

1963 or Today, Masters of Destruction Permeate Our Lives:

A Critique of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War"

[BELINDA BEAVER]

War. A word that everyone is familiar with, unfortunately from a rather young age. Wars have been around as long as there have been people to fight them. Beyond the devastating destruction and loss of life, effects of war permeate nearly every aspect of life, even music. In fact, music and other forms of art are often representative of the emotions and cultural time in which they are produced. For me, music has been able to capture what I am feeling in a way that I never could. This is why I became interested in Bob Dylan's song "Masters of War." I first heard Ed Sheeran's cover of the song in a high school English class during our poetry unit. Already enamored by his voice, the message of the song itself struck something inside me. Here was a song that talked about war in a way that not much else did, as something that was real, destructive, and beyond the battlefield. I found the song to be relevant when I heard it in 2016—when it was already fifty-three years old. Even today the message of the song holds value. Through the power of music, Bob Dylan transforms from a singer-songwriter to a rhetorician in his song "Masters of War." Though this song was originally produced in 1963, the narrative style, the poetic nature of the lyrics, and the anonymity of the content illuminate the true nature of any war, thus keeping the message relevant well beyond the song's release and even into the present day. After describing the song and presenting the necessary historical information, I will introduce what others have to say about the genre, the singer, and the song. Then I will outline my methodology and use those methods to evaluate the song and highlight the continual relevance of its message.

"Masters of War" by Bob Dylan ultimately serves as a criticism of American officials during a time of war. The song is not merely antiwar; it is aimed at the people with power behind the war. Dylan makes clear his frustrations with leaders in his direct address approach and use of name calling, evident right from the start of the song: "Come you masters of war

/ You that build the big guns / You that build all the bombs.”¹ While he is directing his anger at those he deems “masters of war,” their specific identity, as well as that of the overall persona of the song, remains anonymous. A clear distinction is drawn, though, between the powerbrokers of war and civilians and soldiers, as seen in the lines “You play with my world / Like it’s your little toy.”² The authoritative figures are seen as controlling the soldier, who has no sense of agency over his life due to the war; the soldier becomes a victim to the master. As a result of this, an accusatory and bitter tone underlies the song. This is accompanied by the use of grim imagery, such as “You hide in your mansions / While the young people’s blood / Flows out of their bodies / And is buried in the mud.”³ Lines such as these shed light on the harsh realities of war as a result of those who allow and even encourage it. Dylan contrasts the idle actions of those in power with the macabre scene of life on the battlefield, driving home his anti-establishment mentality. These experiences that Dylan includes are generalized, like the persona, yet specific enough to make a clear expression of anger and frustration at the truth of the devastation of war. In four minutes and thirty-three seconds, Bob Dylan crafts a message that captures many of the feelings circulating in the song’s time of creation.

1963, when “Masters of War” was written and produced, was a time of great political turmoil and unrest. The immediate reality of 1963 was the United States’ involvement in two wars: The Cold War and the Vietnam War. These wars were similar in their fight against the spread of communism but differed in their approach. Following World War II, tensions were high between the USSR and the United States with fear of Soviet expansion. In order to combat this, the government utilized the containment strategy—the foreign policy implemented to prevent the spread of communism through the use of outside force. However, this set precedents for the buildup to the arms race. In 1950, President Truman recommended increased military force to prevent communist expansion, while other American officials “encouraged the development of atomic weapons.”⁴ This resulted in the production of increasingly powerful nuclear weapons, leading to high stakes with the possibility of mass destruction. Fear among citizens ran high. Adding to this was the growing conflict across the ocean. While the Cold War lacked physical combat, the Vietnam War was a long and brutal fight. The active involvement of the United States began in 1954 due to conflicts between the communist North Vietnam and

1 Bob Dylan, “Masters of War,” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1963, track 3.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 “Cold War History,” History.com, last modified October 27, 2009. www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history.

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anticommunist South Vietnam.⁵ From the beginning, President Eisenhower backed South Vietnam with American military support. In 1961, President Kennedy increased military aid and presence in South Vietnam for fear of the domino theory—if one country fell to communism, others would follow.⁶ The continual fighting in Vietnam, only intensified by the ongoing Cold War and threat of nuclear war, caused a plummeting of morale in both soldiers and civilians of the United States. Additionally, the Vietnam War sparked large-scale antiwar movements as citizens and soldiers alike lacked trust in the government’s continual insistence that the war was just, and that the US was winning.⁷ The United States was being pulled in multiple directions in 1963, fighting across the sea while simultaneously facing threats at home. Needless to say, the year was a tumultuous time, with high tensions and high frustrations. Due to such commotion, it is no accident folk music saw a revival in the United States in the 1960s. Before delving into “Masters of War” itself, I will introduce what others have to say about folk music, Bob Dylan, and various reviews of the song.

The cultural climate of the 1960s helped to bring about a second wave of folk music, now with heightened political undertones and a sense of urgency. The first reemergence of traditional folk music was twenty years prior in the 1930s. In both of these instances, scholars have not failed to realize that folk music arose around times of great change and political tensions. Folk music often “involved a form of politicization, forging left-wing ideologies onto populist roots.”⁸ The traditional music was reinvented with political force, creating an alternative to mainstream cultural expression and forming cultural politics. Woody Guthrie, a folk legend and important figure in both revivals, described the inherently political content of folk music as being “about what’s wrong and how to fix it.”⁹ For many singers, folk music served as an outlet to voice the real issues of society and bring them to the attention of the government and important leaders. Folk was able to do this because it “constitute[ed] a form of cultural expression alternative to that found in published mass media,” as stated by husband and wife Richard and JoAnne Reuss in their novel on folk music and left-wing politics.¹⁰ Their comprehensive study focuses on the use of folk music as propaganda during the Communist movement. While this is a different

5 “Vietnam War,” History.com, last modified October 29, 2009, www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 501, www.jstor.org/stable/657909.

9 Ibid., 502.

10 Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 5.

era and cultural climate than that of Dylan's "Masters of War" the notions behind the political power of folk music still ring true.

In the 1960s, Bob Dylan was introduced to the folk scene by none other than Woody Guthrie, who sparked his extensive career as a musician. In fact, Eyerman and Barretta claim that Dylan viewed himself as "an incarnation of Woody Guthrie" when he arrived in New York in 1961 and began singing traditional folk music and writing his own songs based on current events.¹¹ Dylan's first album was mostly traditional folk covers, but his second album was all original songs. Many scholars attribute Dylan's success to this second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which helped to define him as a protest singer. "Masters of War" was one such song on this album. Greil Marcus notes that his early protest songs were the ones "that brought Bob Dylan into the common imagination of the nation, and those were the songs that fixed him there."¹² Bob Dylan's roots in folk music helped him to use his music as an outlet to speak about real issues and make calls for action; this genre allowed him to adopt an almost story-telling structure in his lyrics that address concerns relevant to the time in which he was writing. Clinton Heylin notes that Dylan favored "finger-pointin' songs" between 1962–1963 which he used as "genuine expressions of frustration and anger at the neophobes who sought to subvert the inextricable process of change."¹³ Much of Dylan's music is a response to the events happening in the world around him. He says of his song-writing process: "I don't think when I write. I just react and put it down on paper. I'm serious about everything I write...What comes out in my music is a call to action."¹⁴ This approach results in songs about relevant issues that stand the test of time. "Masters of War" is one these songs, and although written as a response to a current event, it still remains relevant well beyond that specific event.

From its release in 1963 and even into the present day, "Masters of War" has received critical attention. Beginning in 1963, "Masters of War" was a well-known protest song. On the surface, the song is about the destructive consequences of war as a result of the actions of arms merchants. Dylan himself has referred to it as a "pacifistic song against war" and as picking up on the spirit in the air as President Dwight D. Eisenhower was leaving office in 1961.¹⁵ While exiting the presidency, Eisenhower

11 Eyerman and Barretta, "From the 30s to the 60s," 528.

12 Greil Marcus, "Stories of a Bad Song," *The Threepenny Review*, no. 104 (2006): 6, www.jstor.org/stable/4385480.

13 Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 113.

14 *Ibid.*, 127.

15 Edna Gundersen, "Dylan is Positively on Top of His Game," *USA Today*, September 10, 2001, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/music/2001-09-10-bob-dylan.htm#more>.

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warned the country of the dangers of a military-industrial complex. In the next couple of years, as Eisenhower had warned, the arms industry was making a fortune and “spreading money all over Washington, D.C.”¹⁶ as the world came closer to nuclear war. Dylan captured the anger and frustration of the nation in the 1960s in “Masters of War.”¹⁷ The popularity of the song, though, continued through the decades.

The initial positive response to Dylan’s song was not limited to its time of release, evidenced by the song’s popularity and multitude of performances throughout Dylan’s career. In 2005, Mojo magazine ranked it as “number one on a chart of ‘The 100 Greatest Protest Songs.’”¹⁸ This song, like many of Dylan’s, was able to move through time “[taking] on elements of those times as they moved through them.”¹⁹ The song itself had such a powerful message that could be applied to a multitude of scenarios, as evidenced by the sheer number of times it was performed and the context of each performance. Between 1963 and 2016, “Masters of War” was performed 884 times, making it Dylan’s fourteenth most played song out of over 500 songs.²⁰ Whether it was performed with “a wistful, almost elegiac manner” the night Barack Obama was elected in 2008 or with fury the night John Kerry was defeated in 2004, the song has held its shape.²¹ As Marcus puts it, the song will live on because “the world has not run out of wars.”²² Dylan continued to perform “Masters of War” because the overarching message could ring true for any war. One such example of this is his performance of it at the 1991 Grammy Awards, which happened to be in the midst of the Iraqi-American war. When asked why he chose that particular song, Dylan responded simply—there was a war going on.²³ The underlying message of the song adapted well to various scenarios, keeping it in the public’s attention.

Another indication of the continued relevance of this song is the various covers that other artists have created. One example of this is Ed Sheeran’s cover in 2013—the one that initially introduced me to the song. ONE Campaign, an organization combatting poverty and disease,

16 Andy Greene, “Readers’ Poll: The Top 10 Best Protest Songs of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/readers-poll-the-10-best-protest-songs-of-all-time-141706/bob-dylan-masters-of-war-172547/>.

17 Ibid.

18 Marcus, “Stories of a Bad Song,” 6.

19 Greil Marcus, “Bob Dylan, Master of Change,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/opinion/bob-dylan-master-of-change.html.

20 “Songs: The Official Bob Dylan Site,” The Official Bob Dylan Site, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/>.

21 Marcus, “Bob Dylan, Master of Change.”

22 Ibid.

23 Marcus, “Stories of a Bad Song,” 6.

gathered many singers to “record classic protest songs as a call to action against extreme poverty around the world.”²⁴ Music was a great outlet for this because, as Sheeran puts it, music is a “powerful tool in galvanizing people around an issue.”²⁵ In this context, “Masters of War” is not so much about a physical war, but rather a larger social issue that needs to be addressed. Once again, protest music is an outlet to call for necessary changes and “Masters of War” is at the heart of it. Dylan’s powerful words and narrative of the song echo throughout history, keeping the message relevant in nearly any context.

Another aspect commonly analyzed in regard to Bob Dylan is the poetic nature of his lyrics. A collection of essays edited by Charlotte Pence focuses on how songs can be treated as literature by giving them “a level of artistic and critical appreciation” that is typically reserved for other art forms.²⁶ Many people recognize that Dylan’s lyrics are poetic, especially since he was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature. Gordon Ball’s essay argues that Dylan, though a songwriter, deserved this prize usually reserved for literature because of his lyrics’ “artful idealism [that] has contributed to major social change, altering and enriching the lives of millions culturally, politically, and aesthetically.”²⁷ At their core, Dylan’s lyrics oftentimes advance calls to action and speak out against current events yet maintain a timelessness about them. The themes that he writes about and how he constructs his songs lead many to call him a true poet. Another essay focuses on Dylan’s longer songs that often lack traditional qualities of a song and instead have “lyric constructions that accomplish a narrative impression, or an emotional one.”²⁸ These songs are still memorable, despite not containing ordinary musical elements. Again, songs like this are compared to poems that utilize many of the same techniques. It is hardly a question for anyone as to whether Dylan’s lyrics are powerful, whether they believe he is a poet or not.

Bringing these conversations together, I will focus on how certain substantive elements of “Masters of War” keep the message of the song relevant. To do this, I am drawing on multiple theoretical approaches. First, Fisher’s narrative paradigm and Burke’s dramatism will be utilized

24 Miriam Coleman, “Ed Sheeran Covers ‘Masters of War’ for Agit8,” *Rolling Stone*, June 15, 2013, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/ed-sheeran-covers-masters-of-war-for-agit8-243227/.

25 Ibid.

26 Charlotte Pence, introduction to *Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, ed. Charlotte Pence (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 12.

27 Gordon Ball, “A Nobel for Dylan?” in *Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, ed. Charlotte Pence (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 183.

28 Claudia Emerson, “Lyric Impression, Musical Memory, Emily, and the Jack of Hearts,” in *Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, ed. Charlotte Pence (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 189.

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in looking at the structure of the lyrics and their emphasis on scene and agent. The narrative paradigm “insists that human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational,” while also challenging the belief that communication must be argumentative.²⁹ Thus, rational, moral stories are also valid forms of human communication.³⁰ Dramatism is Burke’s method of understanding human relationships and motivations, based on five key terms—act (what was done), scene (the situation in which the act occurred), agent (the person or kind of person who performed the act), agency (the means or purpose used to perform the act), and purpose (the underlying reason for the act).³¹ I will then highlight Dylan’s deliberate use of language with Lakoff and Johnson’s understanding of metaphors as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” and Burke’s master trope of metonymy, or the substitution of a related attribute for the intended concept or term.³² Finally, I will examine Black’s theory of persona regarding the anonymity of the content and relatable nature of the materials. Following this analysis, I will evaluate the overall message of the song with aspects from both the truth and artistic criteria, from Campbell’s and Burkholder’s *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*. By the end, I will have made my claim that Bob Dylan is worthy of the title of rhetor and that his song “Masters of War” has a powerful message that resonates throughout time.

While “Masters of War” is a song, it lacks the traditional structural qualities of a song and more closely aligns with that of a narrative. The form is similar to Campbell’s and Burkholder’s narrative-dramatic structure, or one that reflects a certain view of reality and emphasizes that shared experiences are necessary to understand a situation.³³ Additionally, Walter Fisher argues the importance of narration in communication on the premise that “humans are essentially storytellers.”³⁴ His emphasis on the persuasive power of narrative stems from the fact that “symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common.”³⁵ This story-telling style of rhetoric is also similar to the progression of thought in traditional folk songs. “Masters of War” aligns with this as it presents war as a harsh reality that is a shared experience

29 Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 2.

30 Ibid.

31 Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xv.

32 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980): 5.

33 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas R. Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1996), 24.

34 Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm,” 7.

35 Ibid., 6.

for all. By presenting the message of the song as a narrative, it also allows for identification with the message in any context beyond the immediate release of the song.

Bob Dylan uses “Masters of War” as a way to present social reality that rises above any context. The song begins by calling out the figures of authority, then moves to a series of verses that provide examples of their deceit and corruption. It then transitions back to a direct address and ends in rage as a result of the actions of the powerbrokers of war. Beginning with a direct address to the immediate audience, Bob Dylan creates both division and identification from the start. The opening lines, “Come you masters of war / You that build the big guns,” separates these masters from everyone else, opening the opportunity for a shared reality.³⁶ The following examples further present this reality of shared life experiences. With an emphasis on the harsh and destructive nature of war, Dylan voices human experience in a way that nearly anyone can relate to, and at any time. Underlying many of the examples, though, is an accusation, such as “You put a gun in my hand / And you hide from my eyes” and “You fasten all the triggers / For the others to fire.”³⁷ These list-like examples read more like someone telling their own experiences in war rather than a traditional song with a repeated chorus.

The very nature of the song itself as being inherently political and social also correlates with Fisher’s claim that any form of ethic involves narrative.³⁸ Furthermore, the examples have both narrative probability and narrative fidelity, meaning they are coherent and probable. Dylan demonstrates the effects of war as permeating all aspects of life, both on the battlefield with “While the young people’s blood / Flows out of their bodies / And is buried in the mud” and at home with “Fear to bring children / Into the world.”³⁹ Dylan chose to tell these stories in order to illuminate war in its true light. As he lays out these descriptive accounts, the rationality of his anger is revealed; it is not an undirected rage, rather it is very clearly aimed at the people who allow such atrocious acts to occur. Dylan ends the song with his harshest confrontation yet: “And I hope that you die / And your death will come soon.”⁴⁰ This anger brings the argument full circle, as the “masters” have caused the deaths of so many people that they too deserve to die. Dylan’s dramatic conclusion to his story leaves the listener with a sense of finality, as expected in narratives. Throughout the song, the narrative emphasizes the distinction between officials and soldiers.

In looking at “Masters of War” with Burke’s pentad of terms in

36 Dylan, “Masters of War.”

37 Ibid.

38 Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm,” 3.

39 Dylan, “Masters of War.”

40 Ibid.

dramatism, I notice an emphasis on the scene and agent; however, these each have dual meanings that are pitted against each other, furthering the distinction between leaders and soldiers. The theory of dramatism from Kenneth Burke picks five key terms—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—and examines their relationships to investigate human motivations; this theory is often applied to various forms of rhetoric and literature to highlight the purpose of the text.⁴¹ Dylan’s song places a strong emphasis on scene, where the act was done, and agent, who did the act. It is interesting to note the dual nature of each of these ideas in the song. Dylan creates the scene and role of the officials from the beginning with “You that hide behind walls / You that hide behind desks.”⁴² They are safely inside, out of harm’s way, yet there is an element of cowardice with the term “hide.” In fact, the “masters” are seen as hiding again, this time in their “mansions” later in the song.⁴³ These are the people who are in charge of orchestrating the war, yet they hand off the dirty work to those beneath them, as is common practice in times of war throughout history and even today. This practice is clear in the scene of the soldiers being in the thick of battle, where their blood is “buried in the mud.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, the roles and actions of each kind of agent, the officials or the soldiers, are contrasted. Dylan notes that the officials hand off their work when he says, “You put a gun in my hand / And you hide from my eyes.”⁴⁵ As noted in the opening lines, these “masters” created the weapons, but they literally give them to someone else to protect themselves from possible dangers. This passive and safe position is contrasted with that of the soldiers who are out in the field where “the fast bullets fly” and the “death count gets higher.”⁴⁶ In the heart of the battle, soldiers are constantly at risk, the stark opposite of the cowards who caused it in the first place. Both of these scenes and agents can be found any time there is a war. In placing these scene and agent correlations against each other, Dylan is emphasizing the gruesome reality of war, which aligns well with his purpose: to condemn the powerbrokers of war in their destructive tendencies that only cause devastation.

Throughout “Masters of War,” Dylan is very deliberate in his choice of language and language strategies to aid in the song’s persuasive power. Two strategies that are predominantly used are metaphors and metonymy. Lakoff and Johnson point out that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”⁴⁷ Metaphors not only serve to represent one thing in terms of another; they also

41 Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, xv.

42 Dylan, “Masters of War.”

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Lakoff and Johnson, “Metaphors We Live By,” 2.

structure our language, thoughts, and behavior. Oftentimes, we encounter metaphors in our day to day lives without even realizing it because we take metaphors for granted. "Masters of War" utilizes ontological metaphors, metaphors which give concrete substance to ideas and emotions, serving to "deal rationally with our experiences."⁴⁸ Symbolic language such as this is effective in its ability to ground intangible concepts and abstractions. Dylan does this when he writes "You've thrown the worst fear / That can ever be hurled."⁴⁹ Fear is such an abstract concept, making it extremely difficult to conceptualize. By giving fear a material form or substance as something that is able to be thrown, the notion is brought down to earth and made easier to understand. The connection that Dylan gives it to the "masters of war" as something they are throwing again emphasizes their tendency to hand over the true dangers and consequences of war to others. His purpose in condemning them is further illustrated in another ontological metaphor. The lines, "You play with my world / Like it's your little toy" emphasizes just how widespread the effects of war can be felt.⁵⁰ The connotation of a "master" playing with a toy is not lost in highlighting the childish nature of officials who often rush to engage in wars in an attempt to solve the world's problems. Using the "world" of the soldier as the object in play Dylan illuminates that every aspect of the soldier's life is affected by the war in some way. Both of these examples of ontological metaphors are general enough to be relatable to any audience and in any context beyond that of 1963 with the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Dylan uses specific elements such as these to emphasize the true nature of war and those orchestrating it from their offices; this holds true for any war.

Another poetic strategy Dylan uses is metonymy, or reduction, to emphasize the humanity of the officials while also reducing their power. Metonymy is one of Burke's four master tropes, which are figurative uses of words and phrases. Language, especially metonymy, works by "borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible, and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible."⁵¹ Metonymy is more specific in that it typically deals with some intangible state made tangible. Dylan does this repeatedly when referring to the "masters of war." The first instance of this is when Dylan says, "But I see through your eyes / And I see through your brain."⁵² Here, "eyes" and "brain" are biological components used to refer to more abstract concepts, such as goals and thoughts. By saying this Dylan is not only reducing the officials to simple

48 Ibid., 26.

49 Dylan, "Masters of War."

50 Ibid.

51 Kenneth Burke "Four Master Tropes," *The Kenyan Review* 3, no. 4 (1941): 425, www.jstor.org/stable/4332286.

52 Dylan, "Masters of War."

biological identifiers, thus emphasizing their human nature, he is also claiming to know their plan and their purpose. In this way it is interpreted that the “masters of war” realize the destructive nature of war yet still proceed with it anyway. Additionally, speaking of the brain or the eyes is easier to comprehend than grasping at thoughts and emotions. The humanity of the officials is further emphasized in the next use of metonymy: “You ain’t worth the blood / That runs in your veins.”⁵³ Now Dylan represents the life of the officials as blood. He is again reducing them to biological aspects that every person has, thus illuminating that they are human, just like the soldiers who actually fight in the war. In emphasizing their humanity, the notion that the officials should face human consequences is revealed, as evidenced by the harsh ending of the song in wishing for their death. The overall use of metonymy is effective in its ability to reduce the power of the officials behind war by representing their thoughts, goals, and overall life as human characteristics that are inherently the same in everyone.

The final aspect contributing to the lasting message of “Masters of War” is the anonymity of the persona and the generality of the supporting materials. Together, these components can continually recreate an audience depending on the time period the song is examined in. For this claim I am drawing on Edwin Black’s definition of persona—the author implied by the discourse. This persona is both a performance and an artificial construction.⁵⁴ The persona that Dylan exudes throughout the song is that of a young, anonymous soldier. As I have noted previously, the persona is built through division from the “masters of war” with Dylan’s contrasting pronouns—you versus me. The soldier is continually seen as a victim of the officials, such as in the lines “You play with my world / Like it’s your little toy.”⁵⁵ This persona is abstracted from a particular individual, instead standing for the collective group of soldiers as a whole. It is a regular person taken out of their personal life to fight in a war, as many could have been at that time. Dylan further builds the persona later with “You might say that I’m young / You might say I’m unlearned.”⁵⁶ This role of soldier can be given to anyone, despite age or skill level. Keeping the persona of the song anonymous allows for a greater identification, and thus impact, within “Masters of War.”

Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” has gathered a large audience over time, due to its continually relevant message. Black refers to the audience as the second persona, or “implied auditor.”⁵⁷ This audience is the one that

53 Ibid.

54 Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 88.

55 Dylan, “Masters of War.”

56 Ibid.

57 Black, “The Second Persona,” 89.

is implied by the discourse itself, based on ideology. Bob Dylan's initial audience seems to be the officials due to the direct address technique: "Come you masters of war."⁵⁸ However, digging deeper, Dylan appears to be appealing to anyone who may agree with his claims, evidenced by the generality of his examples that are widely relatable. In 1963, teenagers and young adults were drawn to Dylan's music because it was able to "draw on their own unshaped anger and rage, terror and fear, and make it all real, even make it poetry."⁵⁹ Dylan does this through his insistence on depicting the truth of war in his supporting materials. He does not mask any of the brutalities of war when he says, "While the young people's blood / Flows out of their bodies / And is buried in the mud."⁶⁰ Illustrating just how devastating war can be, Dylan appeals to anyone who is affected by it, which is everyone because war is not limited to the battlefield. War affects those at home, even mothers with a "Fear to bring children / Into the world."⁶¹ This experience, and others like it provided by Dylan, presents the shared belief that war is often more destructive than productive. The effects are widespread and felt by everyone. While Dylan is speaking about the wars at the time the song was produced, these same experiences are true of any war, therefore his audience is not limited to the historical context of 1963. Identifying with the ideology of the persona and the depictions of war as I have highlighted in "Masters of War" allows for an audience to connect with the song any time the world is facing some form of turmoil, whether it be war or extreme poverty.

Though "Masters of War" came about as a response to a particular event, its commitment to the truth and its artistic elements keep the song relevant beyond this singular occurrence. One effective method in evaluating a text is its adherence to the truth, for good rhetoric is "rhetoric that upholds the truth."⁶² As I have noted, Dylan adheres strongly to illustrating war in all of its harsh reality. His examples of lived experiences of soldiers, though anonymous and relatively general, portray an accurate representation of war; these are consistent with any war, whether it is 1963's wars or any other war in the last fifty years. Dylan presents a symbolic reality in "Masters of War," one that is shared between him and his audience since the song's release. Additionally, the manner in which Dylan presents this reality serves as a means of judging the text. The artistry of a particular discourse, especially vivid description and depiction, "awaken the senses or emotions of viewers and listeners."⁶³ As I have explained, Dylan relies

58 Dylan, "Masters of War."

59 Marcus, "Stories of a Bad Song," 6.

60 Dylan, "Masters of War."

61 Ibid.

62 Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 114.

63 Ibid., 122.

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heavily on imagery, interweaving it throughout the song to depict war in its true nature and the true nature of those that oversee war. This is highly effective for him because he is able to reach a wide audience by appealing to their emotions. His powerfully poetic lyrics draw people in and keep them enamored throughout the entirety of the song. Other effective artistic strategies are a powerful narrative development, the creation of a persona, and a skillful use of language.⁶⁴ Dylan is seen doing all of these in “Masters of War.” Together these elements are effective because they allow for an identification within the narrative of the song that is not restricted to one particular type of person or one particular timeframe. Evident in its adherence to the truth and the power of its poetics, “Masters of War” conveys a continually important message. The reality of war transcends the historical context around the song’s release because the world has not run out of wars to fight, thus “Masters of War” continues to have something important to say.

In the fifty-six years since Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” was produced and released, the message of the song has remained relevant due to the lyrics’ narrative structure, poetic elements, and the anonymous content. Dylan held nothing back in depicting the true nature of war and calling out those responsible for it in such a way that makes it appropriate to deem him a rhetorician. The song came about as a response to the cultural climate of 1963—one of great political turmoil and civic unrest because of the multiple directions the United States was being pulled in as a result of the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Dylan captured the emotions of many people in “Masters of War.” He used folk music in his own way to sing about then-current events but managed to do so in such a way that transcends the immediate context. The song even extends beyond a response to war; Dylan, and other artists, have performed the song in other times of change and turmoil as a call to action. The story-telling style of “Masters of War” and its relatable persona helped contribute to this widespread and continually growing audience because of the easy identification within the song. Harsh depictions of war and severe condemnations of officials can be applied to any time period. What came about as a reaction to the world around Dylan was a powerfully poetic message that persists. Bob Dylan captured the true nature of war while not-so-subtly calling out those who allow it to happen. His song forces us to confront the truth that engaging in war is a choice—one that has consequences that extend far beyond the battlefield. As long as humans continually make this decision, this song will be relevant. The world has not run out of wars, and unfortunately, it does not seem likely it ever will.

64 Ibid., 123–4.