Blowin' in the Wind

SUMMARY

How many paths does a person have to walk along before they're treated like a human being? How many oceans does a white dove have to fly over before she can rest on dry land? And how many times must weapons of war be fired before they're outlawed forever? The answer to these questions is just moving through the air, my friend, it's just moving through the air.

How long can a mountain be around before it crumbles into the ocean? How long can some human beings be around before they're finally freed from oppression? And how many times can a person look away from that oppression, acting like they simply don't see it? The answer to these questions is just moving through the air, my friend, it's just moving through the air

How many times does a person have to look up before they actually see the sky? How many ears does a single person have to have before they'll actually listen to other people weeping? And how many people have to die for that same person to understand that there's too much death in the world? The answer to these questions is just moving through the air, my friend, it's just moving thorugh the air.

THEMES

THE SENSELESSNESS OF WAR AND OPPRESSION

Bob Dylan's classic protest song "Blowin' in the Wind" addresses the incomprehensible cruelty of war and oppression. In this song, the speaker asks a series of unanswerable questions about how long it will take for humanity to establish lasting peace, compassion, and justice, and then repeatedly concludes: "The answer is blowin' in the wind." This ambiguous reply suggests the complexities of the question itself: if the answer is "blowin' in the wind," it's either right there in front of people or it's impossible to grasp—or both! That paradox also reflects on the nature of human cruelties, those obvious evils that humanity can't seem to stop perpetuating.

The speaker presents listeners with a series of big questions about war, oppression, and indifference throughout the song, treating these questions both as worldwide problems and the problems of every individual. To that end, the song's language is grand and general, and the use of biblically-inflected images—for instance, the searching dove as a symbol of peace—suggests the scale and depth of the questions at hand; these are issues, the song implies, that go right to the roots of human nature itself.

Of course, these questions also work on a more personal scale. Stopping war and oppression is the individual, internal work of "a man," the song suggests, as much as that of a government or a nation; big cruelties can grow from individual attitudes to the world.

The solution to all these problems, the song repeatedly insists, is both ever-present and impossible to grasp: it's "blowin' in the wind," at once as obvious and as invisible as the air itself. This paradoxical non-answer suggests bewilderment in the face of human cruelty, but also a strange sort of hopefulness. One can't pin the wind down, but it is everywhere.

Perhaps the song is suggesting that people need to think and perceive in new, freer ways in order to break out of their old patterns of war and violence. That this is a job both for humanity at large and for every "man" offers a grain of hope in the song as well: if individual people can think in novel ways and come to understand how the answer might be "blowin' in the wind," maybe an end to war, cruelty, and oppression is possible after all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

How many roads ...
... they're forever banned?

The first stanza of "Blowin' in the Wind" sets a pattern—a pattern about patterns, if you will. This is a song about a big mystery: why do people keep killing and oppressing each other, even though anyone can see that war and injustice are terribly wrong? The song's repetitions speak to the bewildering perpetuation of human evil.

The speaker begins by setting a pattern of rhetorical questioning, asking huge, unanswerable questions. These questions aren't just the same in flavor, but also in their phrasing: their parallel structure means that each question starts with "How many" and comes to a central turning point at the word "Before":

How many [...] must [...]
Before [...]

The speaker begins by asking: "How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?" That's an internal question, dealing with personal choices. Those symbolic "roads" (representing journeys, choices, and life experiences) suggest the emotional exploration that might bring this "man" to maturity. In other words, how many things does someone have to experience or go through before they're considered an adult, taken seriously, granted respect, treated as a full human being?

The next question broadens out to a wider world, asking: "Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand?" In this line, made quiet and gentle by soft sibilant /s/ sounds, the speaker uses the dove, an ancient symbol of peace, to evoke a long (and ongoing) journey toward *world* peace. In the biblical story of Noah's Ark, Noah sends a dove in search of dry land; it returns bearing an olive branch. Here, the implication is that this dove will have to fly over *many* seas before being able to rest on dry land. On a symbolic level, this means that peace may be a long time coming. (See the "Symbols" section of this guide for even more on the dove.)

The speaker builds on the established pattern even further in his next question: "Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannonballs fly / Before they're forever banned?" This question relates to war—and war that's been going on for centuries, judging by those old-fashioned "cannonballs." The speaker is asking, how many wars do people have to have before they stop fighting and/or creating such deadly weapons?

This question also builds on the questions that came before it. Just as the white dove must "sail" over the sea, cannonballs "fly" over the land. The image of these weapons of war flying near that lovely dove is a frightening one, one that suggests human beings threaten to destroy any hope for peace through their repeated turn to war and violence.

The speaker's huge symbols—roads, doves, seas—give the song a feeling of grand scale. These questions are broad and general, to do with everyone. But do they have answers?

LINES 7-8

The answer, my ...
... in the wind

The speaker caps the first series of huge questions with two lines that will become a repeating refrain: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind."

At first, this might not seem like much of an answer to those questions at all. And in fact, it isn't! These words tell where the answers to war and cruelty might be found, rather than providing an answer themselves. What might it mean to say that the answer is "blowin' in the wind"?

The reader might begin by thinking about what the wind is like. It's a powerful force with the strength to change the world. It's everywhere, all the time, but it's elusive, shapeless, and invisible; it can't be grasped or controlled. In short, it's a paradox.

The wind, like the "dove" and the "roads," is also a big and ancient symbol. It's often used to represent thought (another powerful, invisible force), change (as in the cliché of the "winds of change"), and spirit (which comes from a root that means wind, but also breath).

If the answer is "blowin' in the wind," then, it might share some of those qualities. Whatever the answer is, it's not easy to pin down; the speaker isn't even willing to say *what* it is, only *where* it is, and that "where" is as elusive as the air itself. It's all around people, but it can't be delivered in a little box. Like the mind, like the spirit, like change itself, it's a force that can't be commanded.

LINES 9-12

How many years ...
... to be free?

The speaker begins this next stanza with a return to the pattern of the first, using parallelism to shape a series of rhetorical questions. Again, those questions are working on a huge scale—and they seem to be connected to each other.

The images of the first question here, like the dove and the seas of the previous stanza, are drawn from nature. The speaker imagines an imposing mountain being slowly eroded by the sea. The speaker doesn't know how long that might take, but implies that it will happen eventually.

Like those before it, this question is both weary and hopeful. There's something awe-inspiring about the idea that a whole stony mountain could be washed away by the patient movement of the ocean. This image might also remind the reader of that wind that the answer blows in: the shapeless, ever-changing sea, like the shapeless, ever-changing wind, has the power to take down seemingly-immovable institutions.

The second question makes it clear what that mountain might stand for. Here, the speaker's repetitions are even more pronounced: the poem doesn't just use a parallel sentence structure, but also ends line 11 with the same word that ends line 9: "exist." That suggests that these questions might have an awful lot to do with each other.

The second question moves away from the symbolic world of mountains and seas to the literal world of injustice, as the speaker asks how long human beings can "exist" under oppression. The exact nature of this oppression is left nonspecific, allowing the speaker's question to apply to the act of oppression *itself*, something that happens in many different settings. The word "exist" is an interesting one that relates the gravity of the question: the speaker suggests that oppression, cutting off others' freedom, is a threat to humanity itself.

The identical structure of these two questions also suggests a

connection between that mountain and that oppression. The freer movements of the wind and sea might one day be able to alter the stony edifices of societal injustice—and the blockages in people's hearts that push them to oppress others.

LINES 13-16

Yes, 'n' how ...
... in the wind

The final rhetorical question in this stanza returns to the everyman of the first lines, asking, "how many times can a man turn his head / Pretending he just doesn't see?" The things this man isn't seeing are left vague, but seem to refer to all the issues already presented in the song—oppression, violence, and so forth. By saying the many only pretends not to see these things, the speaker critiques him for his *chosen* ignorance, his refusal to face the problems in the world.

The song's movement from the broader world—mountains and groups of "people"—to the singular "man" again suggests that the world's enduring problems are as much to do with how individuals think and believe as how governments or societies act. After all, governments and societies are *made* of individuals. Thus even as the song laments the sorry state of the world, it never sinks into defeatism or lets regular people think that they're refusal to "see" the issues at hand doesn't matter.

Here it's worth taking a closer look at some of the patterns of sound that have developed over these lines. There's strong alliteration and consonance on /m/, /n/, /t/, and /h/ sounds in "Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head," drawing listeners' attention to a line focused on the importance of individuals (also note the internal rhyme of "can a man"). The /m/ sound here in particular picks up on alliteration that runs all through the song. These strong, simple repetitions make the lines sound insistent. This speaker feels passionately about these questions, and the dense sound patterns throughout reflect that intensity.

There's also a deceptively simple sing-song feeling to the rhyme scheme here. As in the previous stanza, the even-numbered lines here rhyme, while the odd numbered lines are always longer than those following on their heels. While there's no consistent meter to the song as written, some strongly stressed beats can be mapped out based on Dylan's recordings:

> Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head
> Pretending he just doesn't see?

The sounds of the song grant all its complicated questions a veneer of simplicity. This fits right in with the idea of the "answer" being as ever-present and as hard to grasp as the wind. The straightforward and the complex go hand in hand here.

LINES 17-20

How many times ...
... hear people cry?

By now, the reader has a good sense of the song's shape, and knows to expect the pattern of rhetorical questions here. In this climactic stanza, however, the speaker alters the movement of those questions.

In the first couple of stanzas, the speaker spends more time with general, external questions, using big, symbolic images of mountains and doves to address the complex problems of war and oppression. But here, the everyman who has popped up once in each of the previous stanzas is at the heart of every question, and the focus is much more internal.

The speaker first wonders: "How many times must a man look up / Before he can see the sky?" One might think that this man would see the sky *every* time he looks up. But, this image suggests, sometimes the things it's hardest to see are the things that seem most obvious. The image of the sky suggests freedom and expansion, again tying in with the poem's repeated references to the wind. The gentle sibilance of "see the sky" makes this a deceptively peaceful introduction to questions that are only going to get harder from here.

The speaker's next question is more pointed and more painful: "Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have / Before he can hear people cry?" This hearkens back to lines 13-14, when the speaker imagines the everyman purposefully *looking away* from pain: a big part of finding an end to violence, the speaker insists, is no longer pretending it doesn't exist. A painful confrontation with the suffering that's right there in front of every human is necessary if any answer is to be found. The /ee/ assonance and internal rhyme of "ears" and "hear" suggest that those ears are *made* to hear, if only their possessor would use them well.

LINES 21-24

Yes, 'n' how ...
... in the wind

The final rhetorical question of the song is the simplest and most painful of all. There's no metaphor here, no symbolism standing between the reader and this last question: "Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows / That too many people have died?"

These lines' repetitions—especially the one-two punch of polyptoton in "deaths" and "died"—bring the question home with blunt force. This is a culmination of all the questions that have come before. All the speaker's musings about war and injustice point toward the ultimate mystery of ongoing, senseless loss.

Just as before, the speaker closes this stanza with that cryptic non-answer. The only thing one can say to this terrible question is that the "answer is blowin' in the wind." But there's one more point to make about this refrain. The speaker doesn't just tell

readers/listeners where that answer can be found: the speaker addresses them directly, as "my friend."

This subtle apostrophe gives the poem a sense of fellow-feeling throughout. Part of every human's internal reckoning with evil is recognizing that all humans are connected. Addressing his audience as "my friend," the speaker hints that part of what "a man" has to do in order to see, feel, and alter the world's pain is to reach out to the person next to him. It takes both the free, flexible, and fluid power of the wind and the acknowledgement of shared humanity to begin to bring war and oppression to an end.

SYMBOLS

ROADS

Roads (in this song as elsewhere) symbolize choices and life journeys. In asking "How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?" the speaker wonders what it takes to achieve true humanity. How many paths must one explore? How much hard experience does one have to go through to understand one's own humanity—and the humanity of others? The image of roads suggests that this journey to full humanity is a long and difficult one. It also suggests that it's a choice: no one is going to make this "man" go on the road, he's going to have to make that decision himself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?"

THE DOVE

Doves—gentle birds with strong homing instincts—are an ancient symbol of peace. The reader may be familiar with this symbolism from hearing about political "hawks and doves"—war-hawks versus peace-loving doves. But there's also a reference here to a specific dove: the biblical dove of Noah's Ark, which flew out from the Ark to seek dry land and returned bearing a hopeful olive branch. The symbolism of the dove here suggests that the change the speaker hopes for may not be easy to come by. The dove may be looking for the "dry land" of a whole new landscape, a peaceful world where she might finally sleep, for some time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand?"

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE SEA

The mountain of line 9, slowly eroding into the sea, is a symbol of those human institutions that keep war and oppression in place. The stony mountain is all that resists change: the shape of government and history, certainly, but also the rocky terrain inside people's hearts. The slow, persistent erosive power of the ocean, on the other hand, symbolizes the action of internal and external change. The sea may not be able to destroy the mountain in one blow, but in its constant fluid motion (as contrasted with the immobility of the mountain), it will inevitably wear it away eventually—even if it takes many, many lifetimes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "How many years can a mountain exist / Before it's washed to the sea?"

CANNONBALLS

The cannonballs of line 5 symbolize war and violence. This song was written in 1962, when cannonballs were no longer a feature of war; Dylan's choice to use cannonballs as an image of war thus emphasizes that war is not a modern problem, but one with roots deep in human history. Simultaneously, these cannonballs tell readers something about how the speaker feels about war: in using this archaic image, the speaker seems to ask, "Shouldn't we be past cannonballs"—and by implication wartime violence—"by now?"

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannonballs fly / Before they're forever banned?"

THE WIND

The refrain of this song returns and returns to the wind, a mighty natural force with a lot of complex symbolism attached to it. The wind is both ever present and impossible to get a grip on. One can't *hold* it, but one can *feel* it; one knows it's there, but it's invisible. As such, it can be taken, in one interpretation, as a symbol of that which is pretty tough to symbolize: new, untried, and freer ways of thinking. The "answer" the speaker seeks doesn't seem to be an answer one can write down in a book. It will come only to those who can prepare themselves to understand the world in completely new and ever-changing ways.

The speaker's earlier biblical references also hint that this wind may be to do with *spirit*: the unknowable presence of God. To think in ways that prevent war, perhaps humanity has to tap into a larger, kinder, and sometimes incomprehensible being or way of thinking/being.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Lines 15-16:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration marks a distinct difference between poetry and normal speech. Day-to-day conversations don't tend to use a lot of emphatic, repeated sounds, so alliteration can help to make a poem feel musical. Here, alliteration (and its cousin sibilance—examined more closely in its own entry) also supports the poem's themes and ideas.

The strongest alliteration in this poem is on /m/ sounds, which appear again and again in the poem's circling questions. A pattern of /m/ sounds connects the words "**m**any," "**m**ust," and "**m**an," suggesting that the speaker's questions have a lot to do with repetition themselves: how long do these recurrent patterns of cruelty and ignorance have to continue before change comes? That initial /m/ sound also links the poem's archetypal everyman to the slowly eroding "**m**ountain" in line 9, a connection which hints that this mountain might symbolize seemingly unchangeable human institutions.

There's also some scattered alliteration on /t/ sounds, which connect the many "**t**imes" a man can "**t**urn" away from injustice, and the "**t**oo" many deaths it will "**t**ake" "**t**ill" he's willing to change.

These repeating sounds make thematic connections, but they also add to the song's musicality. Simple repetitions and simple language stand in contrast to the huge complexity of the questions the song is addressing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "many," "must," "man"
- **Line 2:** "man"
- **Line 3:** "many," "must," "sail"
- **Line 4:** "sleeps," "sand"
- **Line 5:** "many," "must," "fly"
- **Line 6:** "Before," "forever," "banned"
- **Line 9:** "many," "mountain"
- **Line 13:** "many," "times," "man," "turn"
- **Line 17:** "many," "must," "man"
- **Line 18:** "see," "sky"
- **Line 19:** "many," "must," "man"
- **Line 21:** "take till"
- **Line 22:** "too"

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusion to the symbolic dove of peace—and through the dove, to the biblical story of Noah's Ark—connects the song's words to profound and ancient questions about evil and restoration, suggesting that the issues this song grapples with go right to the roots of the human experience.

In the Old Testament, God, displeased with humanity's cruelty and corruption, destroys the world with a massive flood so that he can start afresh. He preserves only Noah and his family, instructing Noah to build a huge boat and fill it with a breeding pair of every animal. Noah knows that the floodwaters are finally starting to recede when he sends out a dove to search for dry land and the dove returns with an olive branch, which heralds the reemergence of the earth from the seas. The gentle, home-loving dove has since become a symbol of peace and restoration.

The speaker's allusion to the dove, sailing over vast seas in search of a resting place on dry land, thus evokes not only the long quest for peace, but the bewildering depth of human corruption. In seeking dry sands to sleep on, this dove searches for a restored world, free from war and oppression. But, as this song suggests, she hasn't found it yet, and it's hard to say when she will.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand?"

ASSONANCE

Assonance often gives a poem a sense of musicality—something that's particularly important given that this is a song, meant to be sung aloud. Assonance of course appears in the song's rhyme scheme (discussed separately in this guide), but also pops up a few times within lines themselves. For example, the long /ee/ sound repeats in lines 3-4, where the dove must sail endless "s**ea**s" before "sh**e** sl**ee**ps." In the next line, the long /i/ of "t**i**me" repeats at the end of the line with the word "fl**y**," while in line 6 "B**e**f**o**re" is echoed by "f**o**rever" through assonance and consonance.

Repeated sounds and words play a big thematic role in "Blowin' in the Wind," which asks a lot of questions about things that keep inexplicably happening over and over: war, oppression, and willful human blindness to war and oppression. Assonance thus not only makes the song sound more musical, but also, very subtly, reflects some of its thematic ideas.

To that end, that long /ee/ sound noted above appears again many times throughout the poem. In the third stanza, for

instance, assonance on long /ee/ sounds connects the inadequate "ears" of the man who won't "hear" to the "people" whose cries he ignores. Each of these instances of /ee/ assonance also links to the repeating "before" that echoes through the whole poem. This repeating /ee/ provides a sonic through-line, in a sense, that weaves through the poem, suggesting that all of these questions are interconnected.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "seas"
- **Line 4:** "she sleeps"
- **Line 5:** "times," "cannonballs," "fly"
- **Line 6:** "Before," "forever," "banned"
- **Line 18:** "Before he," "see"
- **Line 19:** "ears"
- **Line 20:** "Before he," "hear people"

METAPHOR

This song is rich in grand metaphors. The ancient images the speaker chooses help to ground these questions in ideas just about as old as humanity itself.

Many of the speaker's metaphors have to do with the natural landscape—for instance, the metaphorical mountain in line 9. The vast, imposing, stony mountain is an image of all that is seemingly unchangeable in human society and in human hearts. But in line 10, the reader learns that mountain is being eroded by another huge force: the sea. The changeable, ever-moving sea works in contrast to the solid mountain, suggesting that fluid, flexible forces have the power to slowly carve away even the most immovable-looking edifices. The sea, here, might well have something to do with the song's biggest image: the wind.

Like the sea, the wind is ever-changing, shapeless, and powerful. And like the sea, it contains some kind of answer to seemingly intractable problems. Both of these natural metaphors are complex ones, standing for qualities that are themselves hard to pin down, like freedom of thought and changeability. Through these images of huge, ever-changing forces, the speaker suggests that only new and less rigid ways of thinking and being might challenge the mountains of injustice and violence.

The speaker also uses the old metaphor of the road to suggest life's journeys: the archetypal "man" of this song has to travel down many roads to reach mature, independent selfhood.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand?"
- **Lines 7-8:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Lines 9-10:** "How many years can a mountain exist / Before it's washed to the sea?"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"

PARADOX

Paradox plays an essential thematic role in this song: it's right there in the central image of the wind.

This song's refrain might at first seem willfully cryptic. What on earth does it mean to say that the answer is "blowin' in the wind"? The reader might start to think about this question by considering what the wind is like. It's an ever-present force, with the power to substantially alter the world (think about a hurricane!). But it's also invisible and uncontrollable. The wind is thus itself a kind of paradox: everywhere and nowhere, powerful and intangible.

The paradoxical nature of the wind suggests that the answer to the speaker's questions is at once incredibly simple and incredibly complex. In using the wind as an image for the solution to war and oppression, the speaker refuses to pin down any one philosophy. The speaker's not saying "the answer is a particular political system!" or "the answer is in this book I read!"

Rather, the speaker suggests that the answer is something as easy to perceive and as difficult to grasp as the air. It's also something that everyone is going to have to figure out internally, for themselves, rather than clinging to some solid and unchanging system. The paradoxical image of the wind suggests that an end to human cruelty can only come through an ever-changing dynamic process, not a clear and complete solution.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"

REFRAIN

"Blowin' in the Wind" is a song in the folk tradition, so its use of a refrain makes a lot of sense. Refrains—repeating choruses that come at the ends of verses—are a common feature in ballads and folk songs, encouraging listeners to join in and sing along. But here, the refrain also plays a thematic role.

There's a huge amount of repetition in this song, and it connects to the speaker's big ideas. A lot of the speaker's questions have to do with terrible things that happen over and over, or that go on for an incomprehensibly long time: why should injustice, war, and oppression, obviously evil things, keep happening?

The song's inevitable return to its refrain paradoxically insists that the answer to these questions is always the same, but also always different. Even though the speaker returns and returns to the idea that the answer is "blowin' in the wind," the wind itself is never the same twice, always on the move.

The refrain thus encourages the reader to see old, seemingly unchangeable patterns in a different light. The answer is always "in the wind," but the wind is always moving. There's no single cure for the world's ills, and humanity needs to adjust itself to freer and more dynamic ways of thinking if there's to be any hope of real change.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Lines 15-16:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"

REPETITION

Repetition plays important roles in this song, shaping both its sounds and its message. There are all kinds of repetitious devices here, and in their different ways, they all speak to the song's sad sense that humans inflict the same evils on each other over and over. But the repetitions here also insist that there *is* an answer to these evils—even if it's pretty hard to grasp.

Perhaps the most obvious kind of repetition here is parallelism, in which sentences repeatedly use the same grammatical structures. Every single stanza uses exactly the same sentence form, repeating questions that ask, "How many [...] before [...]?" That these insistent questions all ask about how *many* times each of these things can happen emphasize the speaker's world-weary tone: there's a feeling here of a terrible, endless accumulation of pain.

The answer to these parallel questions also repeats, forming a refrain: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind." This insistent answer is in fact a paradoxical non-answer; the speaker's refusal to give pat solutions to the problems of human evil is an important part of the song's philosophical stance. (For more on this, see this guide's entry on "refrain.")

Within these already repetitive structures, the reader may also spot anaphora (like the repetition of "Yes, 'n'"), diacope (like the recurrence of "exist" in lines 9 and 11), and polyptoton (the repetition of related words, like "deaths" and "died" in lines 21-22). These repetitions similarly bring the speaker's point home: the evils the speaker's examining are ones that perpetuate themselves across history, happening again and again in slightly different forms.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "How many," "man"
- **Line 2:** "Before," "man"
- **Line 3:** "Yes, 'n' how many"
- **Line 4:** "Before"
- **Line 5:** "Yes, 'n' how many"
- **Line 6:** "Before"
- **Lines 7-8:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Line 9:** "How many years can," "exist"
- **Line 10:** "Before"
- **Line 11:** "Yes, 'n' how many years can," "exist"
- **Line 12:** "Before"
- **Line 13:** "Yes, 'n' how many times can"
- **Lines 15-16:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"
- **Line 17:** "How many times must"
- **Line 18:** "Before"
- **Line 19:** "Yes, 'n' how many"
- **Line 20:** "Before"
- **Line 21:** "Yes, 'n' how many," "deaths"
- **Line 22:** "died"
- **Lines 23-24:** "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind / The answer is blowin' in the wind"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Unanswerable rhetorical questions make up the bulk of "Blowin' in the Wind." The song is built out of a series of riddling questions about the terrible persistence of violence and oppression, and it answers them only with its insistent non-answer: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind."

The speaker's rhetorical questions—"how many times must the cannonballs fly/Before they're forever banned?" "[H]ow many years can some people exist/Before they're allowed to be free?"— suggest that part of the difficulty with human evils is that they simply don't have clear answers. Injustice and cruelty, like the metaphorical "mountain" of line 9, often feel like huge, permanent, frightening features of human life—and not only do they feel intractable, they feel inexplicable. Everyone knows that war, for instance, is a bad thing—so why can't humans stop warring with each other? Answerless rhetorical questions, the speaker suggests, are the only kind available to humans who try to reckon with evil.

The speaker's questions are full of images taken from nature, lending them the tone of an old riddle or puzzle. His single, repeated answer is itself another riddle: only the shifting, ungraspable, wordless wind can provide any kind of reply to the questions he asks.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-14
- Lines 17-22

SIBILANCE

Sibilance creates a quiet, whispery, gentle effect—you can't yell an /s/! Here, sibilance often turns up in moments suggesting resolutions to difficult times. For instance, the flight of the dove in lines 3-4 is full of soft /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds:

> Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail
> Before she sleeps in the sand?

These hushed tone here suggest the dove—a symbol of peace—reaching an even greater peace, coming to rest on a quiet beach.

Sibilance also creates an onomatopoeic effect in line 10. Onomatopoeia is the effect where the sounds of a word imitate the sounds of the thing it describes, and the reader may hear exactly that in the sibilance of "washed to the sea." The ocean's quiet persistence has the power to eventually take down the stony mountain.

There's a final, subtle bit of sibilance in line 18, where the speaker wonders:

> How many times must a man look up
> Before he can see the sky?

This soft image—of a man looking up to really see what's been right there above him all along—serves as a deceptively gentle introduction to a hard final question: "[H]ow many deaths will it take till he knows / That too many people have died?" The quiet of the man looking at the sky prepares the last stanza's painful crescendo.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "seas must," "sail"
- **Line 4:** "she sleeps," "sand"
- **Line 10:** "it's washed," "sea"
- **Line 18:** "see," "sky"

VOCABULARY

Blowin' in the wind (Line 7) - This purposely ambiguous phrase has a double meaning: the "answer" the speaker seeks is, like the wind, both always there and impossible to hold onto.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Blowin' in the Wind" breaks into three stanzas, each an eight-line octet. In the first of these, the speaker introduces huge, unanswerable questions about war and peace; in the second, the speaker gets a little more pointed, grounding observations in the actions of people rather than archetypal doves and roads; in the third, the speaker is more pointed still, honing in on the individual "man" and his willful ignorance of human suffering.

Though the focus of each stanza shifts and narrows slightly, each stanza strongly resembles the last in its form. The speaker's circling refrain makes up the final two lines of each stanza, and thus means that every stanza returns to that ineffable answer, "blowin' in the wind."

Within stanzas, too, there's a repeated rhythm of questioning: the speaker always adds on to the initial question with a "Yes, 'n'" (i.e., "and"). These repetitions add to the feeling that this speaker is turning over questions that just can't be answered easily. No matter how many questions the speaker asks, the speaker always has to return to the slippery wind in the end.

METER

"Blowin' in the Wind" as a written text doesn't have a consistent meter. However, "Blowin' in the Wind" isn't just a written text. It's a song, and its melody emphasizes and de-emphasizes, stresses and unstresses, certain words throughout.

For example, the noun that appears directly after "many" in each verse always jumps up the scale, the higher note adding emphasis to "roads," "seas," "times," and so forth. This draws listeners' attention to the diversity of situations that the speaker (or, rather, singer) is presenting. The word "man" also gets more oomph in each verse, adding emphasis to the human element of the song.

Take lines 1-2, which, again, don't have an actual meter, but essentially pattern the stressed words like this when sung:

> How many roads must a man walk down
> Before you call him a man?

The melody pulls listeners' attention to many of the song's thematic ideas.

Also note that one of the differences between poetry that's set to music and poetry that isn't is that the melody may add to or change the number of syllables in a word. So, for instance, the line that looks like this on the page:

> How many roads must a man walk down

Sounds like this when it's sung:

How many roads must a man *wa-alk* down

Music makes the words more flexible, as the singer can stretch them around the melody and rhythm in unique ways. In terms of sound, the song isn't a thumping march; it's a lyrical lament, and its naturalistic meter as sung makes that clear.

There are technically 10 syllables in the above line (though "many" is sung so quickly as to almost constitute a single beat). All the lines starting with "How" have 9-11 syllables, and these lines are always longer than the lines beginning with "Before," which have 6-8 syllables.

One can find this pattern—a longer line followed by a shorter line—in everything from nursery rhymes to old ballads. In choosing this rhythm, the speaker connects his song to ancient tradition, just as he connects his questions to ancient themes.

RHYME SCHEME

"Blowin' in the Wind" uses an unobtrusive rhyme scheme that conceals some surprising complexities. Two things stay constant throughout the whole song: the even lines of every stanza always rhyme with each other, and the final two lines of each stanza always end on the word "wind" (technically creating a couplet). The first and third stanzas follow this pattern (albeit using different rhyme sounds before that final repetition of "wind"):

ABCBDBEE

In context, the first stanza looks like this:

[...] down A
[...] man? B
[...] sail C
[...] sand? B
[...] fly D
[...] banned? B
[...] wind E
[...] wind E

The final two rhymes are, again, identical rhymes, as the speaker simply repeats the phrase "blowin' in the wind." Between this repetition and the repetition of that B sound, this stanza's rhyme pattern circles back on itself over and over, like someone turning a complicated question over in their head.

The rhymes here, and throughout the poem, are also all full and clear; the poem never uses slant or half rhymes. This makes the speaker's words sound simpler than they actually are, and reflects the nature of the questions being asked—questions that, on the surface, *seem* straightforward, yet get at the complicated heart of the human condition.

The speaker breaks the above pattern very slightly in stanza 2. Whereas above the first and third lines *don't* rhyme with each other ("down" vs. "sail"), in the second stanza they *do*—again as an identical rhyme ("exist" and "exist"). On the one hand, this identical rhyme draws attention to the symbolic relationship between the images here—that of a mountain crumbling into the sea, and that of people breaking free from oppression.

A more formal or stylized poem would be unlikely to rhyme "exist" with "exist" in lines 9 and 11, but it makes perfect sense for an everyday speaker with insistent questions to frame those questions in the exact same words. The rhyme scheme here thus feels simple, even though it isn't, because the words that *do* rhyme tend to repeat their rhymes over and over: insisting just as the speaker insists, in a natural, everyday voice.

There's also a hint of hope in the rhyme scheme here. Because each stanza ends with the same word—"wind"—every stanza ultimately rhymes with each other. Perhaps discords may someday resolve into harmony after all.

SPEAKER

This song's speaker has a reflective, wise voice, and sees the big questions of the world from both an intimate and a grand perspective. This speaker doesn't tell readers anything about themselves directly, but the reader can tell this is a person with a passionate, idealistic, melancholy soul, who's disappointed by humanity's failures. The speaker is focused on questions about how to bring about an end to the suffering that humans cause each other, but isn't naive: the speaker knows that these problems are as old as humanity itself, and that the answers can't be found in any one philosophy. The speaker uses symbols from both nature and biblical tradition, reaching out to that which is bigger than any one human to find guidance. By keeping the speaker nonspecific, the song can be taken slightly differently by all who hear it; it isn't tied to a single, unique perspective, but rather to the human condition itself.

SETTING

The landscapes that "Blowin' in the Wind" evokes are archetypal ones, drawing on big, general ideas rather than specific places. The speaker sings of roads, seas, and mountains; these are symbolic *types* of place rather than real places, and they help to connect the song to themes that feel universal. One might read the setting of this song as the whole world. It doesn't matter what mountain one looks at or what sea one sails: the problems this song touches upon are the same everywhere.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Bob Dylan (1941-present) is one of the most important figures

in American music, and his long and varied career continues to this day. Born Robert Zimmerman, he renamed himself after one of his heroes, the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, and rose to prominence as a folk singer in the tradition of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. "Blowin' in the Wind," recorded in 1962 and released in 1963 as part of the album "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan," was one of his first big hits, and it became an anthem of its era.

Dylan's musical evolution has shocked (and even enraged) his fans as often as it has impressed them; an early folk audience famously booed him when he dared to introduce electric guitar to his act. But the puckish, experimental Dylan has never been thrown off by criticism, and over the course of his career he's explored a wide range of genres and styles, from folk to rock to gospel—and even made a Christmas album. His music has influenced just about every musician who's followed him; like the Beatles, he remade the entire musical landscape.

He's perhaps best-known for his distinctive vocal style and his cryptic, elegant, sometimes surreal lyrics. Critics like Christopher Ricks have often read his songs as poetry, and indeed, Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Dylan wrote "Blowin' in the Wind" in 1962, America was embroiled in the Vietnam War abroad and in massive protests at home. The civil rights and second-wave feminist movements were in full swing, peace protestors marched for nuclear disarmament, and the more conservative older generation was in conflict with the freedom-loving younger one. In short, it was a time of both disillusionment and new idealism. The grand scale of "Blowin' in the Wind," with its archetypal images of mountains and doves, speaks to the power of the problems 1960s America grappled with.

"Blowin' in the Wind" fits right into its cultural moment both in form and in subject matter. The idealistic protest movements brought with them a revival in folk music traditions. Folk music was seen as a people's art form, and many musicians of the period used folk songs to register their discontent with the status quo. The themes of "Blowin' in the Wind"—the longing for an end to war and injustice, the difficulty of breaking from oppressive traditions, and the need for utterly new and less rigid ways of thinking—caught the contemporary imagination, and the song's huge popularity speaks to the political and aesthetic chords it struck in its time.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Bob Dylan's Official Website — Check out Bob Dylan's current website. (http://www.bobdylan.com/)
- A Historical Interpretation — This page from History.com interprets the song as an important moment in political as well as artistic history. (https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/bob-dylan-records-blowin-in-the-wind)
- A Times Profile of Dylan — A recent New York Times article on Dylan's artistic life and legacy. (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/arts/music/bob-dylan-rough-and-rowdy-ways.html)
- A Short Biography — The Poetry Foundation's brief biography of Bob Dylan. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/bob-dylan)
- Bob Dylan Performs the Song — Watch a video of Bob Dylan singing this song in 1963, not long after he wrote it. (https://youtu.be/vWwgrjjIMXA)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Blowin' in the Wind*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Aug 2020. Web. 1 Oct 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Blowin' in the Wind*." LitCharts LLC, August 12, 2020. Retrieved October 1, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/bob-dylan/blowin-in-the-wind.