

Is This The End? The Doors, Vietnam, and the End of the American Experiment

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Jim Morrison said of "The End" in 1969: "Every time I hear that song, it means something else to me . . . but I see how it could be a goodbye to a kind of childhood." This cryptic reference to a loss of innocence in a song replete with references to the "king's highway," "weird scenes in a gold mine," an "ancient lake," and a violent Oedipal climax, coupled with its use as a frame for Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam masterpiece *Apocalypse Now*, led me to consider the song as an interesting challenge for an assignment in Dr. Eric Schroeder's AMS (American Studies) 110 class on American society during the 1960s.*



Our assignment was to analyze a song from the sixties in its political, social, and historical context, which was particularly fitting for the sixties since it was undoubtedly a decade of music that was reflective of the state of American society. "The End," however, proved to be particularly challenging, though I suspect Jim Morrison would not have had it any other way. Long live the Lizard King.

—Kevin Peterson

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The assignment that Kevin describes above is one I've often used in my class on the 1960s—students usually rise to its challenges and write some great papers. But when they come and ask my advice about song choices for their papers, I generally steer them clear of *The Doors* (Morrison's lyrics are very difficult to pin down) and always discourage them from taking on "The End" (in the past I thought it might be a good topic for an MA thesis but not a four-page paper). Luckily, Kevin didn't ask me for advice. He went head-to-head with "The End," building a critique of the song located firmly*

in the social and political history of the period, using several drafts to do this. The result is a paper that not only provides a close reading of the song but in doing so also helps illuminate why the song was such a favorite with the counterculture by showing us its appeal through its rejection of middle class values and beliefs.

—Eric Schroeder, University Writing Program



FOR ALL OF ITS HORRENDOUS BRUTALITY and massive devastation, its international scope, and its polarizing quality, the Vietnam War was, more than anything, a crisis of American identity. It saw a mass civilian mobilization of protest that spawned from other movements of the 1960s, most clearly from the civil rights movement, with such far-reaching influence as to affect the very literature, film, and music of American society. One band that was particularly influenced by the conflict in Vietnam was The Doors, who in 1967 released their eponymous debut, *The Doors*. Widely hailed as one of the crowning works of the 1960s “counterculture” movement, *The Doors* addresses many issues that were on the minds of the American public during the decade. The album features numerous hits from the 1960s, but the final track, “The End,” is by far the most controversial—and therefore most appropriate—song to encompass the cultural response not only to the war in Vietnam but also to the so-called counterculture movement in general. Through its references to an apocalypse, “The End” accurately assesses not only the war in Vietnam, but also how this conflict was reflective of a larger ideological conflict that affected all levels of American society, heralding the end of American society as it was and the development of a new society and national identity.

“The End” opens with lead singer Jim Morrison crooning “This is the end / Beautiful friend / This is the end / My only friend.” This blunt statement is significant for two reasons. First, it highlights “the end” of something, this something left purposefully and effectively ambiguous. Secondly, it addresses the speaker’s “only friend,” with an ambiguity that is perhaps alluding to the widespread isolation many people in American society felt in America during the chaotic events of the 1960s. This isolation was most certainly felt by those in the counterculture movement, as they intentionally separated themselves from the vast majority of the people because of their opposition to the dominant cultural values which,

in their eyes, led to the conflict in Vietnam. The scope of “the end” is expanded from this personal dynamic to that of a larger, perhaps societal, level as Morrison describes the end “Of our elaborate plans . . . of everything that stands,” suggesting the collapse of something clearly ideological (elaborate plans), which may refer to the American government itself, and something apocalyptically physical (everything that stands) which in the context of the Vietnam War could refer to Vietnam itself. This concept is strengthened as the speaker mentions the goal of what has seemingly ended, when he asks the listener to “picture what will be / So limitless and free,” and ambiguously alludes to “a desperate land” that is “Desperately in need of some stranger’s hand.” This pairing of a utopian vision of a “limitless and free” democracy with the foreboding reference of foreign intervention in “a desperate land” draws attention to the possibility that America’s involvement in Vietnam is the reason why it has been derailed in its quest to have a society “so limitless and free.”

This sentiment was emphatically stated by Paul Potter, the president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), in his April 1965 address at the Washington Monument, in which he stated his belief that “the incredible war in Vietnam had provided the razor, the terrifying sharp cutting edge that has finally severed the last vestiges of illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy” (qtd. in Farber 138–39). However, in “The End” this “desperate land” is left ambiguous, adding a general sense desperation to the song, which would certainly appeal to people who were dissatisfied with many aspects of American culture. On the one hand, Vietnam was certainly desperate as it was in the throes of a civil war. On the other hand, many people (if not all) included in the “counterculture” movement saw America as desperately in need of redirection, or perhaps complete abandonment, leading them to protest all policies of the American government, Vietnam in particular. This protest was a sign, and a direct result, of “the end” of a certain aspect of America’s role in the world, as many Americans (Potter included) felt that the American government was no longer a bastion of liberty but perhaps a scheming bureaucracy guided by self-interest.

“The End” also satirically anticipates the response of the American government in response to such claims, with Morrison claiming “The west is the best / The west is the best / Get here, and we’ll do the rest.” Such superiority was no doubt spoon-fed to the soldiers that were sent to

Vietnam, as they were repeatedly confronted with the patriotic messages of the Presidents who had gotten them into Vietnam, from Eisenhower's declaration that "the loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have consequences for us and freedom," to John F. Kennedy's assertion that "the United States is determined to help Vietnam preserve its independence, protect its people against communist assassins, and build a better life through economic growth" (qtd. in Farber 117). The American men who fought in Vietnam responded to the satirical messages in the music of artists like Jimi Hendrix and The Doors partly because of "their ferocious sound" but mostly because of "the nihilistic and/or anarchic sentiments evident in some of their lyrics; such qualities struck many soldiers as grimly appropriate to the environment in which they found themselves" (Hillstrom 292–93).

The Doors commented further on the so-called soldier's situation in "The End," singing that "The blue bus is calling us" and asking "Driver where you taking us?" CHECK The term "blue bus" refers to the buses that took drafted men to basic training, as is mentioned by William Caughey in his "A War Story," and the apparent ignorance of the soldier asking "where you taking us?" CHECK reflects what historian James William Gibson explains about the ignorance of what going to Vietnam really meant, that "much [of] war culture [reflected] upon the 'unreality' of Vietnam, the sense in which nothing seemed to meet preconceived concepts of rationality" (qtd. in Hillstrom 6–7). More generally, however, the ignorance of the narrator on the ambiguous blue bus may be a broader reference to America in general, as many people felt as though the American government was "steering" the country to ruin and thus came to protest the policies of this seemingly overwhelmed bureaucracy. The speaker then abruptly shifts from the naïve draftee to the seasoned killer, who is described "[awakening] before dawn, [putting] his boots on / [and taking] a face from the ancient gallery," harkening to the ancient times of empire and conquest, when the soldier would wear a mask so as to not face the reality of his gruesome battle. This predicament was certainly true of the Vietnam experience in the sense that soldiers were forced to detach themselves from the violence they were forced to commit since they were faced with the goal of raising the "body count" of the Vietnamese population (civilian or otherwise) and "[depriving] the enemy of the population" (qtd. in Farber 153). However, the listener

soon learns that this killer is not going to battle, but “into the room where his sister lived, and then he / Paid a visit to his brother, and then he / He walked on down the hall, and / He came to a door . . . and he looked inside” (Doors). The killer then addresses his father, who responds “yes son?” to which he responds “I want to kill you.” He then addresses his mother, saying “I want to . . . fuck you,” alluding to Sophocles’ drama *Oedipus Rex*, in which the title character inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother. This seemingly incestuous verse seems to highlight a key concept of the counterculture movement, or as Paul Rothchild, The Doors’ producer, explains:

“Kill the father” means kill all of those things in yourself which are instilled in you and not yourself . . . those things must die. The psychedelic revolution. “Fuck the mother” means get back to the essence . . . the reality . . . Kill the alien concepts, get back to reality . . . to the beginning of personal concepts. Get to reality, get to your own in-touch-with-yourself situation. (qtd. in Riordan and Prochnicky 131)

Thus Morrison emphasizes the need to return to your own personal values, as opposed to those established by a society that had gone so terribly wrong as to send its own people to fight and die in a war in Vietnam. This truly terrifying situation for the soldiers in Vietnam would seem to point to “the end” that The Doors were singing of, whether through the “end” of conventional warfare, the “end” of a pure American purpose, or the “end” of the world itself.

As the lengthy song comes to a close, the speaker implores the listener, in a sadistic tone, to “C’mon baby, take a chance with us . . . and meet me at the back of the blue bus,” as if the speaker is now displaying a morbid enthusiasm and disillusionment with the experience and feels that the only alternative to the dominant culture is violence. This disturbing mindset is reinforced by the chanting of “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill” followed by a reprise of the address to “my beautiful friend,” emphasizing that “This is the end.” The speaker then laments that “It hurts to set you free / But you’ll never follow me,” which in the context of the counterculture movement could mean a specific address to the very society the speaker is rejecting, as well as referring to the “setting free” of the “traditional” American values by the youth, since they “believed that the ‘traditional’ verities and ‘traditional’ values of American life were what had produced the war in Vietnam,” leading to a move “from protest

to resistance” (Farber 165–168). This radical reorientation and abandoning of values by a small but extremely vocal segment of America’s youth signaled the “end” of America in the eyes of this seemingly betrayed segment of the population. As Paul Potter, the president of the SDS, stated in the same 1965 Washington Monument speech, the hypocrisy of America would continue as long as it “still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world,” while it left “millions upon millions of people . . . impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society” and “consistently [put] material values before human values” (qtd. in Farber 139). These accusations, though debatable, certainly made it appear as though the so-called American experiment—that is to say, a truly democratic society—had failed because of the federal government’s response to Vietnam.

The Doors sang “The End” to an America wanting justification for its anger and frustration. As violence and hopelessness in Vietnam increased, it seems that so did people’s disillusionment with both the government and the concept of America itself. Instead of inspiring patriotism in a time of American global supremacy against communism, the war in Vietnam polarized the population, threw the very concept of a true democracy into question, and to some heralded the very “end” of civilization itself. The Doors provided this dispossessed group with the very nihilism and dejection they felt as they watched their country’s fabric weaken, and they recognized the Vietnam experience for what it truly was, the end—the end of the illusion of a steadfastly right and just America and the beginning of an actively critical society, with citizens who had seen what an unchecked bureaucracy could really do.



The End

The Doors, from *The Doors* (1967)

This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end
Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end
No safety or surprise, the end
I’ll never look into your eyes . . . again

Can you picture what will be
So limitless and free
Desperately in need . . . of some . . . stranger's hand
In a . . . desperate land ?

Lost in a roman . . . wilderness of pain
And all the children are insane
All the children are insane
Waiting for the summer rain, yeah

There's danger on the edge of town
Ride the King's highway, baby
Weird scenes inside the gold mine
Ride the highway west, baby

Ride the snake, ride the snake
To the lake, the ancient lake, baby
The snake is long, seven miles
Ride the snake . . . he's old, and his skin is cold

The west is the best
The west is the best
Get here, and we'll do the rest

The blue bus is callin' us
The blue bus is callin' us
Driver, where you taken' us ?

The killer awoke before dawn, he put his boots on
He took a face from the ancient gallery
And he walked on down the hall
He went into the room where his sister lived, and . . . then he
Paid a visit to his brother, and then he
He walked on down the hall, and
And he came to a door . . . and he looked inside
"Father ?" "yes son" "I want to kill you"
"Mother? . . . I want to . . . fuck you"

C'mon baby, take a chance with us
C'mon baby, take a chance with us
C'mon baby, take a chance with us

And meet me at the back of the blue bus
Doin' a blue rock, On a blue bus
Doin' a blue rock, C'mon, yeah

Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill

This is the end, Beautiful friend
This is the end, My only friend, the end

It hurts to set you free
But you'll never follow me
The end of laughter and soft lies
The end of nights we tried to die

This is the end



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