

**Short Story Writing 101 through Song:
Bob Dylan's "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts"**

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When Bob Dylan describes the early years of his career in his autobiography, *Chronicles*, he meticulously mentions hundreds upon hundreds of people, songs, places, books, poems, historical events, and other things that influenced him as he developed as a singer and songwriter. Like other prolific songwriters, Dylan has the ability to soak up the myriad facets of life around him and transform them into strikingly original songs. His song "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts," released on the 1975 album *Blood on the Tracks*, was born of this alchemy and can be analyzed in numerous ways, one of which is how Dylan used the narrative structure and writing techniques commonly employed by writers of short stories to write the lyrics of this song. This song can be seen as an exemplar of the basic rules of fictional prose writing, a sort of Short Story Writing 101 put to music.

Below are the complete lyrics of this song as they are printed on Bob Dylan's official website. There are 16 stanzas of five lines each. The numbers have been added to each stanza for easy reference.

Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts

1

The festival was over, the boys were all plannin' for a fall
The cabaret was quiet except for the drillin' in the wall
The curfew had been lifted and the gamblin' wheel shut down
Anyone with any sense had already left town
He was standin' in the doorway lookin' like the Jack of Hearts

2

He moved across the mirrored room, "Set it up for everyone," he said
Then everyone commenced to do what they were doin' before he turned their heads
Then he walked up to a stranger and he asked him with a grin
"Could you kindly tell me, friend, what time the show begins?"
Then he moved into the corner, face down like the Jack of Hearts

Key words : Bob Dylan, Short Story, Structure, Writing Techniques

3

Backstage the girls were playin' five-card stud by the stairs
Lily had two queens, she was hopin' for a third to match her pair
Outside the streets were fillin' up, the window was open wide
A gentle breeze was blowin', you could feel it from inside
Lily called another bet and drew up the Jack of Hearts

4

Big Jim was no one's fool, he owned the town's only diamond mine
He made his usual entrance lookin' so dandy and so fine
With his bodyguards and silver cane and every hair in place
He took whatever he wanted to and he laid it all to waste
But his bodyguards and silver cane were no match for the Jack of Hearts

5

Rosemary combed her hair and took a carriage into town
She slipped in through the side door lookin' like a queen without a crown
She fluttered her false eyelashes and whispered in his ear
"Sorry, darlin', that I'm late," but he didn't seem to hear
He was starin' into space over at the Jack of Hearts

6

"I know I've seen that face before," Big Jim was thinkin' to himself
"Maybe down in Mexico or a picture up on somebody's shelf"
But then the crowd began to stamp their feet and the houselights did dim
And in the darkness of the room there was only Jim and him
Starin' at the butterfly who just drew the Jack of Hearts

7

Lily was a princess, she was fair-skinned and precious as a child
She did whatever she had to do, she had that certain flash every time she smiled
She'd come away from a broken home, had lots of strange affairs
With men in every walk of life which took her everywhere
But she'd never met anyone quite like the Jack of Hearts

8

The hangin' judge came in unnoticed and was being wined and dined
The drillin' in the wall kept up but no one seemed to pay it any mind
It was known all around that Lily had Jim's ring
And nothing would ever come between Lily and the king

No, nothin' ever would except maybe the Jack of Hearts

9

Rosemary started drinkin' hard and seein' her reflection in the knife
She was tired of the attention, tired of playin' the role of Big Jim's wife
She had done a lot of bad things, even once tried suicide
Was lookin' to do just one good deed before she died
She was gazin' to the future, riding on the Jack of Hearts

10

Lily washed her face, took her dress off and buried it away
"Has your luck run out?" she laughed at him, "Well, I guess you must have known it would
someday
Be careful not to touch the wall, there's a brand-new coat of paint
I'm glad to see you're still alive, you're lookin' like a saint"
Down the hallway footsteps were comin' for the Jack of Hearts

11

The backstage manager was pacing all around by his chair
"There's something funny going on," he said, "I can just feel it in the air"
He went to get the hangin' judge, but the hangin' judge was drunk
As the leading actor hurried by in the costume of a monk
There was no actor anywhere better than the Jack of Hearts

12

Lily's arms were locked around the man that she dearly loved to touch
She forgot all about the man she couldn't stand who hounded her so much
"I've missed you so," she said to him, and he felt she was sincere
But just beyond the door he felt jealousy and fear
Just another night in the life of the Jack of Hearts

13

No one knew the circumstance but they say that it happened pretty quick
The door to the dressing room burst open and a cold revolver clicked
And Big Jim was standin' there, ya couldn't say surprised
Rosemary right beside him, steady in her eyes
She was with Big Jim but she was leanin' to the Jack of Hearts

14

Two doors down the boys finally made it through the wall

And cleaned out the bank safe, it's said that they got off with quite a haul
In the darkness by the riverbed they waited on the ground
For one more member who had business back in town
But they couldn't go no further without the Jack of Hearts

15

The next day was hangin' day, the sky was overcast and black
Big Jim lay covered up, killed by a penknife in the back
And Rosemary on the gallows, she didn't even blink
The hangin' judge was sober, he hadn't had a drink
The only person on the scene missin' was the Jack of Hearts

16

The cabaret was empty now, a sign said, "Closed for repair"
Lily had already taken all of the dye out of her hair
She was thinkin' 'bout her father, who she very rarely saw
Thinkin' 'bout Rosemary and thinkin' about the law
But most of all she was thinkin' 'bout the Jack of Hearts

Narrative Point of View

Dylan uses third-person omniscient narration to tell this story. This narrative point of view creates the atmosphere of a storyteller speaking to an audience, and it allows Dylan to include any type of information that he chooses to tell the story. Limited only by the need to keep the story interesting, he describes various characters' actions, words, and thoughts, he changes the location of the story at will, and he arranges the events in the order of his choosing. He is like a puppeteer manipulating the world of his story, and he doesn't mind if the audience occasionally notices him pulling the strings.

Different stories require different narrative points of view, so it is essential that writers choose the type of narration best suited to tell each story. Two other common narrative points of view are third-person limited and first-person. With third-person limited narration, the writer limits himself to describing the internal thoughts of only one character but is otherwise free to use all the options available with third-person omniscient narration. By using third-person limited, the writer softens the all-powerful tone of the narrator that third-person omniscient can have, and he gives readers the feeling of having a special relationship with the main character.

First-person narration, in which a story is told by one of the characters in the story, allows the writer's voice to disappear into the character. As readers read a good first-person narration, they feel very close to the narrating character, almost as if they and the character are friends. However, with this narrative point of view, writers are limited to describing only

things that the narrating character could possibly see or know or think or feel.

There are several ways to modify both third-person and first-person narration, and sometimes writers use a combination of narrative points of view to tell a story, but the key is choosing the narrative style that best fits the story to be told because how a story is narrated determines to a great extent what story is actually told. Aspiring writers should experiment with different narrative points of view so that they become proficient enough to choose and use the best method for each story that they write.

Plot Structure

Dylan organizes the events in this song according to the basic narrative plot structure of beginning, conflict, rising action, climax, and resolution. This common pattern of events is used extensively in short stories, novels, movies, TV dramas, and so on, because it is flexible enough to tell almost any story, and because it creates such a satisfactory impression.

Stanzas 1-5 are the beginning of this story. In them, Dylan describes the setting, introduces the main characters, and begins the action of the story. The first four lines of stanza 1 give the setting – a cabaret in a dangerous town someplace in the mythical history of the American West – and line 5 gives the first mention of the protagonist, a man known as “the Jack of Hearts.” Stanza 2 shows the Jack of Hearts, a stranger to this town, deftly getting some information he needs and then blending into the crowd. Stanza 3 introduces Lily, the beautiful dancer who likes to gamble but doesn't always win. Stanza 4 describes Big Jim, the handsome ruthless and very rich owner of the diamond mine in this one-company town. Stanza 5 introduces Rosemary, Big Jim's legal wife and spurned lover, who knows her fate but does not accept it.

As this song illustrates, the setting of a story is usually established quickly at the beginning of a story and at the beginning of each new scene. This is best done by using concise vivid details that also create an emotional atmosphere for the story. The place can be an actual, fictional or unspecified place, and the time can be in the past, present, future or an unspecified time. Whatever setting a writer chooses, his goal is to describe the setting in such a way that it feels real to the readers. Characters should also be described concisely and vividly. Describing characters in action, as they are doing something, is always more interesting than describing them as if they are paintings hanging on a wall.

Stanza 6 is the conflict. Big Jim notices the Jack of Hearts in the crowd at the cabaret and realizes he means danger, but before Big Jim can sort out his thoughts, the dance show starring Lily begins, distracting his attention.

The conflict is the event which introduces a problem or a change into the lives of the characters, thus beginning the string of events that will become the rest of the story. The conflict can be a dramatic event or, as in this song, something quite small. It should occur organically out of the setting and the characters that were described in the beginning of the story.

Stanzas 7 to 14 are the rising action, the exciting, seemingly inevitable, and increasingly emotional events which happen one after another leading up to the climax. Lily dances, more guests arrive at the cabaret, and Rosemary drinks and contemplates a secret plan. The Jack of Hearts sneaks into Lily's dressing room after the show, surprising and delighting her. Big Jim suspects something and rushes to Lily's dressing room. Big Jim opens the dressing room door and discovers the Jack of Hearts with his lover, but before Big Jim can shoot, Rosemary stabs him in the back. And while all this is happening, the Jack of Hearts' men rob the bank and steal Big Jim's money.

As in this song, the rising action is usually the longest part of a story. Whatever happens, the events should be consistent with the setting and the characters: Sherlock Holmes can notice small details, Superman can fly, and the Jack of Hearts can always stay one step ahead of danger. The events should also be increasingly interesting and exciting. If the rising action is good, readers will keep turning the pages, always wanting to know what happens next. The action can be physical, emotional, intellectual, physiological, or any combination of those, but it should grab the reader's attention and not let go.

Stanza 15 is the climax, the event that brings an end to the series of events that began with the conflict. In this song, Rosemary is hanged for killing Big Jim, and the Jack of Hearts and his men escape.

The climax has two main functions. It ends the events in the rising action, and it gives meaning to those events. The climax tells the readers who won, who lost, and explains, or at least hints at, why. The climax is what readers wanted to know all the time they were reading the events of the rising action; and after readers have forgotten most of the details in the story, they are likely to remember the events and the emotions of the climax.

Stanza 16 is the resolution, a final scene after the climax that brings the story to a complete close, often a kind of soft landing after the emotional climax. In this song, Dylan shows Lily pondering her life as she prepares to leave the town now that Big Jim is dead, the cabaret is closed, and the Jack of Hearts has left her again.

The resolution gives a story an ending that is somewhere along a continuum between closed and open. A closed ending explains any questions readers may have about what happened in the story and may hint strongly about what lies ahead in the future for the characters. An open ending leaves questions unanswered and does not predict the characters' future. Writers must always remember that the ending of a story – the combination of the climax and the resolution – becomes the key by which readers understand all the events of the story. To see the power of the ending, try changing the ending of a story you know and see how strongly a different ending influences the entire story.

Subplot

Dylan includes one subplot in this song. In stanza 1 line 2, stanza 8 line 2, and all of stanza 14, he describes how the Jack of Hearts' men rob the town bank while their boss is busy

in the cabaret. The skillful theft of money in the subplot nicely parallels the Jack of Hearts' skillful theft of Big Jim's lover in the main plot.

Subplots add an extra dimension to a story, making the action more complicated and interesting. Subplots usually involve minor characters, the events of the subplot usually follow the basic narrative plot structure, and most importantly, a good subplot has some type of connection to the main plot.

Characters

This song has four main characters: the Jack of Hearts, Lily, Big Jim, and Rosemary. Dylan describes them thoroughly, and most of the story is about them. The song also contains quite a few minor characters: the Jack of Hearts' men, men drinking in the cabaret, dancing girls, Big Jim's body guards, a judge, a stage manager, and an actor. These characters add depth and a feeling of reality to the story even though very little information is given about them.

As in this song, writers usually introduce the main characters near the beginning of a story and then introduce minor characters throughout the story as needed. Including both main and minor characters is one of the many ways that a fictional story mimics real life. Everyone knows lots of people, each to a varying degree. Their family and close friends, who they know in great detail and with whom they do many things, are like the main characters in a story. All the other people in their life, from colleagues at work, to neighbors, to strangers that they pass on the street, people who they know a little or even next to nothing about but who appear in their life and make it more complete, are like minor characters. Just like real life, a story needs a full cast of characters.

Names

Dylan gives the four main characters in this song names that have a meaning. The Jack of Hearts is a gambler and a lover. The two women are named after flowers. Lily is beautiful and, at the same time, not at all pure like a white lily. The herb rosemary is prized for its beauty and fragrance, and it symbolizes remembrance; Rosemary's beauty once caught Big Jim's attention, but now he has forgotten her. Big Jim is literally big Jim, the richest and most powerful man in town. The minor characters are not given names but are identified by their job or some other detail.

Giving a character a name makes that character seem real. In most cases, it is best to give a character a name that sounds natural, one that fits the character's personality and the setting of the story. Occasionally, it is effective to give a character a name or nickname that has a meaning, as Dylan did in this song. However, having too many characters with special names can feel heavy-handed and may ruin the verisimilitude of a story. Minor characters often don't require a name; they can be identified by their job or a personality trait or some

other thing about them.

Description

Because Dylan is writing lyrics, not prose, he is more economical with words than most short story writers need to be. However, his descriptive technique is well worth emulating. He describes the people and places in this song with just a few well chosen details. To give two examples, in stanza 4 lines 1 to 3, Big Jim is described with two facts, two adjectives, and three nouns: he is the shrewd owner of a diamond mine, he looks dandy and fine, and he has bodyguards, a silver cane, and perfectly combed hair. Stanza 6 lines 2 and 3 describe the cabaret just as the dance show begins with three actions: the crowd stamp their feet, the houselights dim, and darkness covers the audience.

Just as Dylan uses only a few effective details to describe the people and places in this song, writers should strive to keep descriptions of people, places, and things as concise and as vivid as possible. Writers should remember that descriptions of actions are more interesting than descriptions in which nothing is happening. Most readers have a lifetime of real-world experience and a healthy imagination, so all writers need to give them are a few well-chosen details to spark their memory and imagination, which will allow the readers to see the story in their mind's eye.

Flashback and Foreshadowing

The events in this song take place over two days and are told mostly in chronological order. However, Dylan occasionally uses flashback and foreshadowing to add important information and to heighten interest in the story. These two techniques can both been seen in stanza 8. Lines 3 and 4 are a flashback – a description of events that happened before the ongoing events of the story – in which Dylan describes the love relationship that has developed between Big Jim and Lily. Then in line 5 Dylan foreshadows – gives a hint – how this relationship might change by the end of the story.

Flashback is a useful technique that allows writers to give necessary background information about characters, places, or things in a story that will help readers better understand the action of the story. Flashback interrupts the ongoing action of a story, which can be both good and bad. Writers should use flashback only when necessary and should keep it as concise as necessary. Properly done, flashback gives readers useful, interesting information, and at the same time, it changes the pace of the storytelling in a positive way, adding a touch of variety that keeps the story interesting. A flashback that is unnecessary or too long bogs down a story.

Foreshadowing is used less than flashback because it is not as necessary and somewhat trickier to do effectively. The important thing to remember is that foreshadowing is a hint, a tease, about things to come, not a billboard advertizing future events.

Dialogue

Dylan uses third-person omniscient narration to tell this story; however, sometimes he has the characters speak for themselves in dialogue. Looking at two examples, in stanza 2 line 4, the Jack of Hearts asks one of the men in the cabaret, "Could you kindly tell me, friend, what time the show begins?" When the Jack of Heart speaks, listeners get a taste of his character – he is an easy guy to like – and they also get new information about the story – a show is going to start pretty soon. In stanza 11 line 2, the backstage manager says, "There's something funny going on, I can just feel it in the air." From his words, listeners understand the pressure that the manager feels in this chaotic situation, and they get a strong hint that something is about to happen.

Allowing characters to speak for themselves in dialogue makes the characters seem more real, allows readers to understand each character's personality and emotions, and provides a change of pace from the narrating voice. Good dialogue sounds realistic for each character and each situation, even though it may actually be cleverer than authentic speech. Good dialogue conveys both meaning and emotion: characters end up describing themselves through their own words. And good dialogue keeps the action of the story moving forward without saying the obvious or repeating the unnecessary.

Metaphor and Simile

In most cases, using adjectives is sufficient to describe people, places, and things in a story. However, metaphor and simile are also useful descriptive techniques. In stanza 6 line 5, Dylan uses the metaphor "butterfly" to describe Lily. This one-word comparison of Lily to a butterfly evokes images of a beautiful fragile dancer flitting dangerously from lover to lover. In stanza 5 line 2, Dylan describes how Rosemary enters the cabaret "like a queen without a crown." This simile expresses eloquently how Rosemary's fortunes have deteriorated from the time she married Big Jim until now.

Metaphor, in which two things are compared implicitly by mentioning only one of the things, and simile, in which two things are directly compared usually with the words "like" or "as," can both create striking images through comparison. Because metaphor and simile create powerful images they should not be overused; sprinkle them throughout a story. And like everything else in a story, they must seem organic to the characters and the situations, unless the writer is trying to create humor through incongruity.

Putting it All Together

Just as the proper ingredients must be added in the correct proportions to cook a delicious soup, the different parts of a story – description, action, dialogue, flashback, etc. – must be mixed together in just the right way to make a successful story. Stanzas 9 and 10

are good examples of how Dylan mixes his ingredients. In stanza 9, line 1 is action, line 2 is description, lines 3 and 4 are flashback, and line 5 is action. In stanza 10, line 1 is action, lines 2 to 4 are dialogue, and line 5 is action.

Real life is a constant swirl of events. People spend their waking hours seeing, hearing, thinking, doing, feeling, and while they sleep they dream. People do this constantly in unpredictable and innumerable variations. That is real life, and the more a story feels like real life the more readers are willing to enter into the world of the story as if it were real. In a nutshell, the craft of a short story writer is to have a story to tell and to tell the story in a clever, interesting way that feels real even though readers know that it is fiction.

Editing

Sometime between writing the lyrics of this song and actually recording the song, Dylan decided that he didn't need stanza 12. He cut it because he felt the song was better without it.

Just as Dylan wrote and rewrote the lyrics of this song until he had a final version, and then at recording time cut stanza 12, writers must learn to edit their stories. Great ideas and perfect phrases sometimes jump into a writer's mind, but most of the time, good writing is the result of persistent rewriting. A writer should be his own most critical reader, always searching for a better word, a more appropriate phrase, a more interesting plot twist. And even though it can be quite difficult, a writer should be willing to cut anything that isn't necessary, even an idea that seemed perfect when it was first written.

Title

Dylan chose the names of three main characters as the title for this song. A good title is usually short and points to a key element in the story: a thing, a place, a character, an action or an idea. The title is the first thing that a reader reads, but it doesn't have to be the first thing that a writer writes. Sometimes a good title pops into a writer's head as soon as he gets an idea for a story, but sometimes the best title doesn't occur to the writer until after he has finished a story, or even until after an editor has read the story and made a few suggestions.

Although Bob Dylan didn't write "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" specifically to be an example of short story writing, it nonetheless is. In the process of writing this song, along with using poetic techniques such as rhyme and repetition, which are often used in song lyrics, Dylan consciously or unconsciously drew upon his knowledge of fictional stories and found that using the narrative structure and writing techniques that authors commonly use to write short stories was the best way to say what he wanted to say in this particular song. Having internalized the basic narrative structure and these writing techniques, he was able to use these "rules" like tools to skillfully fashion his own unique story. Just as Dylan used these techniques to tell the story in "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts," writers need to master

these and other basic writing techniques in order to use them creatively to transform their ideas, experiences, and sparks of imagination into compelling fictional stories that can pull readers intellectually and emotionally into their fictional world and give readers an experience that feels so real and seems so true that it becomes part of their actual life.

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[Abstract]

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Bob Dylan's 1975 song "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" can be seen as an exemplar of the basic rules of writing short fictional stories. The lyrics of this song contain excellent examples of how writers use narrative point of view, plot structure, subplot, character development, description, flashback, foreshadowing, dialogue, metaphor, and simile, and how writers edit text and choose a title. Although Dylan did not write this song specifically to be an example of short story writing, it nonetheless is a concise and clever example of many of the writing techniques that writers need to master in order to write interesting and compelling short stories.

Key words : Bob Dylan, Short Story, Structure, Writing Techniques