**Dylan, Whitman and Shakespeare – I Contain Multitudes**

Rough and Rowdy Ways - 2020

The basis of this song is Walt Whitman’s long poem Song of Myself and Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Whitman presents the self as containing everything which influences it or has brought it about. Each of us is a multiplicity.

*‘Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)’*

At one point, Dylan’s narrator likewise claims to be ‘a man of contradictions’ and to ‘contain multitudes’. It’s in this respect that the song echoes Macbeth where the two protagonists can be taken as representing the supposedly manly and womanly sides of a single person.

*I'm a man of contradictions, I'm a man of many moods  
I contain multitudes*

Bob recognises that he contains multitudes – meaning that everything that he is is a result of everything that has gone before him and will contribute to all that comes after him. As the range of his influences is so vast, he inevitably embodies contradictions

**Good vs Bad**

Just as he is a mixture of female and male characteristics, the narrator is a mixture of good and bad. On most occasions good is associated with the female part and bad with the male.

‘… just like Anne Frank – like Indiana Jones’

(The first film in the series  is set in 1936. Indiana Jones is hired by government agents to locate the Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis.)

That the narrator has a bad side is clear also from his being like:

‘… them British bad boys the Rolling Stones’.

**Youth vs Age**

The youth/age combination applies to both his male and female parts.

His male part is young in that he’ll:

*‘… rollick and frolic with all the young dudes’*

It also applies in that he’s able to distinguish between two different female components of his makeup. These are the, presumably young, ‘pretty maids’ and the ‘old queens’ who each figure in verse six.

**Time vs Eternity**

The song’s intention is to develop Whitman’s view which is partially hinted at in the opening lines:

*‘Today and tomorrow and yesterday too  
The flowers are dying like all things do’*

That there’s no actual distinction between past, present and future is further suggested by a statement that makes life, not just death, exist eternally:

*‘Everything’s flowin’*all at the same time*‘.*

That explains why the narrator sleeps:

*‘… with life and death in the same bed’*

While the song uses  Whitman’s poem as a base, it takes up where Whitman left off. It’s only at the end of his poem that Whitman acknowledges that the vast complexities in the makeup of a person are problematic in giving rise to contradictions.

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| *Today and tomorrow, and yesterday, too The flowers are dyin' like all things do Follow me close, I'm going to Balian Bali I'll lose my mind if you don't come with me I fuss with my hair, and I fight blood feuds I contain multitudes*  *Got a tell-tale heart, like Mr. Poe Got skeletons in the walls of people you know I'll drink to the truth and the things we said I'll drink to the man that shares your bed I paint landscapes, and I paint nudes I contain multitudes*  *Red Cadillac and a black mustache Rings on my fingers that sparkle and flash Tell me, what's next? What shall we do? Half my soul, baby, belongs to you I relic and I frolic with all the young dudes I contain multitudes*  *I'm just like Anne Frank, like Indiana Jones And them British bad boys, The Rolling Stones I go right to the edge, I go right to the end I go right where all things lost are made good again* | *I sing the songs of experience like William Blake I have no apologies to make Everything's flowing all at the same time I live on the boulevard of crime I drive fast cars, and I eat fast foods I contain multitudes*  *Pink petal-pushers, red blue jeans All the pretty maids, and all the old queens All the old queens from all my past lives I carry four pistols and two large knives I'm a man of contradictions, I'm a man of many moods I contain multitudes*  *You greedy old wolf, I'll show you my heart But not all of it, only the hateful part I'll sell you down the river, I'll put a price on your head What more can I tell you? I sleep with life and death in the same bed*  *Get lost, madame, get up off my knee Keep your mouth away from me I'll keep the path open, the path in my mind I'll see to it that there's no love left behind I'll play Beethoven's sonatas, and Chopin's preludes I contain multitudes* |