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Canonical Membership through Participation in the American Project

Defining the canon has been a search to define a national aesthetic and personality. Acceptance into the modern canon has largely been due to a text's social influence and its affect upon literary and creative consciousness. The debate of greatness is contingent upon the belief that greatness can be objectively identified and evaluated. Supporters of canon formation defend their selections with notions of an American tradition. This tradition is a parallel development of canon and culture; an American canon should be reflective of the American culture: eclectic, rebellious, and according to Harold Bloom, "lonely, idiosyncratic and isolated." Bob Dylan's song "Desolation Row" participates in this American aesthetic and therefore the American canon. Dylan's song, and work in general, have "contaminated" (Bloom 229) the American psyche, thus influencing artists, activists, poets and the public at large for the past 47 years. The song has transcended the music genre to become poetry. The text has been covered, adapted and replicated in other musicians' songs, other poets' texts and other artists' work. Its sheer power of infiltration has launched this song into legend, entwining itself into the American aesthetic, participating in the American Project and gaining membership into the American canon. It is for these fundamental reasons that it deserves literary study. "Desolation Row" by Bob Dylan is a canonical and worthy text due to its poetic form, cultural complexity, social role and cultural

reproduction, it has become in the nearly half-century it has been circulated, “a banner of communal identity” (Smith 150).

“Desolation Row” is, at its core, a poem. It is epic in its sweeping depiction of modern life, yet it is formally ballad. The text was originally sung, as were traditional ballads (Charters 750), yet, it departs from the traditional quatrain composition and is instead divided into ten stanzas of twelve lines, each ending with a variation of the phrase, “[On/To/From/About/Into] Desolation Row.” This conclusion is a traditional ballad refrain and unites the meter of the poem, which is considerably loose, changing from line to line. The poem itself has no overall meter- at times it is closely iambic, but that is the most recognizable stress pattern. All of the other stress patterns are more subtle or absent. Since the poem was meant to be sung, there is a rhyme scheme within each stanza, making the beats more accessible when vocalized. What the poem may lack in metrical structure it makes up for in rhyme scheme. The schema is strict and predictably repeated throughout the entire text, characteristic of Ballad poetry. Each stanza takes the rhyme scheme of: *blank A blank A, blank B blank B, blank C blank C* (where “*blank*” indicates an unrhymed line). Not only contained within each stanza, an independent schema extends through the entire poem where lines ten and twelve rhyme both within the individual stanza and among all others. For example: “go/row” in stanza one, “show/row” in stanza three, “rainbow/row” in stanza four, et cetera. The “oh” vowel sounds are long, soft and heavy, reminiscent of the word “sorrow”. These extended vowel sounds impress the feeling of loneliness and of sorrow. By ending the stanzas with the same refrain and vowel, emphasizes the weighty depression on Desolation Row. Had the stanzas ended in another vowel, such as “i” or “e” the sorrowful tone would have been lost. Slant rhymes, usually absent in musical songwriting, complement the tight rhyme pattern by showing up in the unrhymed lines. For

example, “sailor/commissioner” in lines three and five of the first stanza, “him/violin” of lines nine and eleven of the fifth stanza and “Opera/Casanova” in lines three and five of the seventh stanza. The appearance of slant rhymes enriches the lyricism of the predictable “oh” vowel in the rhyme pattern, balancing this repetition with alternate vowel sounds.

Formal poetic aspects in “Desolation Row” continue as Dylan builds the narrative of the poem through imagery. Gradually built through entire stanzas, rather than through single words or lines, the poem aims at the abstract images of dereliction, exhaustion and, of course, desolation. This overall abstraction is built through focused images of people in dissonant situations. For example, in stanza two the lonely image of Cinderella, combined with a rejected Romeo, impress the image of a person abandoned. Later in stanza four Ophelia stands alone in a window, disconnected from the world below while silently watching life pass on Desolation Row. All of the images within the poem build on one another, rather than standing alone as a single image. Ultimately, these images built up throughout the whole poem, delivering the unifying sense of a bleak society afflicted with isolation and desolation. Dylan’s language is, while figurative, not superfluous. He does not use emotionally-laden language. He instead uses stark diction to create stark physical depictions which indicate the psychological landscape in each stanza. The poetic aspects of “Desolation Row” set it apart from other musical texts. The song is complex in its language and dense in its imagery, which is a departure from mainstream musical compositions. These tight poetic intricacies, which necessitate a deeper look to be fully appreciated, raise the song to the level of Literature; thus the text becomes worthy of a critical, literary analysis. In recognition of this, the Pulitzer Prize jury in 2008 cited Dylan’s “lyrical compositions of extraordinary power” and his unique contribution to not only music but poetry in general.

The characters in the song are vital to the images Dylan creates. Pulled from pop culture, the Bible, politics, folklore and Shakespeare, Dylan inserts culturally prominent figures into the slum of Desolation Row. These characters perform the grind of the Everyman, but the irony of their status can only be understood if one has a pre-existing cultural awareness of 20th century America. The overt allegory to historical figures means that to fully participate in the social dissent that Dylan is commenting on, one has to come to the text with a “canonical knowledge” of the current day. If no such pre-existing knowledge is brought to the text, all metaphor is lost. The corruption of the Commissioner, the innocence of Ophelia, the piety of Noah and The Good Samaritan, and strangeness of Dr. Filth are lost if their cultural context is not first understood. The figures are cultural archetypes and communicate more effectively with the audience than the descriptions of a dissonant situation. Dylan relies on tradition to communicate and it is only by taking archetypal characters and placing them in surroundings that clearly contradict their context that Dylan creates the unnerving dissent in the song. Dylan’s text is sufficiently difficult to participate in because it relies on other texts, other events and other artists to build an understanding of the melancholy and isolation of modern life. Bloom argues that a canonical text must “ratify the greatness” (Bloom 227) of others’ work. In this tradition, “Desolation Row” is certainly literary because it directly engages with an ongoing commentary of current and past misfortune. For example, in the first line of the text, “They’re selling postcards of the hanging” refers to the 1920 lynching of three African Americans in Minnesota. If a sufficient historical and social awareness exists then the line becomes imbued with a deeper, violent meaning, setting the tone of the poem as bleak, morbid and distrustful. Conversely, if there is ignorance of the event then the line’s power falls flat and becomes generically fictional and assumed to be imaginative license for the narrative. These images are elicited through the careful referencing of

real events that demonstrate these emotions, which coalesce to create the overall aesthetic of the poem. Harold Bloom spoke of a successful aesthetic possessing “universality”, and “Desolation Row” possesses such an aesthetic. The irony, however, is that the text’s aesthetic mirrors the universally-felt desolation in 20th century America, rather than a “quest for the transcendence of limits” (Bloom 230). But again, this aesthetic is only apparent through an understanding of modern America.

While Bloom argues that true “Canonical prophecy” cannot be tested until two generations past the author’s death, “Desolation Row” has already achieved a timeless quality due to its cultural reproduction. In the past 47 years the song has been notably covered by other musical performers and has been adapted into visual art (Cobb). In other words, “Desolation Row” has continued “to be cited and recited, continue[d] to be visible...to succeeding generations of subjects” (Smith 149). Its reproduction indicates the profound influence and inspiration in the text- it simultaneously spoke to the current disillusionment and acted as a cautionary tale for the future of society. The song ignited responses and additional commentary on social disharmony and lodged itself securely in the mainstream revolutionary ideals of the 1960s; in other words, “it shape[d] and create[d] the culture in which its value [was] produced and transmitted, and for that very reason... perpetuate[d] the conditions of its own flourishing” (Smith 150). Harold Bloom refers to this influence as “power of contamination” and both Smith and Bloom identify this as a criteria, or indicator, of a true canonical text. Bloom outright states that “contamination is the pragmatic test for canon formation.” Throughout the song’s reproduction the adaptations have varied but have been more or less loyal to the original text. Given the length of the song this may seem surprising, but Barbara Smith argues that because it is “information-rich” it is adaptable: texts that are structurally complex “are especially amenable

to multiple reconfigurations [and] more likely to enter into relation with the emergent interests of various subjects” (151). As an America on the verge of social revolution, the text spoke to cultural dissatisfaction and has continued to do so. The most recent adaptation of the text was in 2010, done by My Chemical Romance, proving that the text continues to be relevant influential and especially adaptable. Bloom points out that “great poets can be known by the other great poets they help create” and the song’s worth and value in modern America is clear by looking at its legacy of influence.

“Desolation Row” has continued to be circulated and reproduced due to its success in expressing a national experience: dissolution in both a cultural and personal identity. Within the American Project there is room for dissent; it is a part of our “lonely, idiosyncratic and isolated” identity. The American Project reserves space for the fringe- those whose eccentricity is often at the heart of social change. “Desolation Row” articulately participates in the American Project and has been preserved and reproduced because of its reserved space, because of its social role of dissent and disillusion and because it “perform[s] certain desired/able functions quite well for some set of subjects” (Smith 148). This performance of a function, Smith argues, is why texts are reproduced. If “Desolation Row” did not participate in the role of dissent then it would not have been adopted into the literary consciousness of the culture and would not have been subject to its adaptations. Because it reflected a favorable ideology in 1965, the text was “chosen” to remain in the foreground of the culture. Its presence continued to influence its environment, aka, its surrounding ideology, because we “preserve...by which we ourselves have been formed” (Smith 150). The text reflected the culture and in turn helped shape its evolution. The role of dissent was nothing new in 1965; it has arguably been a part of a national experience since the founding of the country. Indeed there are other texts which exhibit the same aesthetic and have likewise been

preserved. “The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot has been adopted as one of the most important poems of the 20th century for performing the same role as “Desolation Row.” The two texts are very similar in their scope and breadth of obscure references, satire and prophetic observations. Both became “a banner of communal identity” (Smith 150) for clearly illustrating the dissonance found within an individual and within broader modern culture. “Desolation Row” exhibits the same essential truth as “The Waste Land” - it refers to a derelict state of mind and cultural climate, of social exploitation and exhaustion to the point that, as a society, we reach the metaphysical location Desolation Row. “The Waste Land” and “Desolation Row” perform the same social function for the American Project: dissent. T.S. Eliot achieved canonical membership long ago for his poetry and social niche and the analogous relationship between the two pieces should extend this membership to Bob Dylan’s “Desolation Row.”

An appreciation of an American canon is recognition of a “lonely, idiosyncratic and isolated” (Bloom 226) aesthetic in both literature and cultural artifacts. The American Project contains within it room for pieces that exhibit the aesthetic of modern life’s apparent dissolution of identity and culture. “Desolation Row” by Bob Dylan is a canonical piece of literature and should be preserved as such. The text is a musical poem and necessitates a critical analysis to fully appreciate its poetic structure, cultural complexity and social role. Its “power of contamination” (Bloom 229) has kept the poem circulating for 47 years and its influence has been seen in the other poets’ and artists’ work. “Desolation Row” is reflective of a bleak modern America and continues to be relevant to a national experience.

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