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Protest Music and Rhetoric: A Study of Bob Dylan's Songs

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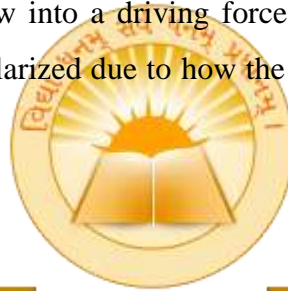
Abstract

This paper examines the use of rhetoric in Bob Dylan's music. In the 1960s, America was struggling with revolution and social change. During this time, protest music served as an outlet for musicians to voice their support for this change. The study focuses on the rhetorical functions of this music in the context of the protest movements of the 1960s.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Protest songs, Bob Dylan

Introduction

In the 1960s, America was struggling with revolution and social change. During this era, protest music served as a means for musicians to voice their support for this change. Through the decade, protest music's influence grew into a driving force behind the social and civic change experienced. The music was popularized due to how the youth of America were able to identify with and relate to its message.



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Protest Music and Rhetoric

Throughout American history, protest music has served as a voice for the concern and need for social change. Because music is meant to be heard, it becomes communal, meaning the experiences and beliefs of the artist are shared with the listener, who in turn has his or her background of experiences and beliefs. Thus, the communication of discontent of one artist in a given song becomes the voice of an entire group of those who relate to the song. The needs illustrated by one individual become the needs of a group and a driving force behind social movements (Kizer 1983).

During the 1960s, protest music served as an outlet for social discrimination and anti-war emotion. Songs written during this era were methods of rhetorical persuasion, as Kizer (1983), stated: "expressed dissent, appeal for change, fascinated support for the movement, and influenced attitudes."

In her article, “Protest Song Lyrics as Rhetoric,” Kizer argues that ethos and pathos are the main methods of rhetoric used in protest music, as the appeal to logic is not quite as necessary when speaking for a just cause. The author quotes Aristotle in the article, saying:

Right things and things that just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites...things that are true and better things are, by their nature, practically always more comfortable to prove and easier to believe in. (Kizer, 1983)

Thus, as protest music persuades us towards a just cause of social advancement of those oppressed and an end to violence, the audience is more likely to join the cause and be influenced by rhetorical efforts. Logical persuasion is unnecessary when a cause is morally correct. In these cases, audiences are swayed much more by emotional and character-based appeals. Although the appeal to logic does exist in protest music, its presence is less evident as these other methods are most effective for these particular arguments. (Kizer, 1983)

According to Kizer (1983), protest songs fall into one of two divisions of rhetoric. These two divisions, deliberative and epideictic, are concerned with the desired outcome of the persuasion effort. Deliberative rhetoric aims to support doing or not doing something in the future. Thus, it is a more direct call to action than epideictic. Epideictic, on the other hand, is more concerned with explaining the merit or lack thereof something. Thus, this term would refer to the songs that speak of and inform audiences of the status quo's injustices without explicitly calling them to act on these circumstances.

Protest Music and Use of Rhetoric in Bob Dylan’s Songs

One overly influential musician of the era was Bob Dylan. Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, began his journey as a folk singer in New York City after leaving his home in Minnesota to pursue a music career. Dylan received his first contract from Columbia Records in 1961 and released his first album, *Bob Dylan*, in March of 1962. By releasing his second



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album in 1963, Dylan had started to write and release his protest songs in response to the civil rights movement raging at this time.

One key to Dylan's success and impact on the society of the 1960s was his openness with imitation. When Dylan first started his career in the early 1960s, he performed many known blues and folk songs, especially those of Woody Guthrie, one of his most prominent role models and reasons for pursuing a music career. For Dylan, music did not have an owner. It was meant to be reshaped and redeveloped in various forms by various artists. Recording the works of others gave the songs a new life and allowed them to reach the minds of new audiences. In performing the songs of older, more renowned artists, Dylan gained publicity and stardom in his career and began to be recognised by those who recognised the music and enjoyed what he had added to it (Blanton, 2001).

Likewise, Dylan's career continued to grow through others, emulating his music through re-recordings. In a recent speech, Dylan gave special thanks to those who recorded his music early on. In his words, they took a song "that had been recorded before that had been buried on one of my records and turned it into a hit song" (Stone, 2015). In this way, Dylan encouraged and appreciated the re-recording of his music and embraced the fame it gave others like it, in turn, brought the recorded songs and others into the light of the public. Thus, Dylan's career both began and continued to thrive through this re-recording and sharing of music.

In the wake of the civil rights movement and later as the anti-war movement began, Dylan used what he had learned in folk music to relate to the feelings and emotions of the American population of the time. Dylan had initially been fallen in love with folk music because it had a way of relating to people and communicating in a very genuine and human way. Dylan put this communication style into his work as well. When describing his style, Dylan explained, "I do not think when I write. I just react and put it down on paper...what comes out in my music is a call to action." (Blanton, 2001, p.6-7) Thus, Dylan's music became so important and impactful for the protest movements of the 1960s because it related

directly to listeners and engaged them in a very human capacity to take action against such things that were immoral and in need of change in American society (Blanton, 2001).

Another way in which Dylan gained influence in this tumultuous time was through his appeal to traditional American values that were relatable and had an emotional connection with the people of the United States. One such appeal was the appeal to the “common man.” This appeal centered around the notion that all American citizens should be valued equally and that one’s merit should be based on virtues and characters rather than status or ethnicity. By appealing to this value, Dylan condemned the immorality of racial segregation and the military draft that upper-class individuals were exempt. By calling on the long-held value of equality, Dylan was able to appeal to the morals and values of the American people on a personal and human level (Dunlap, 2006).

Further, Dylan’s plea to American idealism, also present in many of the folk songs he performed through the initial years of his career, helped his music become a pivotal part of the 1960’s protest movements. In a country founded on the principles of meritocracy and social advancement, it seemed quite hypocritical for specific populations to be marginalized in the late twentieth century. Through his music, Dylan drew attention to this hypocrisy and gained momentum from listeners who noticed and felt a need for social change. Through drawing on these historically American beliefs and calling into question the ability of American society to provide them, Dylan appealed to the many people who desired to be a part of a nation right to the values inherent in its people (Dunlap, 2006).

Conclusion

Dylan is still clear and upfront when addressing the reason for the music. The high frequency of war throughout the music shows the direct nature of Dylan’s protest music as it addresses the issue at hand. The frequency of “just” and “God” have a moral value attached to them when used in the songs and thus exemplify the use of appeal to character. Through these terms, Dylan appeals to the listener’s morals and values and builds an emotional connection with the listener.



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