

Song Analysis

In *The Angler* we want to represent the four sections of the English department, and we have chosen to do this by means of approaching a songtext (Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit*) in different ways: from the different points of view of the various subjects.

You will find here an introductory essay on Jefferson Airplane for Language Acquisition; a phonemic transcription for Linguistics; an interpretation of the lyrics for Literature; and the etymologies of some selected keywords of the song for Philology.

Merel Mookhoek
The Angler, Issue 2
 May 2006

On Jefferson Airplane

You might know Jefferson Airplane from the song "Somebody to Love" and "White Rabbit", which have been their major hits.¹ The band was formed in August 1965, but their last new album (*Windows of Heaven*) was released in 1999² and in 2003 "re-mastered versions of the first four Jefferson Airplane albums were issued."³ Over the years, the members of Jefferson Airplane have changed almost continually: new people joined the band, while old members left, and then came back again. As if that wasn't complicated enough, several members started additional bands, amongst which were Starship, Jefferson Starship⁴ and Hot Tuna⁵. To make things *even* more complex, they have adopted different styles through time: they went from folk and grunting to psychedelic, hard rock and slick Adult Pop.⁶ As a reward for all their achievements Jefferson Airplane was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996.⁷

Footnotes

1. The Official Jefferson Airplane website: <http://jeffersonairplane.com>
2. The Classic Bands website: www.classicbands.com/jefferson.html
3. The Classic Bands website
4. See The Classic Bands website and www.jeffersonstarshipsf.com
5. The Classic Bands website
6. The Classic Bands website
7. The Official Jefferson Airplane website

Jefferson Airplane

White Rabbit

One pill makes you larger
 And one pill makes you small
 And the ones that mother gives you
 Don't do anything at all
 Go ask Alice
 When she's ten feet tall

And if you go chasing rabbits
 And you know you're going to fall
 Tell 'em a hookah smoking caterpillar
 Has given you the call
 Call Alice
 When she was just small

When men on the chessboard
 get up and tell you where to go
 And you've just had some kind of mushroom
 And your mind is moving low
 Go ask Alice
 I think she'll know

When logic and proportion
 Have fallen sloppy dead
 And the White Knight is talking backwards
 And the Red Queen's off with her head
 Remember what the dormouse said:
 "Feed your Head
 Feed your Head!"

Transcription

/wɛn 'lɒdʒɪk æn 'prɒpɔːʃən
 hæv 'fɔːlən 'slɒpi 'ded
 æn ðə 'waɪt 'naɪt ɪz 'tɔːkɪŋ
 'bækwɔːdz
 æn ðə 'red 'kwɪnz 'ɒf wɪð hæ
 'hed
 rɪ'membə wɒt ðə 'dɔːmaʊ 'sed
 'fiːd ʤɔː 'hed/

By Gea, checked by Bert Botma



A Close Examination

At first glance, 'White Rabbit' is a song about the adventures of Alice in Wonderland. The other meaning is somewhat more interesting; it is all about psychoactive/psychedelic experiences and the effects that drugs have on you. Whether or not it is also a "say no to drugs" song is debated among fans and pedant listeners.

Evidence for the first interpretation is rather easy to find for the people familiar with the Alice in Wonderland story. Every couplet is an allusion to the original story, for instance, we hear about the pills, the caterpillar she comes across, and the evil Red Queen she meets at the end of her adventure.

Alice's story is used as a metaphor in this song, or rather as an exemplification of how drugs can make you feel. "One pill makes you larger/One pill makes you small"; drugs can make you feel like you are on top of the world. But on the other hand, the effect may also be that you get the feeling you are nobody and then you can get seriously miserable. Vitamin pills, or perhaps prescribed medicine, have no effect on your psychological health ("The one that mother gives you/Don't do anything at all").

When you take drugs to join your friends/others ("If you go chasing rabbits"), or because you are curious (which is the reason why Alice in the story chases the white rabbit) and you begin to feel you get addicted ("And you know you're going to fall"), then go and speak out to someone. "Tell" someone you love about those friends who offer drugs, or your drive to take them. In other words "The hookah smoking caterpillar" that has "given you the call". And do it before it is too late and you are fatally addicted.

The chessboard may be referring to life, the men on it to the people in your life, who help you sober up and "tell you where to go". The "mushroom" stands for drugs you nevertheless used, which make your mind "move low". And when you are at the point that "logic and proportion" no longer seem to exist, (when you see a "White Knight" who's "talking backwards" and a headless "Red Queen") "remember what the dormouse said"; in other words keep in mind why you wanted to quit on drugs. "Dormouse" refers to you in a mental state: the one in which you actually are conscious and not high (or sleeping in the case of a dormouse), i.e. the moment you plainly can see the damage drugs causes, then "Feed your head" by thinking about all this.

Why, at least the song gives us enough food for thought...

By Tessa

Etymologies

Pill

Classical Latin *pilula* (in post-classical Latin also *pillula*, in some medieval manuscripts) little ball, pellet, especially of medicinal substances, in post-classical Latin also bullet (c1330). The Middle English form *pillem* is unexplained.

Caterpillar

(Dutch *rups*)

Generally compared with the synonymous Old French *chatepelose*, literally 'hairy or downy cat' (cf. the Scandinavian name *hairy woubit* 'woolly bear'). This is a possible source, though no connection is historically established: the final sibilant might be treated in English as a plural formative, and the supposed singular *catepelo* would be readily associated with the well-known word *pillor*, *pillour*, pillager, plunderer, spoiler. This is illustrated by the fact that in the figurative sense, *pillor* and *caterpillar* are used synonymously in a large number of parallel passages. The regular earlier spelling was with *-er*, the corruption *caterpillar*, occasional in the 17th century, was adopted by Johnson, and has since prevailed.

The giving to hairy caterpillars a name derived from the cat, is seen not only in the French word cited, but also in Lombard *gatta*, *gattola* (cat, kitten) and Swiss *teufelskatz* (devil's cat).

Sloppy

From *slop*, probably representing an Old English **sloppe* (cf. *cúsloppe*, variant of *cúslyppe*, cow-slip), related to *slyppe*, and to *slúpan* to slip.

Backwards

Originally: aphetic form of *aback-ward*; but subsequently referred directly to *back*. Primarily *abackward* differed from *aback*, in expressing direction rather than completed motion; and this still to some extent distinguishes *backward* from *back*.

Dormouse

(Dutch *zevenslaper*)

Origin obscure: the second element has been, at least since 1575, treated as the word *mouse*, with plural *mice*, though a plural *dormouses* is evidenced in the 16-17th centuries. The first element has also from the 16th century been associated with French *dormir* to sleep, (as if *dorm-mouse*; 16th century Dutch *slaep-ratte*, *slaep-muys*); but it is not certain that this is the original composition.

By Anne, with help from the OED