from Christianity to science to “polite society.” Stylistically, Rimbaud is known for bizarre juxtapositions of words (“The Moon has heard jackals yelping in the thyme desert, and eclogues in wooden shoes growling in the orchard”), a practice that made him a father-like figure to the surrealist poets that wrote in the 20th century.



Poet Arthur Rimbaud

Perhaps more than anything else, it was Rimbaud’s outsider perspective, his use of surreal imagery, and his rejection of established norms that Dylan admired. This might be best seen in the song “Like a Rolling Stone,” in which Dylan mocks the character of “Miss Lonely,” a once-rich woman now down on her luck, only to later celebrate her newfound freedom as a vagabond outside of the confines of society.

#### Lyric Comparison:

<p>“Like A Rolling Stone” Bob Dylan</p> <p>Ah you never turned around to see the frowns On the jugglers and the clowns when they all did tricks for you You never understood that it ain’t no good You shouldn’t let other people get your kicks for you You used to ride on a chrome horse with your diplo- mat Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat Ain’t it hard when you discovered that He really wasn’t where it’s at After he took from you everything he could steal</p>	<p>“A Season in Hell” Arthur Rimbaud</p> <p>On the roads, on winter nights, homeless, without clothes, without bread, a voice clenched my frozen heart: “Weakness or strength: you are there, it is strength”. . . In cities the mud seemed to me suddenly red and black, like a mirror when the lamp moves about in the next room, like a treasure in the forest! Good luck, I cried, and I saw a sea of flames and smoke in the sky; and on the left and on the right, every kind of richness flaming like a billion thunderbolts.</p>
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# Handout 1d - Dylan's Literary Inspirations

## The Bible

In his biography of Bob Dylan, Robert Shelton attributes part of Dylan's brilliance to his tendency of "devouring everything he could lay his eyes on." It is little wonder, then, that one of texts most inspirational to Dylan was one equally influential to the world as a whole: The Bible. In addition to producing three explicitly religious albums, many of Dylan's songs contain references to stories and ideas featured in both the Old Testament and New Testament.

One of Dylan's most well-known songs, "All Along the Watchtower" (famously covered by Jimi Hendrix) is drawn from a scene in the Bible's Book of Isaiah, and is featured on the album *John Wesley Harding*, which Dylan described as "the first biblical rock album." Another of his well-known songs, "Blowin' in the Wind," is inspired by stories and phrases found within the Old Testament.



Dylan at a Museum

### Lyric Comparison:

<p>"Blowin' in the Wind" Bob Dylan</p> <p>How many roads must a man walk down Before you call him a man? Yes, and how many seas must a white dove sail Before she sleeps in the sand? ...</p> <p>How many times must a man look up Before he can see the sky? Yes, and how many ears must one man have Before he can hear people cry?</p>	<p>The Old Testament</p> <p>Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. (Genesis 8:8-11)</p> <p>Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house. (Ezekial 12:1-2)</p>
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