

# Essay on the joker and the thief disenfranchised youths and jimi hendrixs all alo...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Jimi Hendrix's cover of the Bob Dylan folk song, "All Along the Watchtower," adapts the song from Dylan's mellow and malicious folk song to an exuberant, angry rock anthem for young people in the late 1960s. Under Jimi's alterations, the instrumentation turns ominous and aggressive, his exuberant vocals sounding almost pleading. The song contains a limited chord structure and longer-than-usual musical sections, as well as unsettling improvisation and call-and-response from the vocals and guitar (Zak, 2005). The combination of all these musical elements make the listener, especially one who was young in 1968 (when the song was released), feel overwhelmed and frustrated, likely with the circumstances of the world around them. This song perfectly typifies those feelings, while at the same time serving as a call to action towards the forces behind the injustices they see.

At its core, "Watchtower" is not very musically complicated. Like many of his songs, Bob Dylan stuck with a three-chord structure, making it simpler to play and use a harmonica while singing (Gill, 1999). These three chords are very close to each other in pitch and in a minor key, creating a straightforward, limited tonality. This serves to make the listener feel trapped and constricted, as if there's nowhere else to go but this limited window of sound. Due to the minor key the notes are played in, the listener would not be happy about it, either, as it gives a sinister edge to the notes (Gill, 1999).

The basic structure of the song is maintained by the acoustic guitar and bass. The acoustic is boldly strummed by Jimi (who performed all

instruments save the drums), the notes played staccato and very quickly, with many subdivisions within the beat (Kramer, 1992). This serves to ramp up the energy in the piece and create a restless feeling in the listener. The bass does this as well, booming out the basic notes of the chord with a deep pound that makes the listener feel uneasy. The three notes in the riff are played in descending order of pitch, then ascending, never changing out the order; this serves to create a feeling in the listener that something is surrounding, even circling them. Like the chord structure, the song's form is fairly consistent. It consists of an eight-measure intro, eight-measure verses, and a coda, each with a 4-beat measure. Unlike most songs, there are no bridges in 'Watchtower'; or at least, they are replaced by electric guitar solos, the first lasting 16 measures, the second lasting 32. These verse lengths are slightly longer than most songs (with eight-measure bridges and four-measure verses), giving the listener a feeling of impatience at times, as they wait for the next section of the song.

During each verse, as Jimi finishes a lyric, the electric guitar gives a short, subtle riff before the next line, almost as an afterthought. This provides a bit of call-and-response to the verses, as Jimi and his guitar trade places as the focus of attention. With each successive line, the guitar response gets longer and more complicated, building tension and desperation in the listener. This helps acclimate the listener with the idea of the guitar as one of the voices of the song, which is helpful as it has to carry the solos that have replaced the bridges. The listener feels caught between two forces pulling against each

other, a sensation synonymous with their own confused attitudes toward life and responsibility, between war and peace.

**The trapped feeling elicited from the instrumentation is expressed perfectly in the lyrics of the first verse of the song:**

“There must be some kind of way out of here,”

Said the Joker to the Thief.

There’s too much confusion -

I can’t get no relief.”

The first line is a phrase many youth must have thought given the circumstances of their environment - the smothering expectations of their parents and the dangerous duty of their government made many young people in that decade uncertain as to their options and future. Some did find a ‘ way out of here’; draft dodgers fled to Canada, Sweden, and Mexico, or went into hiding somewhere in the States. Until Jimmy Carter pardoned all Vietnam draft dodgers in 1979, there was also a stigma that a draft dodger was a coward, at least among older Americans (Grunenberg et al., 2005). Regarding the chaos of the antiwar protests and horrifying information that was coming out of the media, the lyric ‘ there’s too much confusion’ rang true for a lot of Americans. Like the Joker in ‘ Watchtower,’ recipients of the draft couldn’t get any relief from inevitable service in Vietnam. The same is true of African-Americans - the assassination of two of their most influential leaders (MLK and RFK), as well as the brutality of the police response to their

outcry for equal rights would have left some blacks in the '60s confused and seeking relief (Grunenberg et al., 2005).

**The rest of the first verse carries a lot of meaning as well:**

“ Businessmen they drink my wine;

Plowmen dig my earth.

Know what any of it is worth.”

When listening to these lyrics, there's a lot a lower-to-middle-class '60s youth can take from it. The businessmen drinking his wine and plowmen digging his earth can all tie in to feelings of disenfranchisement they may feel towards the government, their parents, big business, etc. They could feel resentment at the college students and conscientious objectors who could afford to pay to get out of the draft, while they are recruited to risk their lives in Vietnam. Or it could be the opinion of an African-American who sees whites getting all the opportunities he is denied. These displaced young adults see every day the people who have what they want taking it for granted, 'none of them along the line' knowing 'what any of it is worth.' Emotions like this are at the heart of this song, and this verse is one of the most central examples of it (Marqusee, 2003).

**The second verse, in contrast to the idea of feeling trapped, gives a feeling of reassurance and rebellion:**

“No reason to get excited’,

The Thief he kindly spoke.

There are many here among us

Who feel that life is but a joke.”

This verse calls to not ‘ get excited,’ which for a young man or woman in the ‘ 60s could mean to not meet violence with violence, continuing King’s idea of passive resistance in the Civil Rights Movement. The Thief, along with the Joker, are portrayed through the lyrics as our guides through the song, two radicals sitting down and discussing the many problems of society while coming up with a game plan for how to change it (Gill, 1999). The ‘ many’ who are ‘ here among us / who feel that life is but a joke’ are in reference to the dominant culture, who seek to merely accumulate wealth and not do anything about the serious issues.

**The second half of this verse gives some reassurance, however:**

“ But you and I we’ve been through that

And this is not our fate

So let us not talk falsely now

The hour’s getting late”

This part of the verse is a rallying cry for the members of the hippie counterculture, asking every member to rise up and rebel against the dominant culture of capitalism and big business. They don’t plan to treat life as a joke, but cherish nature and celebrate each other in a new feeling of community, not ‘ talking falsely.’ The hour getting late gives this proposal a

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sense of urgency, as time is quickly running out, and they must act before it's too late. Jimi's ascended pitch and forceful delivery of that final lyric emphasizes this urgency, leading the listener to feel roused and excited. This kind of enthusiasm and fervor led many people, young and old, to protest the war and civil rights injustices in the '60s (Grunenberg et al., 2005). These hippies decided an untimely death in Vietnam or constant persecution by the dominant culture was 'not their fate,' and therefore spoke out.

### **The third and final verse introduces us to a seemingly unrelated paragraph:**

" All along the watchtower,

Princes kept the view,

While all the women came and went

Barefoot servants too."

Moving from conversational lyrics to more visually stimulating prose - instead of dialogue we get imagery - the song gains a more epic feel, especially in its place after the very long guitar solo, giving the listener a feeling of watching important events unfold. Though it seems to place us in a different setting, Dylan's lyrics seem to discuss the same topics. The watchtower, we learn, is literal, as the imagery this verse gives us implies a medieval setting, as the aforementioned tower guards a castle containing princes, regal women, and barefoot servants. By giving the listener these easily recognizable symbols in the guise of almost-mythical figures and creating an even bigger divide between them, it places them on a higher

pedestal than the listener normally considers them, making them feel even more intimidated and overshadowed. The fact that they reside in a guarded castle makes them seem removed from society, living in their own microcosm among their own people, alienating themselves from the people they disenfranchise.

**Then in the final four lines, a threat appears to the dominant culture:**

“ Outside in the cold distance

A wild cat did growl.

Two riders were approaching

And the wind began to howl.”

The cold distance is how the dominant culture views the uneducated masses: a strange desert of emptiness and lack of hope that they choose to ignore, treating life as a joke as mentioned earlier in the song. Suddenly, a wild cat growls, conjuring up images of nature, unbridled and free, representing ideals of freedom and harmony with Mother Earth that the hippie counterculture placed in high regard (Grunenberg et al., 2005). The implied ferocity of the cat supplements the aggressive instrumentation, which agitates and provokes the listener into action against the dominant culture. The two riders who approach are, as implied, the joker and the thief from earlier, our shepherds to a better way of life, approaching the castle of the higher classes to confront them and change things for the better. They are the listener's guides to action, calling them to arms against the injustices



they see around them - unjust and cruel wars, racism, corruption, etc. Jimi's voice once again nearly yells the final line in the song, as the wind begins to howl, nature once again rearing its head against industrialization and implying that the battle between the dominant culture and the hippie counterculture is beginning (Zak, 2004).

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