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Booklover-Changing of the Guards

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The announcement of the Nobel Laureates in all the various disciplines is one of my personal anticipations each autumn. When it was announced that Bob Dylan had been awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” I realized that a trip to the library was not going to be on my agenda. Instead I would find myself delving into a collection of more than 600 song lyrics online, for Bob Dylan is the first musician to win the prize in the 115 years of Nobel history.

I was young when Dylan came onto the music scene, but the lyrics to “The Times They Are a-Changin,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and “Like a Rolling Stone” are part of my mental soundtrack and most likely yours, too. But lyrics as literature, this is a twist. And then I remembered a high school summer class in English where the teacher distributed lyrics to several popular songs and we as a class were asked to read them, interpret them and understand them, much like a group of poems, short stories, or excerpts from literature. I was enchanted with that teacher who took such an edgy approach to her English curriculum.

Born Robert Allen Zimmerman in 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota, Dylan legally changed his name to Robert Dylan in 1962. He gave an explanation for his name changing decision during a 2004 interview with CBS: “You’re born, you know, the wrong names, wrong parents. I mean, that happens. You call yourself what you want to call yourself. This is the land of the free.”

Dylan dropped out of school to pursue his musical aspirations. Like many aspiring musicians, he traveled to New York City. While there he visited Woody Guthrie, who heavily influenced his early music career and he decided he would become Guthrie’s disciple. Dylan also explored the musical genres of American folk, blues, rock, gospel and jazz as well as folk music from other ethnic origins to sculpt his songs, all the while embracing various literary influences to craft the lyrics to deliver the messages. It has worked for generations of Dylan followers.

Dylan’s songs and lyrics rose in popularity during a time of social unrest and anti-war sentiment in America. They resonated with the youth of these times and quickly became part of the popular vernacular. We easily break into “The answer is blowin’ in the wind” or “How does it feel. To be without a home. Like a complete unknown. Like a rolling stone?” or “The night they drove Old Dixie down. And all her bells were ringing.” Even the news media announcements of Dylan’s honor were decorated with excerpts from his lyrics, leading to discussions of whether the times are really “a-changin” due to the lack of any women in the 2016 list of Nobel laureates.

As I read through song titles and lyrics on the websites, the song I will leave you with had an intriguing title based on the news media announcements of “But Eden is burning either brace yourself for elimination. I’ve moved your mountains and marked your cards. He’s pulling her down and she’s clutching on to his long golden locks. Forty-eight hours later the sun is breaking. Where the angels’ voices whisper to the souls of previous times. The endless road and the wailing of chimes. The palace of mirrors. Where dog soldiers are reflected. The empty rooms where her memory is protected. Where the angels’ voices whisper to the souls of previous times. She wakes him up. Forty-eight hours later the sun is breaking. Near broken chains, mountain laurel and rolling rocks. She’s begging to know what measures he now will be taking. He’s pulling her down and she’s clutching on to his long golden locks. Gentlemen, he said I don’t need your organization, I’ve shined your shoes. I’ve moved your mountains and marked your cards. But Eden is burning either brace yourself for elimination. Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards. Peace will come. With tranquility and splendor on the wheels of fire. But will bring us no reward when her false idols fall. And cruel death surrenders with its pale ghost retreating between the King and the Queen of Swords.”

The Charleston Advisor, Changing of the Guards

Column Editor: Donna Jacobs (Retired, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425) <donna.jacobs55@gmail.com>

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