

Willamette University
College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English

ADVANCED STUDIES IN AUTHORSHIP:
BOB DYLAN

English 450W • T/Th 1:10-2:40pm

Professor: Dr. Mike Chasar
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Office Hours: T/Th 2:45-4pm, and by appointment

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Course Description

This is a class about understanding and analyzing the multimedia poetic artistry of Bob Dylan, recipient of the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature. It is also a class that seeks to take what we learn from studying Dylan and use it to better understand the artistic and cultural work of other songs in the sphere of popular music more broadly. Dylan has long been praised for expanding the subject matter, diction, vocal and instrumental ranges, performance personae, intertextualities, artistic pretensions, and countercultural positioning of rock and roll and other musical genres (folk, country, gospel among them), and so this class pursues those and other aspects of Dylan's work in the first two-thirds of the semester, thereafter training its eyes and ears on the work of musical-poetical artists who extend, expand, and complicate the breadth of popular music that Dylan's career helped to make possible.

Befitting a 400-level course in English, this class will be run on the model of the graduate-level seminar. It does not require that you have any particular level of expertise regarding the subject matter, but it asks that you be willing to take the reins—as reader, listener, interlocutor, researcher, collaborator, creator, and so on—in helping class to learn it. This includes setting the discussion agenda and giving presentations; identifying and sharing relevant research and/or scholarship; integrating your interests and sharing your existing knowledge and experience; and, in the last third of the semester when we move away from Dylan proper, assigning and leading discussions on popular non-Dylan songs of your own choosing.

In addition to a 15-20-minute collaborative presentation focusing on a Dylan album and its various contexts, and in addition to leading discussion for a half-day later in the semester on a song or songs of your choosing, this class will entail two ambitious, demanding-in-their-own-way projects. The first will be a 2,000-word close reading and close listening essay engaging a single Dylan song, modeled after the essays in our primary textbook *The Poetry of Bob Dylan: 30 Essays on 30 Songs*. The second and final project will conclude the semester with an ambitious, individualized project of your own design that incorporates or relates to course subject matter in a clearly identifiable way.

Course Materials

Mike Chasar, editor. *The Poetry of Bob Dylan: 30 Essays on 30 Songs*. Bloomsbury, 2025.

All recordings are on YouTube, and all lyrics are available online, especially at The Official Bob Dylan Site at www.bobdylan.com.

Student Learning Objectives

- To gain a critical understanding of how to approach the subject of popular music and its traditions from a literary-critical vantage point
- To gain a critical understanding of the place of Bob Dylan in the traditions of American literature and music
- To do comparative literary analysis in terms of subject, period, genre, medium, and other aspects of a song or album or related phenomena over an extended stretch of history
- To identify, read, and present on secondary sources
- To lead, participate in, and continue class discussion in the manner of a graduate seminar
- To brainstorm, research, propose, draft, and complete a final project

Course Requirements & Grading

Class participation	20%
Bob Dylan Presentation	10%
Short Essay	20%
Song Discussion/Presentation	10%
Final Project Proposal	10%
Final Project	30%

Time commitment for this course:

Willamette's Credit Hour Policy holds that for every hour of class time there is an expectation of 2-3 hours of work outside of class. Thus, for a class meeting three hours a week you should anticipate spending 6-9 hours outside of class engaged in course-related activities. For a senior seminar class meeting two days per week like this one, this means spending between 4-4.5 hours of work outside of class for each day we meet. Examples include study time, reading and homework assignments, research projects, group work, attendance at lectures or readings, etc.

Bob Dylan Presentation (10%)

As you'll see from the schedule on the syllabus appended below, we will start the semester by intensively studying eight key Dylan albums—one album per week. With the exception of the first album (*The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*), each week will start with a presentation by one or two students introducing that album and its relevant contexts, aiming to offer the class a foundation and anchor for further study.

For this presentation, you and your partner(s) should:

1. Use the officially approved version of the lyrics made available online at bobdylan.com to cut, paste, and combine the lyrics to the album's respective songs in a single document that you circulate to class. This way, we'll all be working with the same version of the songs, we'll have them available in a single place and can read them in the sequence(s) in which they appear on the album, and, by sharing the work over the course of the semester this way, we don't all have to look them up and cut and paste on our own.

As you format this document, please use my version of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* as a model. The album title and release date should be clearly noted. Side One and Side Two should be clearly noted. The lyrics should occur in the order that the songs appear on the album. And the document should have page numbers.

Please circulate this document to class by 5pm on the Wednesday before we begin discussion of that album, so that we have four full days to independently work with it before the date when your presentation takes place.

2. Design and lead a presentation that runs 15-20 minutes long and that may include subjects such as:
 - Relevant biographical material
 - Relevant historical context
 - The album's critical reception then and now
 - The album's structure, style, and key literary features
 - The album's key singles, their structure, style, and cultural lives
 - Key media appearances and key performances related to the album and its songs
 - Scholarship on/about that album and/or related topics
 - Other material that you determine is relevant including "paratextual" material like packaging, cover art, inserts, liner notes, etc.

Handouts, slide presentations, lists of resources, annotations of key scholarship, and other "takeaway" items always help to distinguish presentations of this sort.

Short Essay (20%)

Our main textbook is *The Poetry of Bob Dylan: 30 Essays on 30 Songs*, for which contributors chose songs that interested them and then wrote crisp, clean, insightful, historically- and critically-informed analyses of those songs and their importance. As you will see reading through this book, everyone pursued the same task ("write a 2,000-word essay on a Dylan song of your choosing") but their interests, analytical frameworks, scholarly approaches, and individual geniuses made for very different essays.

As you read these essays for class, try to read them for more than content: also read them to learn and understand the strategies they use to take a rote assignment and make it uniquely their own. In doing so, you will find a ready set of models/examples for your first writing assignment, in

which you yourself will follow the same prompt. By this time in the semester, you will have studied Dylan for over two months, having intensively studied eight key albums, having studied seven other Dylan albums on your own time, and having given and been an audience member for seven presentations. Your assignment, then, is the following: pick a Dylan song and write a 2,000-2,250-word analytical, thesis-driven essay about it explaining what you see and hear from your perspective that a more casual listener might not.

Song Discussion/Presentation (10%)

The syllabus for the last third of the semester will be determined by students, each of whom will have 30-45 minutes in which to present and lead/moderate discussion on two assigned songs of their choosing. To this end, students will: a) identify two related or unrelated songs for classroom analysis; b) assign those songs via links to performances, lyrics, video, and other related matter they deem important; c) include possible discussion questions to start class discussion with; and d) introduce the songs in class on the assigned day and lead or moderate the subsequent discussion.

Final Project (30%) and Final Project Proposal (10%)

Befitting a 400-level seminar class, students will conclude English 450W with an ambitious, month-long project of their own design closely connected to the subject matter of this class (Dylan and popular music forms). The nature/scope/focus/shape/medium of that project will be determined in consultation with the professor and described, explained, justified, and planned out in a 2-3-page formal proposal. As a way of getting you thinking, final projects might be:

- A formal thesis-driven essay responding to and in conversation with established Dylan scholarship
- A formal thesis-driven essay expanding on or repurposing your short essay in some significant way
- A formal thesis-driven essay doing comparative work between Dylan and other artists
- A formal thesis-driven essay on work by or about Dylan that we haven't studied in class (including album cover art, visual art, cinema, music video, Dylan's other writing, etc.)
- A formal thesis-driven essay taking up songs by other artists, perhaps focusing on an aspect of the work of a single artist, perhaps doing a comparative study
- A formal thesis-driven essay considering the various multimedia manifestations of songs ranging from videos to karaoke
- A creative nonfiction piece focusing in some way on popular music
- A lengthy piece of fiction in which popular music—maybe even Dylan himself—is a central thematic/formal concern
- A series of original songs in the tradition/style of popular music—either lyrics or lyrics and music, perhaps incorporating performance and/or recording and/or video depending on your goals and imagination—accompanied by an artist's statement
- A relevant zine of your own creation, or a study of zines related to and focused on popular music (punk rock and riot grrrl movements were especially known for their zines)

- A formal thesis-driven essay examining some aspect of musical culture ranging from fan cultures to the circulation of music (say, by cassette tape or digital streaming services) to the controversies, legislation, semiotics, celebrity, and politics thereto related.

As we'll come to appreciate over the course of the semester, the multimedia poetics of popular music is a ripe subject for students interested in text, voice and vocalization, music, performance, video, remediation, visual art, and more. The goal of your final project is to seize on a topic of deep interest to you, run as hard as you can toward that topic, and hopefully make something that will have a future of some sort—a writing sample for grad school, a project you'd like to continue, material that you'd like to circulate in some shape or form.

A Final Note

This class is designed to be part of your education, and my goal is to help make learning fun and stress-free, to help you learn as much as possible, and to help foster a generous and inclusive environment in which everyone can learn as much as possible. If there's anything I can do to better meet these goals, please let me know!

Tentative Work Schedule

*** Note: Unless otherwise noted, assignments are due the day they are listed. ***

Introduction

M 8/25 Class Introduction
 Sample text #1: Dylan, "Knockin' On Heaven's Door"
 Sample text #2: Beyoncé, "Cozy"

The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan

W 8/27 Listen and study: [*The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* \(1963\)](#)

Note: The assignment to "listen and study" here and elsewhere on the syllabus means a deep, slow, considered engagement with the text—the musical version of "close" or analytical reading" in which you might normally underline key passages and make notes in the margin. To "listen and study" to the assigned albums and songs for this class means listening to each song at least twice and probably reading along with the lyrics at least one of those times. As a form of multi-media poetry, songs ask us to 1) pay interpretive attention to the lyrics, 2) pay attention to the manner in which those words are vocalized, 3) pay attention to the musicalization of the piece, and 4) pay attention to the relationship created between the words, the voice, and the music.

To "listen and study" to an album entails even more, such as: a) What is created by way of the song sequence, and b) what is the relationship between Side A and Side B (if there are indeed "sides" to the album)? There's more and more the

farther afield we go. We can pay interpretive attention to the theater of live performance and how it shapes the song, for instance. Or we can pay attention to music videos and how they shape our experience and the song's possible meanings.

At the outset, “listen and study” means 1) slowing down your attention, 2) thinking deeply about the components of the songs—words, voice, music—and how they relate, 3) thinking about the ways that sequences of songs take shape and the ways that album sides relate, and 4) making notes on all of this to prepare for class discussion.

M 9/1 No Class (Labor Day)

W 9/3 *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (continued)
Read: Chasas (“Introduction”) and essays by Lesley Wheeler, Peter Miller, and Joanna Davis-McElligatt
Listen and study: [*The Times They Are A-Changin'* \(1964\)](#)

Bringing It All Back Home

M 9/8 Listen and study: [*Bringing It All Back Home* \(1965\)](#)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 9/10 *Bringing It All Back Home* (continued)
Read essays by Matthew Kilbane, Marsha Bryant, Angela Sorby, and Jeremy Yudkin
Listen and Study: [*Another Side of Bob Dylan* \(1964\)](#)

Highway 61 Revisited

M 9/15 Listen and study: [*Highway 61 Revisited* \(1965\)](#)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 9/17 *Highway 61 Revisited* (continued)
Read essays by Linda Kinnahan and Urayóan Noel
Listen and study: [*Self-Portrait* \(1970\)](#)

Blonde on Blonde

M 9/22 Listen and study: [*Blonde on Blonde* \(1966\)](#)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 9/24 *Blonde on Blonde* (continued)

Read essays by Loren Glass, Melissa Girard, and Chip Tucker
Listen and study: [Nashville Skyline](#) (1969)

Blood on the Tracks

M 9/29 Listen and study: [Blood on the Tracks](#) (1975)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 10/1 *Blood on the Tracks* (continued)
Read essays by Steven Rings, Anne Margaret Daniel, and Bartholomew Brinkman
Listen and study: [Slow Train Coming](#) (1979)

Desire

M 10/6 Listen and study: [Desire](#) (1976)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 10/8 *Desire* (continued)
Read essays by William Maxwell, Sean Latham, Chasar (“Bonus Track”)
Listen and Study: [Time Out of Mind](#) (1997)
If you haven’t already, think about choosing the song that will be the subject of your short essay (due on 10/27)

Tempest

M 10/13 Listen and study: [Tempest](#) (2012)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 10/15 *Tempest* (continued)
Read essays by Ryan Topper, Michael Thurston, David Caplan, and Richard Thomas
Listen and study: [Modern Times](#) (2006)

Rough and Rowdy Ways

M 10/20 Listen and study: [Rough and Rowdy Ways](#) (2020)

Presentation: _____ & _____

W 10/22 *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (continued)
Read essays by Taylor Black, Marit Macarthur, Adam Bradley, and Thomas Palaima

M 10/27	No class — Short Essays Due by 5pm
W 10/29	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project Proposal
M 11/3	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project Proposal
W 11/5	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Final Project Proposal Due by 5pm
M 11/10	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project (about 3 hours)
W 11/12	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project (about 3 hours)
M 11/17	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project (about 3 hours)
W 11/19	TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ TBA: Two assigned songs: _____ Work on Final Project (By the end of today, you should have spent about 12 hours working on your final project)
M 11/24	Independent Work Day — Work on Final Project By the end of today, you should have spent about 17.5 hours working on your final project)
W 11/26	Thanksgiving Break Work on Final Project (3-4 hours)
M 12/1	Independent Work Day—Work on Final Project (4 hours of work outside of class plus 1.5 hours of work during class time) By the end of today, you should have spent about 26-27 hours working on your final project
W 12/3	Last Day of Class Work on Final Project (3 hours)

Final Project show and tell

Final Project Due: 5pm on Tuesday, December 9

Note: Your final project takes the place of a final exam for English 450, so all the time that you'd normally spend preparing for and taking an exam should be devoted to finishing your final project. Therefore, expect to spend about 9-10 more hours on your project after your workshop—three for the time you'd spend taking a final exam and the 6-7 hours you'd spend preparing for the exam. This project should reflect about a total of about 40 hours of your work!!!

General WU Policies

Time Commitment

Willamette's Credit Hour Policy holds that for every hour of class time there is an expectation of 2-3 hours' work outside of class. Thus, for this class you should anticipate spending 6-9 hours outside of class engaged in course-related activities. Examples include reading course materials, preparing for discussion, preparing and writing papers and exams.

Academic Integrity

Students of Willamette University are members of a community that values excellence and integrity in every aspect of life. As such, we expect all community members to live up to the highest standards of personal, ethical, and moral conduct. Students are expected not to engage in any type of academic or intellectually dishonest practice and encouraged to display honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in all they do. Plagiarism and cheating are especially offensive to the integrity of courses in which they occur and against the College community as a whole. These acts involve intellectual dishonesty, deception, and fraud, which inhibit the honest exchange of ideas. Plagiarism and cheating may be grounds for failure in the course and/or dismissal from the College.

Intellectual Property & Privacy

Class materials and discussions including recorded lectures are for the sole purpose of educating the students enrolled in the course. The release of such information (including but not limited to directly sharing, screen capturing, or recording content) is strictly prohibited, unless the instructor states otherwise. Doing so without the permission of the instructor will be considered an Honor Code violation and may also be a violation of other state and federal laws, such as the Copyright Act.

Diversity and Disability Statement

Willamette University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. My goal is to create a learning environment that is usable, equitable, inclusive and welcoming. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or accurate assessment or achievement, please notify me as soon as possible. Students with disabilities are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Services office in Smullin 155 at 503-370-6737 or accessible-info@willamette.edu to discuss a range of options to removing barriers in the course, including accommodations.

SOAR Center Offerings: Food, Clothing, and School Materials

The Students Organizing for Access to Resources (SOAR) Center provides free, confidential, and equitable access to food, toiletries, professional clothing, textbooks and scholarly resources for all WU and WU-affiliated students. The SOAR Center is located on the Putnam University Center's third floor. The space houses the Bearcat Pantry, Clothing Share, and First-Generation Book Drive and is maintained by committed students and advisors. Please check www.willamette.edu/go/soar for current hours of operation and email soar-center@willamette.edu for any questions or concerns.

Land Acknowledgement

We are gathered on the land of the Kalapuya, who today are represented by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians, whose relationship with this land continues to this day. We offer gratitude for the land itself, for those who have stewarded it for generations, and for the opportunity to study, learn, work, and be in community on this land. We acknowledge that our university's history, like many others, is fundamentally tied to the first colonial developments in the Willamette Valley. Finally, we respectfully acknowledge and honor past, present, and future Indigenous students of Willamette.

Religious Practice

Willamette University recognizes the value of religious practice and strives to accommodate students' commitment to their religious traditions whenever possible. Please let me know within the first two weeks of the semester if a conflict between holy days or other religious practice and full participation in the course is anticipated. I will do my best to work with you to determine a reasonable accommodation.

DACA/Undocumented Student Advocate

Willamette is committed to supporting our DACA/Undocumented students in a variety of ways. This year, Emilio Solano, Assistant Provost for Institutional Equity and Community Engagement, is the contact person for all DACA/undocumented students. Emilio can provide those students with a number of external and internal resources that are available. His contact information is esolano@willamette.edu, Office: 302 UC, Phone: 503-370-6027.

Commitment to Positive Sexual Ethics

Willamette is a community committed to fostering safe, productive learning environments, and we value ethical sexual behaviors and standards. Title IX and our school policy prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which regards sexual misconduct — including discrimination, harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We understand that sexual violence can undermine students' academic success, and we encourage affected students to talk to someone about their experiences and get the support they need. Please be aware that as a mandatory reporter I am required to report any instances you disclose to Willamette's Title IX Coordinator. If you would rather share information with a confidential employee who does not have this responsibility, please contact our confidential advocate at confidential-advocate@willamette.edu. Confidential support also can be found with SARAs and at the GRAC (503-851-4245); and at WUTalk - a 24-hour telephone crisis counseling support line (503-375-5353). If you are in immediate danger, please call campus safety at 503-370-6911.

Trans Inclusive Classroom Space

University community members will gladly honor your request to address you by your affirmed name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this at any point in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.