



 Prestwick House

# Free Lesson Plan

## POETRY:

### *The Poetry of Bob Dylan*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1,4,10 | TEKS 110.31.(b).2, 3

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#### **Objectives:**

By the end of this lesson, your students will be able to:

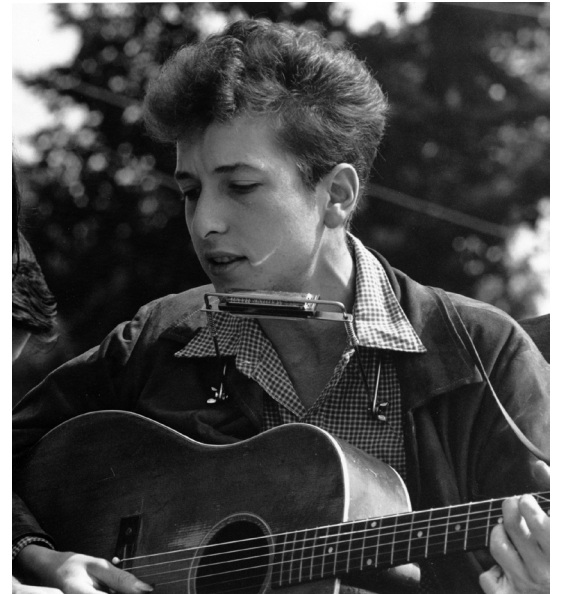
- analyze the images presented in two portions of Bob Dylan's songs;
- discuss the primary ideas in the lyrics;
- recognize some rhetorical devices Dylan uses;
- understand the poetry of the verses.

#### **Time:**

45 Minutes or 1 Class Period

#### **Materials:**

Handout: Selections from Bob Dylan Songs



#### **Procedure:**

**1. Give students a brief explanation of Dylan's life, including his recognition as America's most important 20th -21st century songwriter.**

Robert Allen Zimmerman was born in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 24, 1941. He changed his name to Bob Dylan, moved to New York City, and began writing songs and performing them. He has continued doing so for more than 50 years. In 2016, Dylan received the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first American since Toni Morrison won it in 1993 and the only songwriter ever to win. He was recognized, in the words of the Nobel Committee, "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition."

**2. Play the two songs referenced in this lesson: "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," from the album *Bringing It All Back Home*. These songs are available to stream via Youtube or other streaming services.**

**3. Hand out lyrics with the portions of the two songs.**

**4. Discuss the selection from "Mr. Tambourine Man," analyzing it for poetry, rhetorical devices, and thematic concepts.**

*Here are sections from two of Dylan's most poetic songs that can be analyzed for both what they say and how it is communicated.*

*The First is "Mr. Tambourine Man," with its rhyme scheme indicated.*

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### **Chorus:**

Contrary to how most songs are constructed, “Mr. Tambourine Man,” written in 1964, actually begins with the chorus, then goes into the main verses.

Before beginning the analysis, a little background information on the general idea of the song will assist in understanding what Dylan is talking about.

The narrator is asking the title character, possibly the author’s muse or inspiration, or Dylan himself, “to play a song for” him after a night of sleeplessness and deep thought. The narrator promises to “follow” the song because it will free him from the torment, weariness, and difficulties of his life.

First, it is important to recognize that the rhymes are not all exact, which is called half-rhyme. Notice that there are internal rhymes in the first verse that also frequently rhyme with the last word of a line: *though, know; hand, sand, stand, branded; feet, meet, street’s*. Have your students do the same for verse two.

Now, let’s look at the chorus. The narrator uses direct address to make the request of Mr. Tambourine Man to “play a song” to relieve the feeling he has this morning. The key phrase that keeps the listener off-center is what a jingle jangle morning might be. Obviously, the feeling is not pleasant, but one aspect of poetry is that it allows for multiple interpretations.

### **Verse:**

The first verse talks in vague terms of the night before: the image of the vastness and power of “evening’s empire” ending; the allusion to sand/time running out; the contradiction between the sun ending the dark night, yet the narrator being blind. He is barely able to face the day and has nothing or no one waiting for him. But none of that matters anyway because being outside on the city’s dead street would not give his imagination any freedom, nor would it give him any peace.

As with Dylan and other poets, though, multiple interpretations are possible. What does he mean by these specific words: *empire, sand, weariness, branded*?

How has the evening vanished from his hand?

Why is the upcoming day different?

Are his nerves jangled because of lack of sleep, something emotional like loneliness, or something else?

What song does the narrator want Mr. Tambourine Man to play? Could the actual verses be the song that the narrator requests?

Either in class or for homework, have students examine the second verse in a similar manner, asking questions, examining the lyrics for rhyme, and trying to arrive at a meaning of the verse.

**Note:** Avoid letting students get sidetracked in a discussion of Dylan’s singing voice and focus on the lyrics of the song. This song often believed to be about LSD and drug use, but it was written before Dylan used the drug and he has denied that interpretation.

### **5. Discuss the selection from “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” analyzing it for poetry, rhetorical devices, and thematic concepts.**

The second set of lyrics are from “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” a song Dylan wrote in 1964.

The first portion of the first verse is a metaphor, substituting something easily understood for something much more complex. The all-encompassing dark, even at noon when the sky should be brightest, obliterates the Universe; even the rich (the silver spoon) have no protection against it. Since the moon is not visible at noon, that element contributes to the feeling of helpless despair. The verse makes the listener aware that the singer has a feeling that powerful forces control his life, as well as all of Nature. Dylan might conceivably be

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*expressing a metaphorical, internal darkness, which is controlling enough to extinguish not only the bright, essential light of the sun, but also the beauty and peace of the moon.*

*There are other interpretations possible: Nuclear war is one, but the first line is also a distinct allusion to the Crucifixion during which the daytime sky grew dark.*

*Look at the verse for its effect and images: Since noon does not break, as dawn does, the listener is immediately placed into a state of confusion. This intense darkness can also create shadows, making the setting even more surreal. Next, Dylan surprises the listener with another contrasting image: a knife (a symbol of violence) and a balloon (a symbol of childhood and innocence).*

*The scene continues with the concept of this unusual darkness blotting out the sun, needed for all life, as well as the moon, needed for the respite sleep brings. This extreme darkness is not only all-encompassing, but it is also a physical impossibility. Dylan's landscape here, therefore, is surreal, impossible, and horribly negative.*

*The final two lines may refer to the darkness that prevents anyone from knowing that trying to understand why these contradictory things exist is pointless. Dylan may also simply be making the philosophically existential claim that trying itself is senseless, pointless.*

*Finally, the rhyme scheme ties the verse together because of the repetition. In addition, the last word/words in consecutive lines rhyme. This pattern continues throughout the rest of the song—the next two ends with crying and sighing. The other final rhymes are: hatred, sacred, naked, make it; around you, found you; invest in, bless him, he's in, please him; phony, lonely, show me, only.*

*Students should also note the understatement of the title.*

#### **6. Ask your students whether songs should be considered literature.**

While every student will have his or her own opinion, the following recent articles may be of use in leading your discussion.

“I nominated Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize more than a dozen times” by Gordon Ball in the Washington Post

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/14/i-nominated-bob-dylan-for-the-nobel-prize-youre-welcome/?utm\\_term=.6082ae4d7089](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/14/i-nominated-bob-dylan-for-the-nobel-prize-youre-welcome/?utm_term=.6082ae4d7089)

“Bob Dylan is a genius – but reducing his songs to ‘literature’ is dangerous” by Christopher Ricks in *The Telegraph*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/bob-dylan-is-a-genius--but-reducing-his-songs-to-literature-is-d/>

“Bob Dylan the Writer: An Authentic American Voice” by Dwight Garner in *The New York Times*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/books/bob-dylan-on-the-page-poetry-and-prose-to-match-any-american-writer.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20161014&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=59924205&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/books/bob-dylan-on-the-page-poetry-and-prose-to-match-any-american-writer.html?emc=edit_th_20161014&nl=todaysheadlines&nlid=59924205&_r=1)

You might also want to let your students know that many of the ancient works of literature that you read in class, such as Homer's *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* were originally songs set to music. Does that change anyone's opinion?

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### STUDENT HANDOUT

# The Poetry of Bob Dylan

Two Portions of Bob Dylan's lyrics

## Mr. Tambourine Man

(Chorus)

- A Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me
- B I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to
- A Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me
- B In the jingle jangle morning I'll come followin' you.
  
- C Though I know that evening's empire has returned into sand
- C Vanished from my hand
- D Left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping
- E My weariness amazes me, I'm branded on my feet
- E I have no one to meet
- D And the ancient empty street's too dead for dreaming.

(Chorus)

- F Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin' ship
- F My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip
- G My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels
- H To be wanderin'
- I I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade
- I Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way
- H I promise to go under it.

## It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)

- A Darkness at the break of noon
- A Shadows even the silver spoon
- A The handmade blade, the child's balloon
- A Eclipses both the sun and moon.
- A To understand you know too soon
- B There is no sense in trying.
  
- C Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn.
- C Suicide remarks are torn
- C From the fool's gold mouthpiece the hollow horn
- C Plays wasted words, proves to warn
- B That he not busy being born is busy dying



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**Answer Key:**

The answers, my friend, are blowin' in the wind. The answers are blowin' in the wind.

**Homework:**

In a short essay, have students evaluate one of their favorite songs in a manner similar to what you did in class. Be sure that students review the song's rhyme scheme and look for poetic devices in the songs, in addition to explaining the song's meaning.

**Standards**

Common Core state Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.10

**Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills**

TEKS 110.31.(b).2

TEKS 110.31.(b).3

**Sources:**

Ball, Gordon. "I nominated Bob Dylan for the Nobel Prize more than a dozen times." *Washington Post*. October 14, 2016.

Dylan, Bob. "Mr. Tambourine Man." *Bringing It All Back Home*. 1964.

Dylan, Bob. "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" *Bringing It All Back Home*. 1964.

Garner, Dwight. "Bob Dylan the Writer: An Authentic American Voice." *The New York Times*. October 13, 2016.

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