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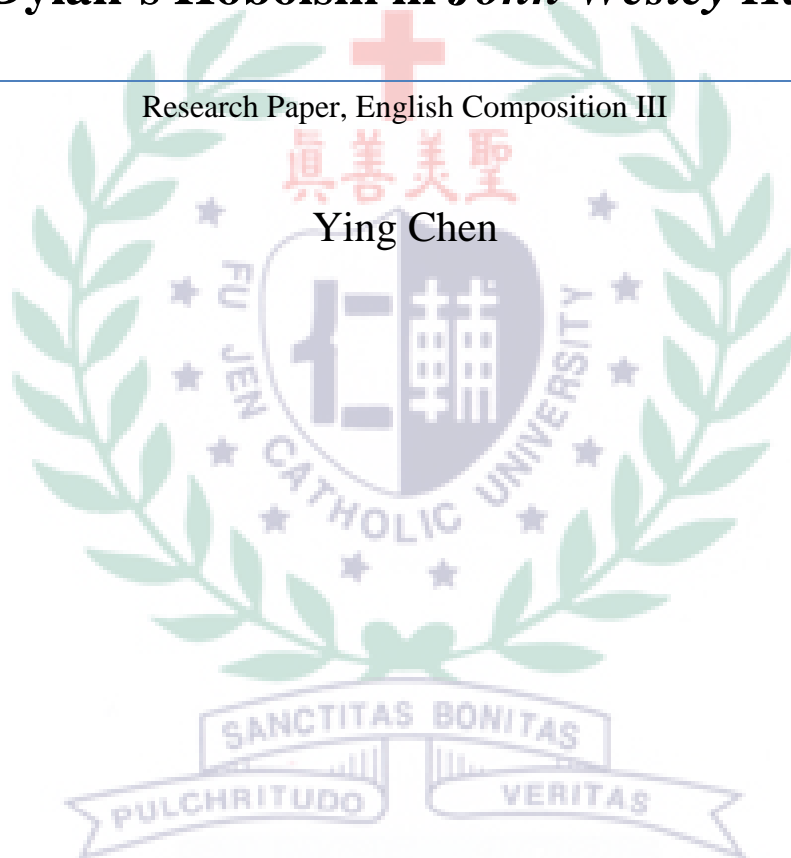
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Bob Dylan's Hoboism in *John Wesley Harding*

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Bob Dylan's Hoboism in *John Wesley Harding*

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Bob Dylan's Hoboism in *John Wesley Harding*

“The winds of change are blowing wild and free / You ain't seen nothing like me yet,” sings Bob Dylan, a legendary icon that is recognized as more than just a musician (Dylan 1997). Since he launched his music career in 1962, Dylan has continued to change himself and become a better songwriter while altering the course of music history. With all his changes, Dylan's songs have a consistent focus on the everyman and self-reliance, with which he supported the Folk Protest Movement and peopled his songs with characters and speakers that are either homeless or traveling, rejects the status quo and take self-reliant actions. This idea of self-reliance is, in fact, Emersonian, which James Dunlap has proven to exist in Dylan's early works. However, is the idea then carried on in a later period of Dylan's career? If so, what methods or motifs does he use in his songwriting to deliver his messages? What is the series of ideas embodied in an album of a later period that helps emphasize the idea of self-reliance? To answer these questions, this paper chooses to focus on Bob Dylan's album *John Wesley Harding* and analyze how self-reliant hoboism and nonconformity are at the core of the album through a sequence of ideas stemming from the establishment of self-reliance, implied pity for the hobos, restoration of justice, to, finally, a simple assurance of human relation and restatement of self-reliance.

Bob Dylan's career spans over half a century and can be generally summarized into four important eras: “Folk Singing,” “Reinventing His Image,” “Touring and Religion,” and “Rock Star Status” (*Bio*). The first era begins with the release of Dylan's first album *Bob Dylan* in 1962, when he was absorbed into the folksong tradition and wrote songs that sparked the folk protest movement as well as won him the title: “the spokesman of the generation.” However, he later rejected the title by going “electric” and entered a new phrase

of writing rock songs in 1965 (Williams 65). Within the second era ranging from 1965 to 1974, Dylan's self-image went through constant reinvention as he ventured from being a rock n' roll rebel to a western countryman. It was in this era that he established his ideal of constant self-reinvention and nonconformity with his changing outlooks and musical styles. After reemerging from an "escape" from the public in 1966 due to a motorcycle accident and taking a rest from touring since then, Dylan returned to the stage in his third era, the "Touring and Religion" phase, from 1974 till 1989. Dylan worked with numerous musicians on tour during this time period and was even "born again" by converting to Christianity in 1978 (Williams 113). After highs and lows, Dylan reached his fourth era, the "Rock Star Status" phase where he regained public acceptance and praise for his songwriting, and continues to flourish in the music field with more vitality than ever.

This paper focuses on the album *John Wesley Harding*, which is of great importance in Dylan's career as it signifies his most prominent use of the hobo persona and self-reliant ideals. After a motorcycle accident that made him retreat from the media spotlight to readjust his life, Dylan reemerged from hideout and produced *John Wesley Harding*. The album represents a rebirth for Dylan as well as his songwriting technique. Dylan's use of the hobo persona in the *John Wesley Harding* is combined with rural myths and biblical images that point to the ideas of "repentance and deliverance, judgment and forbearance" that are evident in the songs of the album (Gibbens 257). Also, in this album Dylan uses a musical style that is distinguished from the psychedelic trend in the rock-and-roll musicians of the same time period, proving that he has "renewed [his] times by rejecting them" (Hughes 177; James 55). As a matter of fact, the psychedelic trend, as is evidenced in The Beatles's "Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and The Rolling Stones "Their Satanic Majesties Request" could

be seen as initiated by Dylan with his previous albums *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde*. Here, with *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan released an album with stripped down guitar accompaniment and carefully written lyrics that help develop the story that it poses as an opposite in style contrary to the mainstream sound and psychedelic songwriting that was trending at that time (James 55). As Robert Shelton states, Dylan seems to be “whispering in a climate of scream and shout” with stories of cowboys, outlaws and drifters, all characters representing self-reliance for him (qtd in James 55). Thus, *John Wesley Harding* can be considered as a reflection Dylan had of his self-reliance when reestablishing his identity and reemerging into public sight.

To understand the hoboism embodied in *John Wesley Harding*, this paper will first analyze the album’s thematic layout to show how the songs are written to create a hobo-context and tell stories from a hobo-perspective. Here, John Gibbens’ *The Nighingale’s Code: A Poetic Study of Bob Dylan* and John Hughes’ *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s* are used as support for my explanations of the song lyrics, but I move further to analyze four essential songs with evident descriptions of hobos and their lives. Along with mentions of other songs in the album, a sequence of ideas can be found in the album that prove the existence of self-reliant hoboism and nonconformity to society at the center of the album. While many of the hobos are presented in this album to reflect a social atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety, self-reliant hoboism is presented in a succession of ideas in the album starting from an establishment of self-reliant ideals in the opening song “John Wesley Harding,” pity for the nonelective transients in “I Pity The Poor Immigrant,” hope for the restoration of justice in “Drifter’s Escape” and, finally, a simple reassurance of human relation and restatement of self-reliance in the ending song “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight.”

Hobos originated with migratory workers in the western or northwestern parts of the United States around 1890 (Lieberman). The 1893 edition of *The Standard Dictionary* defined the word “hobo” as “an idle, shiftless wandering workman, ranking scarcely above the tramp” (Lieberman). Yet, it would later become a word for men who would “strike out on their own” in life in search for jobs from one place to another (Fink 361). In literature, they are presented as counter-cultural characters falling outside the expectations of society, yet able to celebrate their spirit of carefreeness, wanderlust and remain somewhat heroic (Allen 14). Thus, a distinction between two types of hoboism emerges: “nonelective transience” that describes physical homelessness due to perils in life, and “elective transience” that describes self-chosen wandering for new opportunities (Elkholy).

Dylan’s hoboism is that of the latter, where wandering and leave-taking is the only method to seek opportunities to live a life away from the judgments of society. Historically, the concept of self-reliant hoboism is significant to Americans during the 1960s due to the controversies caused by the Vietnam War, which made the American people anxious and scared of an apocalyptic world to come (Gibbens 262). In the hoboistic mindset and self-reliant choice that flourished at that time was the anxiety about an uncertain future, about losing their loved ones or their homes at any time and about wanting to oppose the government that was prone to intervene in the Vietnam War.

The self-reliant actions of the hobo personas in *John Wesley Harding* have a parallel with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideal in his “Self-Reliance.” Dunlap has stated that Dylan’s earlier works, most prominently his “protest songs,” ignited individualism that stemmed from Emerson’s self-reliant ideals as they “asked people to examine their consciences, to stand up and be counted...in order to effect positive change” (551). Similar attempts can also be found

in Dylan's period of *John Wesley Harding* as he proposes the possibility of seeking changes through self-reliant actions and not conforming to society. Trusting oneself and one's actions are at the center of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," as he suggests that one must "trust [oneself]" to be not like "minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors" that take action to improve their own lives (2). Emerson further states that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," therefore, "whose would be a man must be a nonconformist"; those who do not conform to the prejudiced judgments of society are the ones who can be "a man" (3). Thus, the idea that people are the only ones who can redeem themselves by following their own judgments instead of the bias of society, and by taking initiative in changing their own circumstances despite the society's restrictions, is stated.¹

The hobo characters in *John Wesley Harding* are autonomous and obscure figures "fighting to emancipate themselves from the past, in pursuit of uncertain redemption" and "fugitives from the law, from a former identity, or from the accusations of others," which make them relatable to those who have experienced loneliness, isolation and perils in life that are difficult to solve (Hughes 178). However, they are also presented ambiguously, for even though each lyrical line develops the story, they do not give concrete descriptions of the hobo characters' own story nor the reasons for their homelessness or travels (Hughes 178). In addition, since the elective hobos travel because they are unable to accept society and the nonelective hobos wander because they are unable to be accepted by society, they are both suitable personas for Dylan to inscribe into his songs to deliver his idea of seeking

¹ Here, Dylan's self-reliance focuses on not conforming to the prejudiced judgments of society. He seeks to escape the entrapments of the mob, but does not preach an excessive self-trust, which ultimately leads to isolation.

nonconformity through self-reliance (Hughes 178). In other words, the hobo characters in *John Wesley Harding* are either already equipped with self-reliant attitudes that lead them to live outside society or are realizing the importance of self-reliance that can help them avoid conforming to the judgments of society. Either way, Emerson's "absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" is Dylan's message and the ideal attitude that the hobo characters should acquire in the album (4).

The self-reliant hobo and outlaw persona that take action to change his circumstances is positively presented as a Robin Hood-like hero in "John Wesley Harding." As the opening song, "John Wesley Harding" establishes the hobo persona and self-reliant ideal that would be carried on throughout the album. The name of the character in the song, John Wesley Harding, seems to be derived from the historical outlaw John Wesley Hardin, though the addition of the letter "g" may reject this claim (Gibbens 259). The historical Hardin was a criminal who, as "the most notorious desperado Texas ever produced," was often associated with "the most desperate crimes and blood-thirsty atrocities" (Hardin 4). The character Harding in Dylan's song is described as a similar outlaw figure who embarks on self-reliant travels "with a gun in ev'ry hand"; yet, contrary to the historical Hardin, who committed crimes for his own benefits, Harding in the song is a Robin Hood-like figure who "was a friend to the poor" and does deeds to bring about justice (Dylan 1967). He is thus illustrated as a vigilante who holds his own sense of justice and does not conform to that of the society. Furthermore, he helps out with situations that decent men encounter, and straightens out quarrels in his own ways by abiding to his own judgments:

With his lady by his side
 He took a stand
 And soon the situation there

Was all but straightened out
 For he was always known
 To lend a helping hand (Dylan 1967)

Even though Harding is famous as a chivalrous and charitable outlaw, he is also infamous as a criminal who the authorities want to catch.² A contrast between the society's judgments, which includes that of the law enforcement and government, and the perception of the ordinary people, is also presented in the song. Harding is known to lend help to the ordinary people, yet is sought for by the authorities. Ultimately, due to Harding being smart and wise, the authorities never successfully catch him; thus he seems to "escape the contaminating effects of judgment" with his elective transient self-reliant travels, as the society couldn't prove any charges against him (Hughes 180).

However, not all hobos or migrants are portrayed as positive characters in the album. Apart from promoting self-reliant elective transience through the hobos, Dylan expresses pity for the nonelective transients and even scorn for transients in migration without a choice in order to pursue materialist gains. "I Pity The Poor Immigrant" shows pity for the nonelective transients and exposes the unfair judgments of society. The poor immigrant didn't choose to be thrown into his homeless state; else "he would've stayed home" (Dylan 1967). He leaves his home in search for a better life in another place and is in pursuit of his vision and wealth. However, when he does not successfully find a job to sustain himself, he cannot help but "use all his powers to do evil" for survival (Dylan 1967). The indifference and the cruel judgments of a materialist society is exposed in the song as it neglects the immigrant no matter his

² All across the telegraph
 His name it did resound
 But no charge held against him
 Could they prove
 And there was no man around
 Who could track or chain him down
 He was never known
 To make a foolish move ("John Wesley Harding," Dylan 1967)

struggle, resulting in him “always left so alone” in the end without help, status, or wealth (Dylan 1967). In a way, the immigrant can be seen as conforming to the pursuit of wealth and status, as well as trapping himself in the perpetual judgment of society as he is “committed utterly to the self-betraying pursuit of worldly advancement” (Hughes 180). A similar situation is presented in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” where Frankie Lee falls into the temptations of “his friend” Judas Priest and dies of “thirst” without any resistance. Both songs expose the deadliness in conforming to society and its temptations, and propose the importance of self-reliance. Resulting from the situation of the immigrant, the paradox of the human condition is then presented with the lines that he is one “who passionately hates his life / and likewise, fears his death” (Dylan 1967).

In addition, this kind of self-blinding only results in misery, as none of his goals are achieved, and his greed only extends to the point where betrayal rises against the speaker.³ The “me” in the last line may symbolize Dylan himself, who speaks out for the people, represented by the immigrant, and feels betrayed as the people become excessively greedy for him. A similar betrayal can be seen in “As I Went Out One Morning,” where the speaker feels betrayed by the society that the damsel in chains represent.⁴ The speaker in “As I Went Out One Morning” meant to help free the damsel, but is almost trapped by her, paralleling how the society reaches out to Dylan to speak for its freedom through song, yet ends up trapping

³ I pity the poor immigrant
 Whose strength is spent in vain
 Whose heaven is like Ironsides
 Whose tears are like rain
 Who eats but is not satisfied
 Who hears but does not see
 Who falls in love with wealth itself
 And turns his back on me (“I Pity The Poor Immigrant,” Dylan 1967)

⁴ Dylan received the Tom Paine Award in 1963 from the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee and gave an acceptance speech where he admitted that “I saw some of myself” in Lee Harvey Oswald, who assassinated John F. Kennedy, and got booed off stage.

him and abusing his talents.

The ending stanza of “I Pity The Poor Immigrant” results in a deepened pity for the immigrant as he is forced to accept the emptiness that is his life and his visions. After having to “trample through the mud,” to endure hardships for his survival, he goes hysterical as he “fill his mouth with laughing,” and realizes that his “visions in the final end / must shatter like the glass” (Dylan 1967). Finally, the speaker pities the poor immigrant “when his gladness comes to pass,” when he realizes that his original visions are destroyed and he is stuck in a desperate situation which he cannot change (Dylan 1967).

To further develop the ideas of self-reliance, Dylan expresses his wish for a just and open society that does not easily criticize or judge others. The wish for the restoration of justice and nonconformity to society are seen in “Drifter’s Escape” accompanied by an exposure to the unfair judgments of it. Much like “Dear Landlord,” which pleads for justice with the speaker stating to the listener who is possibly society or a Godlike figure with higher power that “if you don’t underestimate me / I won’t underestimate you” (Dylan 1967), the speaker of “Drifter’s Escape” also asks for justice, and actually receives it. The first stanza of the song sets the setting to the scene, evidently a drifter being carried out of a courtroom after his trial while praying “Oh, help me in my weakness” to a higher power that is possibly God (Dylan 1967). The “Oh” words serve as a lament, which is similar to that of praying and hoping when feeling helpless. The word “weakness” then suggests that the drifter is unable to take control of his life and the situation he is in, thus asking for help from a higher power. The drifter then states that he doesn't understand the judgments of society; that he knows of his past doings and they are nothing wrong:

“My trip hasn’t been a pleasant one
And my time it isn’t long

And I still do not know
 What it was that I've done wrong" (Dylan 1967)

The second stanza presents pity, sympathy, and compassion to the drifter, as well as the unfair judgments of society. Since the trial is over, the judge "he cast his robe aside" and, whilst pitying the drifter, says to him: "You fail to understand / why must you even try?" (Dylan 1967) Once again the drifter's inability to take control of his own situation is reemphasized here. An ironic scene of the judgments of society is further presented in the lines "inside, the judge was stepping down / while the jury cried for more" (Dylan 1967), where the prejudiced and stubborn society seeks to continue the trial when the real authority of the court, the judge, had already ended it.

In the third stanza, however, the hope for the restoration of justice is granted as the drifter receives a chance to escape with the help of a lightning bolt. Characters such as the attendant and the nurse show sympathy for the drifter, similar to how the ordinary people praise the outlaw John Wesley Harding in the first song of the album.⁵ The word "cursed"⁶ that the attendant and the nurse use to describe the jury further emphasize how society is blinded by its prejudice. The drifter, despite the wretched situation he is in, hopes for the assertion of his justice with faith. His wish is then granted with the striking of a lightning bolt, so strong that it "[strikes] the courthouse out of shape" (Dylan 1967), which represents the powerfulness of a higher power, God, or even fate that is determined to let the drifter free. The drifter clearly anticipates the recovery of justice with the last line "the drifter *did* escape" as he grasps the opportunity for survival. In a way, his vision, contrary to that of the poor

⁵ The attendant and the nurse are both lower-class working people, like that of the ordinary and decent people who John Wesley Harding lends a hand to. They are different from the law enforcements, wealthy people and the government that society represents.

⁶ "Oh, stop that cursed jury"

Cried the attendant and the nurse ("Drifter's Escape," Dylan 1967)

immigrant, is realized at the end. He returns to his self-reliant wanderings after his escape, “his transporting, indefinite, sense of experience,” which lets him live the life free from the judgments and perils in society (Hughes 185).

Finally, Dylan concludes the album with a simple assurance of human relation and restatement of self-reliant traveling can be found in the album’s ending song “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” which resonates with the album’s opening song “John Wesley Harding” in its emphasis on self-reliance. Analyzed in a hobo-context, “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” describes a hobo persona enjoying his last chance to have peace before embarking on his journey again. As Gibbens mentions, the speaker seems to be stopping still and letting his guard down in the song (278). A simple assurance of human relation is also evident in the song, as the first and second stanza, “Close your eyes, close the door / you don't have to worry anymore / I’ll be your baby tonight” and “shut the light, shut the shade / you don't have to be afraid / I’ll be your baby tonight” draw pictures of the speaker and a listener retreating from society and its judgments on them (Dylan 1967). However, with an emphasis on the last word of the chorus, “I’ll be your baby *tonight*,” there is an anticipation of self-reliant wandering again (Dylan 1967). The third stanza seems to project the image of society’s judgment slowly fading away from them, as the mockingbird represents the society’s cries for Dylan to be its spokesman, and the use of the phrase “sail away” suggests slow change that does not happen easily.⁷ The “big, fat moon” then symbolizes an authoritative figure, possibly a higher power or God that is always watching the speaker, and with the description of it “shin[ing] like a spoon” (Dylan 1967), it can be analyzed as having power over them or

⁷ Well, that mockingbird’s gonna sail away
We’re gonna forget it (“I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” Dylan 1967)

displaying a strong sense of judgment.⁸ Yet, with the emphasis on the word “but,” the speaker chooses to cherish the moment he has with the listener and make the most of it no matter what the society or those on the outside think of him. A reassurance of human relation is further shown in the final stanza of the song, as the speaker opens his heart to the listener in “kick your shoes off, do not fear / bring that bottle over here” (Dylan 1967).

The idea of the society’s dissolving judgments in “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” has a parallel with another song in the album, “Down Along The Cove,” which depicts a scene where the speaker is able to enjoy his relation with his “true love” without the people around them judging. However, “Down Along The Cove” takes a step further, where Dylan’s vision of a open society is not only not judgmental, but also “understanding” and has compassion for the speaker’s condition: “ev’rybody watchin’ us go by / knows we’re in love, yes, and they understand” (Dylan 1967). Nevertheless, since the speaker understands that reaching the ultimate vision of an open and just society like that illustrated in “Down Along The Cove” is extremely difficult, he knows that the only way for him to live contently is to embark on self-reliant journeys again and not conform to a single condition or status, thus the song “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” ends with a repeated line “I’ll be your baby tonight,” emphasizing once again on the word “tonight,” which points to the leave-taking that is to happen *tomorrow*. Thus, as the closing song to the album, Dylan stresses his hoboism in “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight” with the idea that self-reliant leave-taking is the only way to live life to one’s content away from a society that is prejudiced, judgmental, and stresses conformity to the mob.

By presenting the elective transient hobo persona as his ideal and opposing it to both

⁸ That big, fat moon is gonna shine like a spoon / But we’re gonna let it / You won’t regret it (“I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” Dylan 1967)

nonelective hobos with materialist pursuits and the unjust society, Bob Dylan seeks to live outside the judgments of society with self-reliance and nonconformity through his hoboism in *John Wesley Harding*. The album begins with an emphasis on carrying out self-reliant actions for survival that leads to a criticism of the materialist society and the deadliness in conforming to it. Furthermore, Dylan's vision of the restoration of justice is then depicted with the affirmation of an escape from the judgments of society. Ultimately, the album ends with the insistence on Dylan's hoboism, as self-reliant traveling and not conforming to prejudiced crowds is the key in Dylan's philosophy of life.



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