

The Paradox of Commitment: The Philosophy of Jakob Dylan in “Will It Grow”



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Jakob Dylan, songwriter and lead singer for the Grammy-award winning Wallflowers, released his first solo album, *Seeing Things*, in June 2008. The album contains ten stripped-down songs, accompanied only by Dylan's vocals, an acoustic guitar, bass, brushed drums, and occasional harmonizing vocals.

Seeing Things did well commercially: the album reached #24 on the Billboard200, was the #8 the Billboard Digital Albums chart, and reached #8 on the Billboard Rock Album chart.¹ The album was critically acclaimed and received excellent reviews. *Rolling Stone* describes *Seeing Things* as “an album of stark, solo acoustic songs that evoke the softer side of Elvis Costello and Bruce Springsteen.”² Steven Thomas Erlwine writes, “the simplicity of the setting helps focus on Dylan's unassuming, well-crafted songs, songs where melodies are gently insinuating and words are so carefully sculpted it's easy to overlook how nicely he turns a phrase.”³ The album received 4-star/”A” reviews from *Uncut Magazine*, *Blender*, *Z!nk*, *MSNBC*, *the Boston Herald*, and others; it received excellent reviews (that don't have ratings) from *Paste Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, *Relix*, *Vanity Fair*, *Filter*, *Spin*, *the Huffington Post*, *Maxim*, Yahoo! Music, and countless other newspapers,



Photo: Lewis Cooper

magazines and on-line sources, including Amazon.com buyers, who gave the album an average of 4.5 stars.

The songs on the album are “intelligent, clean melodies touching on the staples of American folk and rock,” explains Paul Taylor of the *Manchester Evening News*.⁴ The songs, “firmly rooted in blues and folk...have a warm, rustic, old-time-y feel,” reveals a 4-star review on msnbc.com. *Performing Songwriter* offers:

Dylan brings a poet's sensibility to themes that range from heartache of a soldier pining for loved ones back home (“War Is Kind”) to reflections on persevering in the face of adversity (“Will It Grow”). Dylan's unique strength, however, is that he's never brooding or maudlin. Even the darkest moments on *Seeing Things* are tempered with hope and yearning, and a bright light shines from the core of each sublime gem.⁵

The fifth track on the album, “Will It Grow,” has been described as having an “Appalachian Folk” sound, “even more steeped in the folk tradition” than other tracks with “an almost spiritual harmony rippling through it.”⁶ It is often mentioned as one of the stand-out tracks on an album containing many stand-outs. As one listens to the song and studies the lyrics, it “sounds simple enough.” But, it contains a number of contradictions that, upon deeper examination, reveal that this song is anything but simple.

The song is a fractured narrative from the perspective of a farmer who is both committed to the land and trapped by it, as it's unforgiving and barren. The music complements the narrative, taking the listener on a journey. The song begins

**Table 1:
Lyrics to “Will It Grow”**

Jakob Dylan (2008)

[Verse]	I made a promise to not let go Our tug of war has only made me want you more Steeped in hard luck and doomed to roam My love is braver than you know My forefathers they worked this land And I was schooled in the tyranny of nature's plans Dressed in thunder a cloud came round In the shape of a lion a hand came down
[Chorus]	Damn this valley Damn this cold Take so long to let me know It's plant and reap and plow and sow But tell me will it grow
[Verse]	Dig my ditches in the golden sun I'd be robbing these trains if I could catch me one Sunday Monday now Tuesday's gone Got me stone cold sober in a drought so long Boarded mansions and ghost filled yards There's a boy in a water tower counting cars Steel trap's open and empty stalls There's a well-worn saddle but the horse is gone
[Chorus]	Damn this valley Damn this cold Take so long to let me know It's plant and reap and plow and sow But tell me will it grow
[Bridge]	Jet black starlit midnight rolls I am down in the garden where I let go Here on the surface the earth looks round But it's a goddess city of cold flat ground
[Chorus]	Damn this valley Damn this cold Take so long to let me know It's plant and reap and plow and sow But tell me will it grow Will it grow Will it grow Will it grow

with a few lone guitar chords, then the drums join in, and finally Dylan’s voice begins with the strong claim, “I made a promise to not let go.” Throughout the song, the drums, along with a brush, supply a steady tapping, imitating the sound of movement – like a horse beginning to trot or a train moving along the tracks. This provides the backdrop for the entire song: a sense of motion. The movement is illusory, however, as the lyrics describe a situation in which the singer is trapped, unable to move or make progress. He works hard, yet his work is unproductive. The chorus, repeated three times, damns the valley, the cold, and the fact that they “take so long to let me know” if the planted fields will ever grow. This contradiction between movement and stagnation is one of several paradoxes in “Will It Grow.” Another emerges when one listens to the lyrics. The singer recalls his promise to remain committed to the land, yet he also breaks that commitment. A third involves the contradiction between despair and hope. The listener empathizes with the singer’s despair, yet the singer and the listener retain a sense of hopefulness, even when the lyrics provide no promise for that hope.



How does this 4:49 minute song present these complex paradoxes? Can they be introduced and resolved in such a short time frame? If so, how? If not, how might the listener process the inconsistencies? A close examination of the ideas and the arguments offered in “Will It Grow” will address these questions.

Many believe that music is ‘inexplicably’ moving and that we should be passive listeners and “just enjoy the song.” That is one option. But another option is to engage songs and listen with an ear to understand what is being said. A rhetorical critic has tools that help articulate and explain some of the ‘inexplicable’ messages in songs. A rhetorical critic’s job is to identify “the complications of rhetoric and then unpack or explain them” in a way that promotes understanding and appreciation.⁷ With a rhetorical critic’s tools, one can begin to understand the contradictions in “Will It Grow” and see how (and if) the singer resolves them. At first glance, the song is about a farmer working hard on unforgiving land and persevering in his work. At another level, a critic understands, the song offers an integral world view that adds to our understanding of how the world works, how we can find our way in the face of dismal circumstances, and how to manage fundamental contradictions. This paper will reveal these issues through (1) a systematic study of the topics covered in the song, and (2) an analysis of the arguments embedded in the song.

Understanding the Topical Approach

To begin unpacking some of the messages in “Will It Grow,” a critic should first identify and isolate the main themes, or topics, in the song. Considering the topics in a message reveals “what is said and what is not said,” uncovers “rhetorical patterns,” and helps “explain the rhetorical ‘tone’ of the rhetor.”⁸ This process helps reduce the message to its “essential rhetorical character” and uncover a speaker’s way of looking at the world.⁹

Table 2:

Aristotle’s Universal Topics

[as adapted by Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, 2005]

Existence or nonexistence of things
Degree or quantity of things
Spatial attributes, including adjacency, distribution, place
Temporal attributes including hour, day, year, era
Motion or activity
Form , either physical shape or abstract categories
Substance : physical or abstract; the fundamental nature of a thing, often signaled by definitions
Capacity to Change , including predictability
Potency : power or energy, including capacity to further or hinder something
Desirability , in terms of rewards or punishments
Feasibility : workability or practicability
Causality : the relationship of causes to effects, effects to effects, adequacy of causes, etc.
Correlation , coexistence or coordination of things, forces, etc.
Genus-Species relationships
Similarity or dissimilarity
Possibility or impossibility

An analysis of topics is undertaken by classifying the ideas in the song according to Aristotle’s Universal Topics. Aristotle devised a list of sixteen universal topics/themes to help students and citizens become effective persuaders. Aristotle used the term “topoi” to describe the places where one may find an argument; he articulated sixteen places, or universal topics, where one can look to find what to say about any idea. When one knows these universal topics, one can generate sixteen different ways of talking about any issue. Learning the universal themes, the ancients believed, would make students proficient and efficient public speakers. For example, if one was to present a speech on health care reform, referring to the list of universal topics, one could speak from the topic of *feasibility* and discuss whether or not the options would be workable. Or, one could use the topic of *similarity* to emphasize the connections between the reform and similar programs in other countries. Understanding and using the universal topics helps a speaker generate many ideas about what to say on any topic.

Whereas the universal topics had traditionally been used as a strategy to teach students for preparing messages, Wilson and Arnold¹⁰, and later Hart and Daughton¹¹, propose that Aristotle’s topics could also be used as a critical tool. That is, if one looked at the various universal topics in a message, a critic could uncover the speaker’s tone and world view. For instance, a rhetor whose message stressed topics of *motion* (action/activity—e.g. “we need to take this action”) and *time* (e.g. “now is the time” “we have to do this fast”) may communicate a world view of urgency. A rhetor whose appeals underscored *capacity to change* (“if we do this, things will be better”) and *feasibility* (“it’s fast and easy to implement this change”) may reflect a tone/view that is more deliberative. In short, studying the topics used by a rhetor helps uncover the lines of reasoning, and hence, the tone and perspective of the message. Examining the topics in “Will It Grow” may reveal the tone and world view embedded in the song. In addition, we may understand how the contradictions in tone, between the explicit despair and implicit hopefulness, are communicated.

TABLE 3:
Tally of Universal Topics in “Will It Grow”

Existence	0
Degree	0
Spatial	0
Temporal	6
Motion	11
Form	0
Substance	13
Capacity to Change	7
(6 are the same line)	
Potency	4
Desirability [un]	7
Feasibility [in]	1
Causality	0
Correlation	1
Genus-Species	4
Similarity	0
Possibility	0

To analyze the topics in the song “Will It Grow,” I coded each idea in the song, labeling each line according to which universal topic it most clearly reflected. Then I tallied the topics. Finally, I interpreted the patterns/themes revealed in the topics used as well as the topics that were not used. The next section provides a summary of my findings.



Analysis of Topics

To begin, let’s consider which of the universal topics are used in “Will It Grow.” Nine of the sixteen universal topics are evident. From these topics, I discerned four patterns in the ideas presented in the song: discussion of substance, futurity (motion + capacity to change), the nature of relationships, and finally, a strong reliance on potency, or the power of the speaker. Each topic and pattern will be discussed.

Substance

As Table 3 indicates, *substance* is the most common topic in the song. The substance claims are about two basic things: **who** (the substance of the singer) and **what** (the substance of his surroundings). There are numerous substance references to the nature of “who I am.” The singer is, among other things, “steeped in hard luck,” “doomed to roam,” he’s from a line of people who “worked the land,” he “dig[s] [his] ditches,” and is “stone cold sober” in the face of his circumstances. He’s down on his luck, but he’s a hard-working man. Importantly, as the very first line tells us, he “made

a promise” to do what’s he’s doing. The promise reflects the substance of who he is, it’s the first statement about who he is; it’s an important attribute. A defining trait of his character is he keeps his word.

Next, there are substance claims about “what ” or the environment the singer is faced with: there’s been a long drought, mansions are boarded, yards are ghost-filled, there’s a boy counting cars, stalls are empty, it’s “a godless city of cold, flat ground.” It’s a bleak picture. There’s nothing positive or hopeful about the surroundings or the situation. The singer is alone and works on land that is unforgiving, and given the deserted surroundings, the struggle seems to have been going on for some time. But, because of the essence of who he is, he stays. He “made a promise to not let go.”

Motion

The idea of substance--or the essence of who he is and what his surroundings are like--is closely tied to the second most common topic: *motion*. Motion depicts movement and could be a counterpoint to the bleak picture painted with the substance topics. That is, in theory, motion could provide an action for getting out of this bleak place. That



movement is suggested in the music, by the drums/brush that both sound like movement and are present throughout the song. But that’s not how the motion works in the lyrics. In these lyrics, motion is futile. Anything that provides a way out is unavailable: the singer can’t catch a train, can’t see any cars, and the horse is gone. The chorus repeats the futility of the motion three times, “it’s plant and reap and plow and sow” but nothing grows. The message communicated by the motion topic is: despite the action, there is no movement. The singer is trapped: there is nothing to help him out of the situation and nothing he does helps.

Desirability/Capacity to Change

The next most frequently used topics, *desirability and capacity to change*, further reinforce the futility of the situation. The desirability topics highlight the undesirability of the situation: the valley, the cold, the desire for ‘you’. The situation and the singer seem drenched in hopelessness.

There are 7 references to *capacity to change*. Importantly, six of the references are the same line, sung at the end of each chorus: “tell me will it grow?” It’s revealing that this is a question asking if there’s a chance that things may change, rather than a statement of hope or confidence that “it will grow.” This is a question in need of an answer. The question is at the crux of the song: does work have the capacity to change the situation? The answer never comes.

The other reference to *capacity to change* is embedded in the first statement, “I made a promise to not let go,” which also reflects the substance of the singer. The sacredness of the promise, *to not let go*, is fundamental, it supercedes the capacity to change the situation. That is, if he let go, maybe the situation would change. Or, maybe he would be free to leave the hopeless environment. But a fundamental character trait is that he is a man of his word, a promise is sacred, and this reinforces how unlikely change is and how hopeless things are.

Genus-Species

The *genus-species* topic deals with issues about relationships. Although there are only four instances of *genus-species* references, all in the first verse, they are significant references. The first reference to a relationship is to “our tug-of-war” which “only makes me want you more.” There’s a sense of equality in this reference – that the singer and the other are evenly matched in this relationship. This equality is part of the reason for the on-going struggle. The singer also acknowledges that the conflict itself is invigorating and motivating.

There are references to other relationships, but these are not relationships of equality. The rhetor explains: “my forefathers they worked this land.” This is a family profession, his ancestors have done this work. “I was schooled in



the tyranny of nature's plans" – the family experience provided warning that nature ruled, that he would have no control over his fate. The last lines of the first verse describe the substance and almighty power of that genus-species relationship: "dressed in thunder a cloud came around, in the shape of a lion a hand came down." The relationship is unequal and the speaker had little voice in the decision. He may have been

forewarned, but he wasn't asked about continuing the family line, he was told this is what he would do. Thus, we understand the singer is in the situation not only because it was the same thing his family had done, but also because it was ordained to be this way. Once he committed to the land with his promise, his fate was sealed. This is a powerful world view; it recognizes the power of fate in determining one's path. This contributes the sense of powerlessness and despair. But the lyrics suggest that fate is not all powerful. The topic of potency recognizes that the individual has some power as well.

Potency

One final topic that appears only a few times helps explain just how powerful this fate can be. *Potency*, or "power or energy to complete or hinder something" further explains the tug-of-war. This topic emerges in references to the power of the singer or the ultimate power of fate. The singer may have been ordained to work the hopeless land, but he challenges that fate by inserting his own individual will: "my love is braver than you know." He won't be intimidated out of doing this work just because it's hard. Further, the other references to potency, all in the chorus, repeat, "take so long to let me know." This repetition reinforces the idea that fate may not be kind and the ultimate power is not in the hands of the singer. But the singer's promise and braveness in the face of stark silence is certainly inspirational.

Analyzing the topics in the song illuminates a world view where substance is entrenched: where the individual is unable to alter who he is, he's also unable to alter his surroundings. Further, the nature of a commitment--one's promise-- in essence "seals your fate." The difficulty of making a commitment in the face of so many obstacles is highlighted with these topics. The conflict between the essence of who he is and what others expect of him is heartrending. It's no wonder that the listener might empathize and feel hopeless. But the promise of the individual is revealed in a few lines that might offer some hope.

Absent Topics

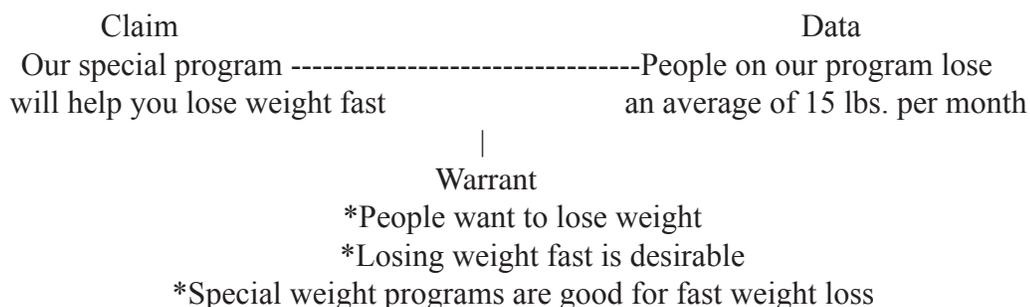
In addition to gaining an understanding of the world view by examining the most often used universal topics, looking at which topics are not used can also be revealing. Table 3 lists seven topics not evident in the song. Two of the most telling are *similarity* and *possibility*. This makes sense, given what we have uncovered above. If the song used a lot of similarity, we would be able to see what this futile, trapped predicament was like. But the absence of similarity shows that it is *not* to be compared, that it stands alone, like nothing else in the world. The lack of *possibility* dovetails nicely with this theme – there's not much chance of altering this situation, especially given whose voice rules. And, the lack of *degree*, or quantity, communicates that just one instance is sufficient to damn the situation, it doesn't have to be something that occurs over and over. That is, one promise and one edict are sufficient to create this unique predicament. The lack of similarity and degree reinforces that the singer is alone. We hear his story and empathize with his situation, but we've never *really* been there.

Why would anyone do this? Why would one give a solemn promise in the face of knowing that it would be hell, thereby trapping himself? This topical analysis underscores who the singer is and the situation he's in, as well as how he sees the world. Analyzing the topics illuminates the ideas in the song, it doesn't help us understand why these

choices were made. To understand the why's underlying the choices, a critic can explore the reasoning in an artifact: the claims made and the reasons behind those claims. The next section will do just that.

Understanding the Toulmin Approach to Arguments

A useful way to analyze the reasoning in a message is to use a method articulated by Stephen Toulmin.¹² He developed a model to help illustrate the ways “people really argue” by breaking down a typical argument in to three main parts. The core parts of the model, or the essential parts of an argument, are the **claim**, **data**, and **warrant**.¹³ The claim identifies the overall assertion of the speaker (“what’s your point?”). The data considers the evidence (“what makes you say that?”). The warrant serves as the bridge between the data and the claim and considers how they “make sense.” An important element of the Toulmin model is the layout, a visual depiction of how the claims [c], data [d] and warrants [w] connect. Consider this example. A television advertisement features a well-known celebrity who says, “Our special weight-loss program will help you lose weight fast! Look at me! Most people lose an average of 15 pounds per month.” This ad can be diagrammed, using the Toulmin model in this way:



This example illustrates that there are a number of warrants one may bring to an argument (even more than those listed above). When the warrant isn't explicitly stated (and it rarely is), a critic should be aware of the multiple interpretations one might bring to the argument so it “makes sense.” In the case of the first warrant listed above, the audience may supply the idea that losing weight is desirable; the second warrant emphasizes the quickness of the weight loss. Which is correct? Either/both are correct—in that they help the argument “make sense”; each of the warrants is reasonable given what is supplied by the claim and the data. An audience may bring a variety of warrants to their interpretation of an argument.



Analyzing an argument with this method helps uncover the reasoning in messages by laying it out in a visual model to see the links between the ideas. Since the warrant is often implied, discovering how an argument fits together can reveal the internal logics of the claims and can reveal what kinds of moves an audience may make to make sense of the argument. In short, we can uncover some of the why's in a message. From the critic's perspective, it is important to emphasize that the warrant of an argument is typically brought by the audience. It is the critic's job to provide a variety of ways that the argument could make sense. Thus, we might understand an argument with a number of different warrants that reveal how an argument could work; there is no certainty that the analysis reflects “what the speaker means.” Instead, this type of analysis helps get at the ways that an argument can function for an audience. In the case of “Will It Grow,” analyzing the arguments might help us understand various warrants that could be offered to explain how the singer got in this predicament and why he's staying in it. This analysis also may illuminate how the paradoxes are managed because it supplies the underlying reasons ‘why’ one may act or think in a given way.

Analysis of Arguments

To uncover how an audience may make sense of “Will It Grow,” I isolated the major claims. Then, I labeled the major data. Finally, I determined what the implied warrants could be, how the data and the claims fit together to make sense.

The arguments in the entire song are diagrammed and provided in the Appendix. The analysis of the arguments in the song will be discussed in parts: verses, chorus, bridge, with portions of the diagrams for these song parts inserted in the discussion. Each part of the song is labeled on the lyrics in Table 1 (above).

Analysis of Verse 1

As the Appendix illustrates, the two verses of the song are largely data, or statements that answer: “what makes you say that? What do you have to go on?” The data provides details about the singer, his background, and the situation he is faced with. The evidence illustrates that the rhetor is ‘here’ because he gave his word he would be (“I made a promise to not let go”), because it’s the work that he knows (“my forefathers worked this land”), and that he has entered the situation knowing full well what to expect (“I was schooled in the tyranny of nature’s plans”). He embraces the challenge (“my love is braver than you know”) even though he doesn’t really have much choice in being where he is, fate dictated his situation (“in the shape of a lion a hand came down”). Importantly, though, he accepted it and even found himself invigorated by the challenge of the work and the on-going struggle. The claims and warrants listed in the Appendix are implied. The explicit data supplied by the rhetor is enough to paint a clear picture and provide sufficient information about the situation. With only data provided, the audience is encouraged to see the situation without wondering “why” anyone would subject himself to it; we believe “this is the way it is.” The claims and the warrants are implied. Further, if the singer explicitly stated the claims (noted in the Appendix), e.g. “I have a right to be here” and “I am in it for the long haul,” the song would have a confrontational or defensive tone. By supplying the data alone, the scene is vivid without being defiant. Importantly, the audience accepts the idea that he has a right to be where he is and that he really has little choice in the matter without question. They are not encouraged to ask why he would make such a choice or how he got there in the first place because this information is presented as factual claims: *this is the way things are*.

Analysis of Verse 2

The second verse is all data, too. The evidence describes the surroundings as desolate, and thus illustrates the impossibility of escape. In addition, the data reinforces the lonely conditions: a long drought, boarded up mansions and ghost-filled yards. Days go by without notice. It’s been a lonely, on-going struggle. By providing so much data-- such vivid images-- the singer’s evidence helps the audience understand the bleakness and hopelessness. If the singer failed to provide the details (data), we might not have a clear picture of the situation. Too many claims without data may come off whiney (“I work hard,” “there’s no way out,” “it’s lonely,” “there’s no pay off,”). Instead, we see an unforgettable and clear picture and, hence, understand the situation clearly through the vivid details. We aren’t there, but we empathize. Again, by supplying only data, the singer paints a picture that *this is how things are*. No one would argue with his description of how he sees things, especially because no one else is there!

The two verses, then, supply factual descriptions which invite the listener to see the situation as the rhetor does. The picture reinforces the substantive topics detailed above. The singer is in a bleak situation that he both had to and wanted to accept; family heritage, coupled with the kiss of fate, dealt the hand. Even though the singer knew what to expect, it’s unpleasant, and there is no hope of escape. His fate is to work and to wait. And, to hope.

Analysis of the Chorus and Bridge

The scene is set by the data in the two verses. It is in the chorus and the bridge that the singer’s lines of reasoning are revealed and the richness of the arguments emerges. One should pay particular attention to repeated statements, as they reinforce the main lines of reasoning of the rhetor.¹⁴ The chorus is repeated three times and justifies close attention.

Chorus

The chorus constructs one overarching argument: the land is unforgiving. The data reinforces that the singer is diligent about doing all the things that should be done (“plant, reap, plow and sow”), but he doesn’t know if his work pays off (“take so long to let me know”). The audience brings, with the singer, the warrant (assumption) that if one works hard, there *should* be some pay off. And since there is no such pay off, the singer is justified to “damn the valley” and the cold. But there is a glimmer of hope, when he claims, [you] “take so long to let me know.” There’s an implied “you” in the phrase. Without the implied you, the phrase should be [it] “takes so long to let me know.” Because the chorus implies a person or thing, we bring the assumption that “someone” may be slow but is not cruel. This reflects

**Table 4:
Arguments in the Chorus
According to the Toulmin Model**

Argument 1 [chorus]

Claim

Damn this valley
Damn this cold-----

Data

Take so long to let me know
It's plant and reap and plow and sow

|
Warrant [implied]

- *When one works hard, s/he shouldn't have to wait too long to see the fruits of labor
- *Hard work should pay off; perseverance should be rewarded
- *Waiting to see if your work pays off is very difficult

a benevolent view of “you”--of fate or of nature. Further, if the singer said that [you] “refuse” or “will never” or “do not” let him know, we would have no reason to hope at all. Instead, by singing “take so long” we believe there will be some pay off, he will know--it will just require patience before the answer comes. The fact that the chorus is repeated three times reinforces our implicit

belief in benevolence and that work *will* pay off, that it might take a long time to reveal itself, but that it will.

The last line in the chorus is repeated three times at the end of the song: “will it grow?” As noted, the last line is not a claim, but a question. The singer is not stating “it won’t grow” (there is no pay off), he is asking “someone” if there will be a pay off. The question is not asked because an answer is needed; the answer is supplied by his action: persistent work. That is, he demonstrates that he believes work will pay off, so he continues working. If he believed the answer was “no,” there would be no need to continue working.

One function of a rhetorical question is to generate a sense of “commonality” between the rhetor and the audience, “via an imagined dialogue.”¹⁵ In this case, asking a question encourages the listener to participate and to supply the answer. Because the supplied warrant offers “perseverance pays off,” there is an imagined response that there will be evidence of the hard work, there will be a pay off; that one merely needs to be patient. No one believes that fate is that unkind--to give a life sentence in a desolate place without ever reaping benefits, especially when that someone plays by the rules (“plant, reap, plow, sow.”). It is hard to imagine that fate could be that malevolent. The listener supplies the warrant that fate is not that unkind; that there will be an answer and that the lesson is about patience and perseverance. It is interesting that this assumption in the pay off of hard work has no end point. Given this line of reasoning, there is no time that the singer would decide “enough, I quit,” because there is an underlying hopefulness and belief that perseverance reaps rewards. This argument, then, reveals the reasoning that you should just keep working and wait it out. This philosophy reveals a singer who never gives up because of his underlying hopefulness. Exploring the arguments in the chorus unpacks why a song that sounds hopeless really offers a message of hope. That is, looking beyond the claims to understand the warrants underneath them is revealing. We understand why a song that may sound hopeless on its face can, indeed, be very hopeful.

Bridge

If “Will It Grow” consisted of only verses and chorus, we might assume that things never change, and that things will always be this way. But, near the end of the song, there is a bridge, which helps us see that things can change. The bridge is a break in the middle of a piece of music. Typically, a bridge sounds different from the verse and chorus, and often has a different harmonic structure.¹⁶ The function of a bridge is to build the tension leading up to the climax of the song, or to lead a song to its conclusion. In “Will It Grow,” the bridge



**Table 5:
Arguments in the Bridge
According to the Toulmin Model**

Argument 2 [bridge]

Claim [implied]

This is too hard to take-----

Data

I am down in the garden where I let go

|
|
Warrant [implied]

*When things get too hard to take, you can let go

Argument 3 [bridge]

Claim [implied]

Things are not as

they seem -----

Up on the surface the earth looks round

-----but it's a godless city of cold flat ground

Data

|
|
Warrant [implied]

*Things should be what they appear to be

*When you've been misled, you're allowed to have second thoughts

follows the typical structure: it is shorter in length than the verse or chorus, it provides the climax of the song—where the singer confronts a critical paradox--and the bridge leads the song to its end. Analyzing the arguments in the bridge helps us understand what's going on in the climax of the song.

The first line in the bridge provides data to set the scene: “jet black starlit midnight rolls.” It’s midnight and very dark, the assumption is the rhetor is alone, but there’s an implied warrant that the *starlit* night provides some light and

hope. The scene is set for a confrontation or turning point; something is going to ‘give.’

That confrontation unfolds as a contradiction in the next line. The written lyrics say, “I am down in the garden where I let go.”¹⁷ This *data* supports the unstated *claim* that “things are just too tough to take.” The warrant that underlies this argument is “sometimes you just need to let go,” or “when things get too rough, you can/should let go.” The audience who brings this assumption to the bridge lets the speaker off the hook, “yes, let go.” This is further understood as the next two lines of the bridge, contend: things are not as they appear to be (implied claim), with the data to support that claim that things looked different than they really are (“the earth looks round;” but “it’s a godless city of cold flat ground”). One implied warrant is that it’s unfair to be misled and that things should be the way they appear.

So, the audience certainly understands why the singer would let go. But with this analysis a significant contradiction is revealed. Remember that the bridge reveals a climax; the *data* in the bridge (“I am down in the garden where I let [you] go”) contradicts the very first line of the song, the *claim*: “I made a promise to not let go.” He promised to not let go and yet...he lets go. What happened?

There are at least four warrants that an audience could provide that might explain how to deal with this contradiction. One warrant underlying the bridge is that “things should be what they appear to be.” Thus, an audience might reason, all bets are off if deceit is involved. Here, promises can be reneged because, as the second part of the bridge acknowledges, things are *not* the way they appeared to be. No one would hold you to a promise that was made under false conditions.

A second explanation that might resolve the contradiction is that the singer “lets go” of a person/relationship in the bridge and that is entirely different from the thing he committed to in the first verse. In a discussion about this song, several fans offered this explanation. The textual support for this explanation is in the insertion of “you” in the bridge when the song is sung.¹⁸ Thus, it is asserted, since the singer does not say “you” in the opening promise (“I made a promise to not let go”) but does in the bridge (“I am down in the garden where I let you go”), he must be singing about *something* in the first verse and about *someone* in the bridge. Some listeners reason, these are not related promises. In this case, the warrant reflects a common belief that “when relationships are tough, you can (should) get out of

Table 6:
Contradictory Argument: Claim in verse 1 vs. Data in the Bridge

Argument 4a [verse 1]

Claim

I made a promise to not let go -----

Data [implied]

I am here, committed

Warrant [implied]

- *When I make a promise, I keep it [I can be trusted]
- *A promise is sacred

Argument 4b [bridge]

Claim [implied]

This is too hard to take-----

Data

I am down in the garden where I let go

Warrant [implied]

- *When things get too hard to take, you can let go

Taken together, there is this contradictory argument:

Claim

I made a promise to not let go -----I am down in the garden where I let go

Data

Warrant [implied]

- *If you are misled/deceived, all bets are off
[promises made under false pretenses are not valid]
- *A promise is made to not let go of this commitment; but you can let go of something else or someone without impacting the promise.
- *A long time ago I was in the garden thinking about letting you go, then I reassessed and made a vow to not let go
- *The only way to really fulfill a promise of commitment is to let go of it

it.” For this explanation to make sense, the listener needs to hold the assumption that there is no connection between the verses and the bridge. In this scenario, the singer is telling a fragmented story about different promises he has made. This interpretation is internally inconsistent, though, since the verses *are* connected (the verses are clearly about the same scene) and the chorus is connected to both verses. Why is it only the bridge that diverges and tells a ‘new’ story? Still, this is a warrant that some listeners bring to the song.

A third explanation addressing the inconsistency in “letting go” assumes a flashback and is offered by listeners in a discussion on a fanpage (jakobdylan.com). In the bridge, the singer returns to the time, just before the song begins, when he let go. He’s in the garden and decides to let go, to walk away from it all. Then something happened (we don’t know what); then the song begins—and he makes that “promise to not let go.” In this scenario, the speaker’s despair is revisited, or perhaps explained. He recalls the time when he almost

broke free of the struggle, he recalls the disillusionment he faced when he realized that things are very different “down here” than they appear. This flashback (the bridge) lets the audience know that he tried to let go of the struggle before. Something made him recommit, though, and vow to not let go. This flashback reinforces that it’s been a long struggle and a continuing tug-of-war. The listener understands, then, how the tug-of-war motivates and inspires him. The listener is never privy to what, exactly, caused the singer to vow not to let go in the face of his commitment to let go in the garden. This interpretation is also internally inconsistent, as the rest of the song is linear and there’s no textual or musical support for the reversal in time at this point in the song.

A final explanation that addresses the inconsistency in “letting go” involves the idea that only by letting go can one’s commitment be realized. As the singer declares in the opening lines of the song, he makes “a promise to not let go”; this promise is a critical part of his identity (as the topical analysis revealed above). In addition, the second line in the first verse acknowledges that the struggle involved in holding on deepens his commitment to the promise (“our tug-of-war has only made me want you more”). After realizing the hopelessness of his predicament (described in the verses) and the futility of performing work (repeated in the chorus), the bridge provides the turning point. There the singer seems to realize that letting go is the only way to really be free of the struggle, of the tug-of-war, of the fight. So, conceding to the struggle, he lets go. But the bridge also shows that he retains his commitment – he’s in the garden (committed to the land) and he continues working the land (after the bridge, he returns to the chorus, “it’s plant and



reap and plow and sow”).

This final time, though, the chorus has a different quality. It’s sung with even more emotion than before. Armed with the commitment to the land and to the belief that hard work pays off, the commitment to the struggle is not needed. There is a reason for fate to have brought him here, and there is reason to believe that commitment to the idea--rather than commitment to the fight--just might pay off this time. At this point, the singer has given even more of himself (he breaks his promise, altering a critical trait of himself), and shows renewed commitment (in the garden), with the hope that this is a new beginning. Until now, he has worked diligently but that hasn’t been enough because he’s been torn—committed to both the struggle and the work. Perhaps he has spent a lot of energy on the struggle, and letting go of the fight will enable him to commit fully to the work, and ideally, to now see the fruits of his labor. Perhaps work that isn’t defined by struggle will pay off, it will grow.

This philosophy has been presented by Dylan in other songs. Just a few examples will illustrate this point. In “I’ve Been Delivered,” (*Breach*, 2000) each verse explains the singer’s commitment to the process. The singer offers that he will keep working until he’s “delivered” from the struggle. Near the end of the song, the deliverance is realized when he lets go of that commitment, he sings “so just keep on letting go ‘cause I must be close to being delivered for the first time.” In “Three Ways,”

(*Red Letter Days*, 2002) Dylan suggests that letting go is always an option that one should consider in unproductive situations: “if you can’t find your way out, you just burn it to the ground.” In “Here In Pleasantville,” (*Red Letter Days*, 2002) he offers that walking away is the best way to realize success: “just move on” and “light a fire on every hill and burn down Pleasantville.” In the song “I Am A Building,” (*Rebel, Sweetheart*, 2005), Dylan sings about loneliness and being trapped in an untenable situation (“I am not moving, I am landlocked”), Dylan suggests, “you’ve won the battle, you’ve won the war,” and then, “for worse or better, I surrender.” But by surrendering the building “burns” and the singer finds hope offering, “I’m not worried anymore.” A hopeless situation becomes hopeful when he lets go.

This warrant in “Will It Grow” reveals that the only way to end the struggle is to let go. This also means he has to break his promise “to not let go.” And, although he received motivation and energy from the struggle itself, there is a realization that he must concede the fight in order to win it. This might call in to question the essence of who he is (since a basic trait, his substance is in keeping promises), and require him to alter that aspect of himself. It’s this adapted/new self that allows growth.

After the bridge the song returns to the chorus, but with this final explanation: there is a renewed hope that the hard work will pay off. The audience supplies the warrant that there is value and reward to hard work. But this time, something has changed. So, returning to the pattern of hard work no longer seems fruitless; the singer has let go of the struggle so that he can be fully committed to the work.

The question posed at the end of the chorus is repeated three more times: “will it grow?” Most in the audience will answer “yes, it will grow.” We supply the warrant, the belief that hard work and perseverance will pay off. This interpretation holds that the rhetor believes so, too. This is why he made the promise in the first place – he can overcome the obstacles by working hard. But sometimes we are our own biggest obstacle, as the singer may realize in “Will It Grow.” With that recognition, and with the willingness to let go, the ultimate value is actualized. There is a foundational belief in perseverance and hard work echoing in this song: hard work will pay off. But it’s not enough just to believe in perseverance, you must also be willing to change yourself and what you are committed to. The audience

and the speaker arrive at the same conclusion: It will grow. A song steeped in hopelessness ends with hope, but only by getting beyond the explicit claims does this understanding materialize. The critic needs to analyze implied claims and warrants to discover how/why the arguments function to create that hope.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that a song about farming does, indeed, provide sound advice for living. “Will It Grow” is well-placed as the fifth song on the album – it provides a center point for viewing one’s situation and one’s ability to control it. Analyzing the topics in the song helps explain the situation and the speaker, and paints a clear picture of what is happening. Analyzing the arguments helps listeners recognize how and why these elements might be perceived and altered. The topical analysis emphasized that the situation was barren and seemed hopeless. Also, we learned that a defining trait of the singer was his commitment, his word. The analysis of the arguments revealed that there was a basic contradiction between a promise the speaker made and what the speaker enacted. Although one could reason that there’s just a lack of clarity in the song, this analysis suggests that the fundamental contradiction between topics and arguments reveals an important philosophy for living. That is, there can be a contradiction between committing to who you are and committing to what you want.

This song addresses that paradox and, at the same time, communicates a delicate balance between despair and hopefulness. The lyrics reflect immobility but the moving sounds made by the guitar and the persistent drums reassure the listener that movement is possible. Additionally, while the circumstances may seem hopeless-- the singer is trapped in a lonely and barren situation--there is an air of hope, especially at the end, to balance the despair. That hope comes from the implicit assumption that perseverance will pay off. Importantly, though, it’s not enough just to persevere, that perseverance has to be accompanied by hard work and sacrifice. In this case, the sacrifice was a willingness to alter one’s self –to adapt and to change. If one is willing and able to alter one’s self, one is likely to reap the fruits of one’s labor.



The analysis of arguments uncovered this paradox: in order to commit to something, one must let go of it. That is, in order for the singer to fulfill his commitment to the land, he must eschew his commitment. This paradox reflects a form of dialectical thinking. Dialectical theory rejects traditional “either/or” options as simplistic, unrealistic, or otherwise unworkable. The dialectical method requires one to look at both options at the same time, and ideally, to embrace them both, to merge them or to transcend the dichotomy to arrive at new options.¹⁹ By concluding that one’s commitment can be realized only by changing one’s self (and hence, one’s commitment), the rhetor in “Will It Grow” embraces the paradox of letting go/committing. The nature of the resolution is not certain (as evidenced by at least four viable ways to resolve the contradiction). Dylan’s lyrics require listeners to at least acknowledge, if not embrace it, and yet

he allows listeners to resolve the paradox on their own.

Next, as he does with so many of his songs, Dylan adds substance to a philosophical conversation. Here, it’s about the role of fate and free will. The dialectic of fate and free will has been discussed and debated by thinkers for centuries. Plato, the Stoics, Nietzsche, Shopenhauer, Freud, Rousseau, Buber, and countless others have all added to the discourse



about what it means to be free, the role of fate (or determinism), what may be involved in free choice, and whether or not it is possible to really have such freedoms. Dylan provides listeners with a way to consider the struggle. By choosing to let go, the speaker also enacts his choice. If there was no role for the individual—if fate had the first and last word—the singer’s choice to hold on or let go would be irrelevant. In the beginning of the song, the singer chooses to hang on. This act undermined his commitment because it divided his commitments between the promise and the process. In the end, by letting go, he both commits and exercises his choice in a situation that seemed hopeless and pre-determined. While fate may have a hand in dictating one’s path (“in the shape of a lion a hand came down”), the point of view in “Will It Grow” suggests that the power of the individual must also be considered. Using language involving the topic of *potency*, the individual is highlighted: “my love is braver than you know”—the individual even taunts or tempts fate. In addition, although the individual must wait and work hard and wait more, he is not completely at the mercy of fate. He can alter the terms by changing himself and thereby alter the situation, making it more bearable and more hopeful. By embracing the paradox of commitment he overrides fate and injects his own power in to the situation. He does have some degree of control over his situation.

Importantly, although the singer exercises his own individual power in committing to this situation and to changing himself, he does so without knowing how things will turn out. He doesn’t hear an answer to his question, “will it grow?” It’s necessary to decide and to commit without ever really knowing how things will turn out. Yet, his belief in hard work drives him. It is telling that this belief is maintained even when the surroundings consistently appear desolate and hopeless. The individual is hopeful and this hopefulness empowers him.

Finally, examining the song in terms of stated and implied claims, data, and warrants, the power of the song becomes clear. The advantage of spelling some things out and leaving other things hidden (or implied), Dylan masterfully presents a point of view while allowing the audience to insert their own assumptions and interpretations of the song. A song that was filled with explicit claims and explicit warrants would leave little room for the audience to create meaning. Yet, without providing some direction, the audience could be left to insert any individual view that may not be based in the message and the viewpoint of the song. By providing some direction, the rhetor and the audience combine their belief in perseverance and benevolence to hear “Will It Grow” as inspirational and hopeful. This balance is often hard to strike. Some songwriters provide too much guidance in interpreting their lyrics (e.g. “this song was written after a bad break up and it’s about how to heal”) while others are reluctant to provide any direction to encourage the audience to fill in their own (“the song is about whatever you want it to be about”).²⁰ But songwriters who can provide enough data and clarity in the claims can make their points while allowing the audience to supply their own warrants. This creates a connection between the audience and the music. It helps us understand why some listeners become so drawn to particular songs. It also illuminates the power that some songwriters have when they tap in to values or assumptions that many hold and can identify with.

Interestingly, this song is consistent in form and content. While the content of the song encourages the listener to embrace the dialectic of committing and letting go, the form of the song does the same. That is, as the singer negotiates the dialectic between committing and letting go, the songwriter embraces the dialectic. He commits to the philosophy but he lets go when he allows the audience the space to embrace their own interpretation. Imagine creating something and at the same time letting go of it so others can grab on to it and make it their own. This requires a commitment to the process and a belief in the benevolence of individuals.

Appendix: Reasoning/Toulmin Model Layout

Layout of Reasoning in Verse 1

I made a promise to not let go **C**
Our tug of war has only made me want you more **C**
Steeped in hard luck and doomed to roam **D**
My love is braver than you know **D**
My forefathers they worked this land **D**
And I was schooled in the tyranny of nature's plans **D**
Dressed in thunder a cloud came round **D**
In the shape of a lion a hand came down **D**

Claim

I made a promise to not let go-----I am here [implied]
[implied]

Data

|
Warrants [implied]

- *Promises are sacred
- *Commitments are made to be kept

Claim

Our tug-of-war has only made me want you more----- My love is braver than you know

Data

|
Warrants [implied]

- *The more you struggle/fight for something, the more you love it
- *Fighting for something you love makes you brave
- *One should not underestimate the strength of love
- *If you love something, you won't back down, even in a tough situation

Claim

I have a right to be here-----My forefathers they worked this land
(and do this) [implied]

Data

|
Warrant [implied]

- *Doing what your forefathers have done is customary, accepted,
- *Family history provides knowledge, experience, credibility

Claim

Data

My life is a struggle/uncertain-----Steeped in hard luck and doomed to roam
[implied]

|
Warrant [implied]

- *Life without certainty is difficult
- *Life should have purpose/direction/luck

Claim

Data

I know what to expect-----I was schooled in the tyranny of nature's plans
I know it's hard work [implied]

|
Warrant [implied]

- * If one has warning, it's more fair than not knowing
- *Knowledge provides comfort/preparation

Claim

Data

Some things are meant to be----- Dressed in thunder, a cloud came around
[implied] | In the shape of a lion a hand came down

|
Warrants [implied]

- * If Fate calls, there is no choice
- *Fate is stronger than individual will
- *Fate/a calling can provide direction

Layout of Reasoning in Verse 2

Dig my ditches in the golden sun **D**
 I'd be robbing these trains if I could catch me one **D**
 Sunday Monday now Tuesday's gone **D**
 Got me stone cold sober in a drought so long **D**
 Boarded mansions and ghost filled yards **D**
 There's a boy in a water tower counting cars **D**
 Steel trap's open and empty stalls **D**
 There's a well-worn saddle but the horse is gone **D**

Claim

I work hard
[implied]

Data

Dig my ditches in the golden sun

Warrant [implied]

- *There is pleasure in work
- *Working hard is an important value
- *Hard work can provide insight/light

Claim

There's no way out
[implied]

Data

I'd be robbing these trains if I could catch me one
Steel trap's open and empty stalls
There's a well-worn saddle but the horse is gone

Warrants [implied]

- *If there are no options, you're trapped
- *Being trapped diminishes your choices and power

Claim

It's lonely
[implied]

Data

Sunday, Monday, now Tuesday's gone
Boarded mansions and ghost-filled yards
There's a boy in a water tower counting cars

Warrants [implied]

- *Work is lonely
- *Constant loneliness is undesirable

Claim

There's no pay off

Data

Got me stone cold sober in a drought so long

Warrants [implied]

- *One should see the fruits of his work
- *Droughts should be temporary

Layout of Reasoning in Chorus

**Damn this valley
Damn this cold
Take so long to let me know
It's plant and reap and plow and sow
But tell me will it grow**

Claim

Data

Damn this valley
Damn this cold-----

Take so long to let me know
It's plant and reap and plow and sow

|
Warrants [implied]

- *When one works hard, s/he shouldn't have to wait too long to see the fruits of labor
- *Hard work should pay off; perseverance should be rewarded
- *Waiting to see if your work pays off is very difficult

Claim

Data

Tell me will it grow-----
(posed as a question not a claim)

[none]

|
Warrants [implied]

- *Knowing there is a pay off makes the wait bearable
- *One has a right to know

Layout of Reasoning in Bridge

Jet black starlit midnight rolls **D**
 I am down in the garden where I let go **D**
 Here on the surface the earth looks round **D**
 But it's a godless city of cold flat ground **D**

Claim [implied]

Data

I'm alone-----

Jet black starlit midnight rolls

|
Warrants [implied]

- *Darkness amplifies loneliness
- *Some light provides hopefulness

Claim [implied]

Data

This is much harder to take than anticipated-----

I am down in the garden where I let go

|
Warrant [implied]

- *When things get too hard to take, you can let go

- ¹"Seeing Things - Jakob Dylan (2008)," *Billboard*, <http://www.billboard.com/#/album/jakob-dylan/seeing-things/1113443> (accessed September 10, 2009).
- ²"Spring '08 LPs from Madonna, Coldplay, The Roots, Mudcrutch, Elvis Costello [and more]." *Rolling Stone*, April 16, 2009. <http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/19830818/page/42> (accessed September 9, 2009).
- ³Erlewine, Stephen Thomas, "'Seeing Things'," *allmusic.com*, (June 2008), <http://allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:kxftxzwjldje> (accessed September 10, 2009).
- ⁴Paul Taylor, "Jakob Dylan - Seeing Things (Columbia)," *Manchester Evening News*, July 24, 2008, http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/entertainment/music/album_reviews/s/1059710 (accessed July 25, 2008).
- ⁵"Jakob Dylan - Seeing Things (Columbia)," *Performing Songwriter*, no. 110, June 2008, 36.
- ⁶"Album review: Jakob Dylan," *Scotsman.com News*, August 3, 2008, <http://news.scotsman.com/entertainment/Album-review-Jakob-Dylan.4350727.jp> (accessed August 3, 2008).
- ⁷Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005), 22.
- ⁸Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005), 60.
- ⁹Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005), 62.
- ¹⁰John Wilson and Carroll Arnold, *Public Speaking As A Liberal Art* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1974).
- ¹¹Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005).
- ¹²Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958)
- ¹³Toulmin's model has at least 6 parts: data, claim, warrant, backing, qualifier, rebuttal. But, many scholars agree that the main structure of the argument (data, claim, warrant) reflects the most basic components of an argument. Many arguments do not include the latter three traits, especially if the argument isn't an interactional one. For a rhetorical critic, isolating the three most basic components helps reveal the types of assumptions (warrants) an audience may bring to an argument so that it makes sense.
- ¹⁴Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005).
- ¹⁵Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005), 146.
- ¹⁶Michael Miller, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Music Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2005), 146-147.
- ¹⁷The line is actually sung on the album and in live versions, "I am down in the garden where I let *you* go."
- ¹⁸This insertion of "you" happens only in the performance of the song on the album and live versions. The "you" does not appear in the written lyrics.
- ¹⁹Howard L. Williams, *Hegel, Heraclitus, and Marx's Dialectic*. (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1989).
- ²⁰Although there are many books published about song meanings, one recent example is *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Story behind the Song* (2009) written by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen & Jo-Ann Geffen. This book promises to "reveal the inspirations behind 101 of the songs that have often become the stories of our lives" (back cover).