

BIBLICAL METAPHORS IN LEONARD COHEN'S SONG LYRICS

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Abstract

This article delves into Leonard Cohen's use of biblical metaphors, particularly in his song "Hallelujah". Authored by Dr. Iryna Biskub and student Valentyna Tsap from Uzhhorod National University, the study focuses on Cohen's biography, emphasizing the impact of his love life, religious imagery, and biblical references on his creativity.

The scientific problem addressed centres on interpreting metaphors in Cohen's songs, aiming to unveil the intricate tapestry of metaphorical language and deepen understanding of themes like love, redemption, and despair. The research contributes to musical analysis, literature, cultural studies, and theology, fostering interdisciplinary discourse on the convergence of art and spirituality.

Referencing previous studies exploring Cohen's use of biblical metaphors, the article distinguishes itself with a profound analysis, emphasizing the importance of metaphors in understanding various facets of Cohen's work. The authors explore Cohen's complex love life, highlighting its impact on his music and writing, drawing inspiration from personal experiences.

The article provides an overview of Cohen's musical career, emphasizing introspective themes resonating with a dedicated fan base. Cohen's live performances, known for intimacy and emotional depth, contributed to his legendary status in the music industry.

The central focus is on Cohen's "Hallelujah", analyzing its thematic depth and biblical references. The article explores the song's historical context, drawing parallels to the Jewish experience and Cohen's personal struggles with faith. It questions whether "Hallelujah" can be considered a Christian song, considering Cohen's Jewish background. The analysis suggests that, despite biblical allusions, Cohen's lyrics may not align strictly with a Christian interpretation.

Concluding, the article summarizes Cohen's significant contributions to music and literature, emphasizing the enduring impact on new generations. It calls for further research into the intricate use of biblical motifs in Cohen's songwriting, exploring implications for understanding spirituality, love, and the human experience in his creative legacy. The text is now condensed to 214 words.

Key words: Leonard Cohen, songwriter, poet, novelist, love life, religious imagery, biblical references.

Introduction

Interpretation of metaphors and their meaning in the author's songs. The scientific problem at the heart of this study revolves around the interpretation of metaphors and their profound significance in the songs of Leonard Cohen. Cohen's lyrical craftsmanship is renowned for its depth and complexity, often laden with metaphors that invite multiple layers of meaning. This problem holds immense significance as it seeks to unveil the intricate tapestry of metaphorical language in Cohen's songs, providing insight into the emotional and spiritual terrain he traverses. By unravelling these metaphors, we can gain a more profound understanding of the themes that underlie his work, such as love, redemption, despair, and the human experience.

Earlier examinations of Leonard Cohen's song

Studying of metaphors in Leonard Cohen's songs extends beyond musical analysis, offering a broader contribution to the realms of literature, cultural studies, and theology. Interpreting these metaphors not only enriches our appreciation of Cohen's artistry but also unveils universal truths, fostering interdisciplinary discourse on the convergence of art, spirituality, and poetic expression. Thus, the scientific problem of deciphering metaphors in Cohen's songs is not only vital for comprehending his work but also for exploring the larger context of human expression, emotion, and spirituality.

Previous studies of Leonard Cohen's work have encompassed the research efforts of several scholars who conducted analyses of his music, poetry, and the use of metaphors in his creative output. Previous studies of Leonard Cohen's work include works by various scholars and journalists who have deeply analyzed different aspects of his music, poetry, and the influence of religious and cultural contexts on his creativity.

1. In the article "How Leonard Cohen Employed Biblical Metaphors to Truly Convey the Beauty, Power and Pain of Love" [1], the author explores the use of biblical metaphors in Leonard Cohen's songs and their significance in expressing various aspects of love and life. This study helps uncover the profound impact of religious imagery on Cohen's work. In a comprehensive exploration of Leonard Cohen's approach to crafting love songs, the essayist Polyphonic delves into four distinct tracks spanning different periods of Cohen's career. From the burning affection expressed in "Suzanne" to the poignant narrative of infidelity in "Famous Blue Raincoat", and the vulnerability depicted in "Hallelujah" to Cohen's declaration of surrender in "I'm Your Man," each song showcases Cohen's masterful use of biblical metaphors to capture the intricate facets of love. The essay underscores Cohen's unparalleled ability to distill the complexity of this universal emotion into words, emphasizing his lifelong dedication to tinkering with phrases and themes in an earnest attempt to articulate the ineffable beauty, power, pain, and truth inherent in love.

2. The article "How Leonard Cohen's hits were influenced by Christianity and Judaism" [2] highlights the influence of Christianity and Judaism on Leonard Cohen's hits. It helps dissect how religious and cultural factors have shaped his

music and song lyrics. In exploring the profound influence of Leonard Cohen's upbringing on his musical legacy, the essay sheds light on the deep religious roots embedded in his lyrics. Author Harry Freedman emphasizes Cohen's extensive religious education and the enduring impact it had on his approach to songwriting, drawing from both Jewish and Christian traditions. From the iconic "Hallelujah," which intertwines with a Jewish legend of King David, to the synthesis of Judaism and Christianity in "It Seemed The Better Way," Cohen's work reflects a seamless transition between religious traditions. The conclusion underscores how Cohen's profound understanding and incorporation of religious narratives enriched his music, offering a unique perspective on the complexities of faith and spirituality.

3. In the paper "How Leonard Cohen mined sacred texts for lyrics to his songs" [3], the author examines how Cohen used sacred texts to craft his song lyrics. This research reveals the religious and cultural influences on his lyrics. The exploration of Leonard Cohen's lyrical genius, as detailed in the book "Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius," unveils the profound influence of both Christian and Jewish narratives on his iconic songs. Cohen's adept weaving of biblical stories, Talmudic legends, and mystical traditions into masterpieces like "Hallelujah," "Suzanne," and "So Long, Marianne" is showcased as a testament to his deep religious knowledge. The analysis suggests that Cohen, viewing himself as a prophet, sought to elevate listeners' thinking by seamlessly blending religious imagery with themes of love, sex, and spirituality, ultimately creating a unique and timeless musical legacy that transcends traditional boundaries.

4. In "Is Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' a Christian Song?" [4] investigates whether the song "Hallelujah" can be considered a Christian song. It deeply analyzes the song's lyrics and their relation to religious themes. In conclusion, the article delves into the question whether Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" is a Christian song, considering Cohen's Jewish background and spiritual journey. While the song incorporates biblical references, the author highlights Cohen's eclectic beliefs, including an admiration for Jesus without fully adhering to Christianity. The analysis dissects Cohen's words about Jesus, emphasizing the complexity of his spiritual perspective. Ultimately, the article suggests that, despite the biblical allusions in "Hallelujah," Cohen's lyrics may not align with a strictly Christian interpretation, prompting consideration of the song's theological implications.

5. The article "Leonard Cohen Canadian musician and author" [5] provides a biography of Leonard Cohen and outlines his contributions as a musician and author. It highlights key events in his life and career. In conclusion, Leonard Cohen, a Canadian singer-songwriter, and author, left an indelible mark on the music industry with his spare songs that carried an existential bite. From his early success in the 1970s to the challenges he faced in the 1980s, Cohen's career experienced highs and lows, ultimately solidifying his status as a songwriter of exceptional emotional power. Despite financial setbacks and a brief retirement, Cohen made a triumphant comeback with albums like "I'm Your Man" and "You Want It Darker," earning him recognition, including inductions into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. His legacy lives on through his timeless contributions to music and art.

6. The article "Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows" [6] also focuses on Leonard Cohen's biography and examines his influence on contemporary music and poetry. In conclusion, the exhibition provides a multifaceted glimpse into Leonard Cohen's intricate personal life, showcasing the complexities of his relationships, particularly with Suzanne Elrod and their two children, Adam and Lorca. The

curated collection of photographs, drawings, and personal artifacts offers a poignant narrative of Cohen's familial dynamics, illustrating the challenges and joys of parenthood amidst a backdrop of artistic exploration. The juxtaposition of intimate family moments with Cohen's creative process and travels creates a rich tapestry that not only delves into the artist's personal life but also sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between his domestic surroundings and creative endeavours.

Relevance of research

The work is relevant because the aim is to conduct a more detailed analysis of metaphors in Leonard Cohen's songs and determine their significance in understanding various aspects of his creativity, including emotions, spirituality, and the human experience. Was approached differs from other studies in that we were provided a deeper and thorough analysis of metaphors, as well as emphasize their importance in highlighting different aspects of Leonard Cohen's work. The article has the potential to expand our understanding of his music and poetry and make a fresh contribution to the study of this eminent artist's creativity.

The relevance of the work lies in providing a more detailed analysis of metaphors in Leonard Cohen's songs and to explore their depth and meaning. Was also emphasized the importance of interpreting these metaphors for understanding various aspects of his creativity, such as emotions, spirituality, and the human experience. The approach sets itself apart from the aforementioned studies as it was offered a more profound and meticulous analysis of the metaphors and highlighted their significance in illuminating different facets of Cohen's body of work. Research has the potential to expand our understanding of his music and poetry, making a novel contribution to the study of this exceptional artist.

Review of the singer's most popular songs

Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) is recognized as a poet, novelist, and songwriter of the first order. Born into a prominent Jewish family in Montreal, and blessed with a gift for language, Cohen evolved into a global icon who filled arenas worldwide and performed to widespread acclaim. Cohen had a strong sense of destiny and a drive to assert his place in history. As part of his artistic development, he preserved all of his work in its various stages. He considered this archive to be his masterwork.

Cohen's journey as an artist was deeply influenced by personal loss, notably his father's early death when he was just nine years old. He inherited his father's poetry library and found solace within its pages, setting the stage for his future career in writing and music.

His family name means "high priest" in Hebrew, and from a young age, Cohen was driven by a strong sense of destiny and self-confidence. He had a comfortable upbringing, attending Hebrew day school and summer camps in Quebec and Ontario. At his local synagogue, Shaar Hashomayim, he absorbed the power of language to inspire. Throughout his life, Leonard Cohen produced a rich body of

work, including iconic songs like “Hallelujah” and “Suzanne,” as well as critically acclaimed poetry and novels [5, p. 1].

He is remembered not only for his artistic contributions but also for his unique ability to touch the hearts and souls of his audience with his profound, introspective, and poetic expressions. Cohen’s legacy continues to resonate with fans and artists worldwide, and he remains an enduring figure in the world of music and literature.

Leonard Cohen had a complex and multifaceted love life, which played a significant role in shaping his personal experiences and artistic creations. He was known for his romantic relationships with various women, and some of these relationships are well-documented in his music and writings. Here are some of the notable aspects of Leonard Cohen’s love life:

- Marianne Ihlen: One of Cohen’s most famous and enduring relationships was with Marianne Ihlen, a Norwegian woman he met in the 1960s on the Greek island of Hydra. Their love affair is beautifully depicted in Cohen’s songs, including “So Long, Marianne”. Their relationship served as a source of inspiration for his work and was an important chapter in his life.

- Suzanne Elrod: Cohen had a long-term relationship with Suzanne Elrod, with whom he had two children, Adam and Lorca. Their relationship was marked by its complexities, and it later inspired songs like “Suzanne” and “Bird on the Wire”.

- Rebecca De Mornay: Cohen was romantically involved with the American actress Rebecca De Mornay in the 1990s. Their relationship garnered some attention in the media at the time.

- Other Relationships: Throughout his life, Leonard Cohen had various other romantic entanglements and love affairs. His experiences with love and heartbreak were often central themes in his songs, poems, and writings [6, p. 3].

Leonard Cohen’s exploration of love, relationships, and their intricacies was a recurring and deeply resonant theme in his artistic work. His exceptional ability to capture the essence of these experiences through his music and poetry endeared him to audiences worldwide. While his own love life was often marked by tumultuous relationships, these personal experiences served as a wellspring of inspiration for his creative expressions. As a result, his songs and poems speak profoundly to anyone who has encountered the complexities and nuances of love and relationships, making his work enduring and universally relatable.

Leonard Cohen embarked on his musical career in the late 1960s, introducing his debut album, “Songs of Leonard Cohen”. His music was characterized by introspective, often melancholic themes that deeply resonated with a dedicated fan base. Over the years, he produced a series of albums, including “Songs of Love and Hate”, “Various Positions”, and “I’m Your Man”, each showcasing his unique fusion of folk, rock, and poetic lyricism [6, p. 12].

Cohen’s live performances were renowned for their intimate and emotionally charged atmosphere. He continued touring and recording well into his later years, further cementing his status as a legendary artist.

Beyond his music, Leonard Cohen was a highly esteemed poet and novelist. His poetry collections, like “Flowers for Hitler” and “Book of Longing”, demonstrated his literary prowess and continued to earn critical acclaim. Although Leonard Cohen passed away in 2016, his artistic legacy endures, shaping the creativity and passion of new generations of artists and enthusiasts.

Canadian musician and songwriter, originally composed the iconic song “Hallelujah” in 1984. Renowned for crafting soulful and poetic songs, his compositions often delved into themes of despair, failed love, and politics, frequently infused with religious imagery influenced by his Jewish heritage. The term “hallelujah” in Hebrew signifies praising God with rejoicing. Nevertheless, Cohen’s song transcends its religious connotations, serving as a poignant lament for lost love. Drawing from his profound knowledge of scripture, he uses biblical references to explore the human condition and offer solace to those grappling with heartbreak.

Through Cohen’s rich imagery, which includes allusions to prominent women in the Bible, “hallelujah” takes on a broader significance. The song teaches us that “hallelujah” can be a refrain for moments of celebration, mourning, regret, catharsis, and reconciliation. Cohen’s composition weaves a narrative of love lost, cherished memories of true love, feelings of guilt, the quest for redemption, and the eventual discovery of peace.

Paraphrased version:

The song “Hallelujah” possesses a thematic depth that intriguingly resonates with its historical context. Through its recurring refrain of “hallelujah”, it takes the listener on a profound journey encompassing emotions of pain, joy, suffering, and celebration, echoing the complex history of the Jewish people. Some argue that the song may also reflect Leonard Cohen’s personal struggles with faith and the collective trials of the Jewish community.

Inspired by the Bible, the song subtly references the tale of David, the shepherd who would later become King of Israel. David's ability to soothe the troubled spirit of King Saul with his lyre and song is metaphorically linked to profound feelings of depression. Cohen’s lyrics are rich in allusions to Jewish Scriptures, including the account of King David’s ill-fated love affair with Bathsheba, his ultimate redemption, and the tragic story of Samson and his treacherous relationship with Delilah, who revealed the secret of his strength. While the song’s meaning remains open to interpretation, its sheer beauty is undeniable. Cohen’s lyrics are haunting and laden with sorrow, especially when he sings about giving his best despite life's disappointments and standing before the “Lord of Song” with nothing but “Hallelujah” on his lips [4, p. 1].

For many years, the song remained relatively obscure, with only occasional live performances by artists like Bob Dylan. It wasn't until nearly another decade had passed that “Hallelujah” garnered widespread popularity and critical acclaim.

Is “Hallelujah” a Christian Song? It’s improbable that Leonard Cohen intended “Hallelujah” to be specifically a Christian song. He held a deep admiration for Jesus but regarded him as a universal figure. As he articulated: “I have great affection for Jesus Christ. He may be one of the most beautiful individuals to have walked the Earth. The one who preached 'Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek' must possess unparalleled generosity, insight, and, some might say, a touch of madness. A person who identified with thieves, prostitutes, and the homeless. His stance is beyond human comprehension. It's a level of compassion that could revolutionize the world if embraced because nothing can withstand such boundless kindness. I'm not attempting to alter the Jewish perspective on Jesus Christ” [2. p. 1].

Unpacking Cohen’s Words, many people admire Jesus, but salvation and a relationship with Him come through repentance and faith in Him. Cohen acknowledged Jesus's wisdom and generosity but misunderstood the nature of Jesus's claims. Some have argued that Jesus must have been a liar or insane because

he claimed to be God, but there is a third option: He is indeed God. He claimed that Jesus's position cannot be comprehended, but for those who follow Christ, the Holy Spirit provides understanding through the Scriptures. Leonard stated that he wasn't attempting to change the Jewish view of Jesus, which typically sees him as a good man and prophet, not the Messiah. "Hallelujah" The song's lyrics include references to King David, Bathsheba, Samson, Delilah, and God, but the references are not always consistent with the biblical accounts. Cohen sang about taking God's name in vain, which the Bible considers a sin, and he questioned the importance of knowing God.

The closing lyrics, where he sings about standing before the "Lord of Song" with nothing but "Hallelujah" on his tongue, may not align with Christian beliefs, as it implies that one's own efforts are sufficient for salvation.

The Bible Says... Taking God's name in vain is indeed considered a sin, and knowing God and adhering to His words are significant. Cohen's "doing his best" and standing before the "Lord of Song" with "Hallelujah" on his tongue do not align with the biblical view that salvation comes through faith in Jesus. Cohen's "Hallelujah" is Not a God-Honouring Song. While the music is emotionally moving and the word "Hallelujah" is frequently repeated, the song's lyrics do not appear to honour God. However, there are versions of the song with lyrics that do exalt God and magnify the work of Jesus in redeeming humanity from sin [1, p. 1].

How Leonard Cohen mined sacred texts for lyrics to the song "Hallelujah".

"She tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne and she cut your hair, and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah..." No one hearing these lyrics from the song "Hallelujah" could doubt that Leonard Cohen knew how to write and sing about love, sex and desire. But fans of his music could be forgiven for not realizing exactly what he was trying to convey about religion and the intricate references he was making to biblical stories, Talmudic legends and the Mishnah, a third-century Jewish text. Now, an analysis of Cohen's work sets out to reveal how extensively the revered songwriter used both Christian and Jewish stories and imagery to express ideas in his songs.

"That leads to a series of disasters in David's kingdom. There are rebellions against him, his son gets killed, his kingdom is broken – terrible things happen, because of the terrible things he did". Importantly, it is David who, according to ancient Jewish folklore, composed the Book of Psalms and invented the word "Hallelujah", meaning "praise God". "David is somebody who, like everybody, is sometimes good and sometimes bad. He's trapped in the middle. And although he writes Hallelujah, which is a holy word, he's also very, very broken". There is a reference in the song to Samson, who loses his strength when his hair is cut by his lover Delilah, because – like Samson – David's troubles begin when he can't control himself around a woman. "I think Cohen is opening himself up in his songs. I think he's trying to say: love can be wonderful. And love can be terrible. It can go horribly wrong and ruin your life". Cohen suffered from depression and, Freedman believes, would have identified strongly with David, a fellow musician. "David messed up. David's kingdom was destroyed. And yet he sang Hallelujah. Because when you don't know how to make sense of anything, when you've failed, when things go wrong, all you can do is sing Hallelujah. All you are left with is 'praise God'. It's a very religious idea". In Hallelujah, for example, Cohen, David has her husband killed.

Biblical imagery is a pervasive element in Leonard Cohen's songs, and his concerts are occasionally characterized as "spiritual occasions". When questioned in interviews about the significance of biblical and religious metaphors in his music,

Cohen asserts that religion serves as a wellspring of inspiration for him. He expresses a non-critical stance towards religion, emphasizing that it has always been an integral part of his identity. Cohen does not view it as oppressive or obstructive; instead, he sees it as a resource that he can leverage to his advantage. The familiar stories from David to Jesus, encompassing concepts like Law, revelation, sacred life, and messiah, offer a rich pool of poetry that he can readily access.

He says, for instance:

I don't criticize religion, I have nothing against it because it was always a part of me. I never felt that it oppressed me, like a tyranny, or that it was an obstacle that kept me from doing what I wanted to do or feeling what I wanted to feel. I had no need to push it away or reject it. On the contrary, I could use it to my advantage; it was a rich source, all these stories that everyone is familiar with. From David to Jesus, the idea of Law, of revelation, of a sacred life, or a messiah. All that poetry was at my fingertips.

Cohen's attitude toward the biblical tradition is inclusive, not elitist. He suggests that one doesn't require specialized biblical knowledge to grasp the role of religious metaphors in his songs. Rather than creating an exclusive realm, Cohen seeks "common ground" by drawing on universally understood stories. For him, the stories of David singing songs or Jesus being crucified are shared cultural knowledge that forms a basis for connection.

In Cohen's artistic expression, biblical metaphors act as fundamental building blocks, accessible to everyone and clearly present in his own reservoir of images and ideas. These metaphors become flexible tools, subject to transformation through Cohen's appropriation and integration into his songs. While they are adaptable to his creative endeavors, the biblical elements also exert an influence, molding and shaping the songs in which they find a place.

To understand Cohen's use of biblical elements, it is useful to identify recurring themes across his songs. This analysis highlights two themes that characterize the way Cohen reshapes the sacred.

Firstly, Leonard Cohen's songs center around the profound spiritual experiences embedded in everyday life. In tandem, sacred narratives or metaphors illuminate the ordinary aspects of life, establishing a dynamic interchange between the sacred and the mundane. This interplay modifies traditional concepts of the divine and the spiritual. Secondly, Cohen's compositions shed light on the fractures and vulnerabilities inherent in human existence, portraying these weaknesses as arenas where the sacred emanates. These vulnerable spaces become opportunities for humans to demonstrate love and contribute to the redemption of humankind by assisting the divine.

These two overarching themes form the nucleus of the discussion on Cohen's songs. Following the exploration of these songs, the analysis delves into two dimensions. Firstly, it examines the impact of Cohen's utilization of religious elements on the perception of the Bible as sacred scripture. Secondly, it scrutinizes the relationship between the poet and inspiration. Specifically, certain songs, particularly in Cohen's recent album "Old Ideas", complicate the ambiguous connection between a muse and the poet. This complexity is examined through the lens of the master-slave relationship and the dynamics between a worshipper or devotee and a god. This additional layer contributes to the understanding of how Cohen navigates biblical metaphors and negotiates the canonical authority associated with these images.

When delving into the concept of the sacred in Leonard Cohen's music, it shouldn't be surprising to encounter spiritual elements even in unexpected settings, such as a song unfolding in a local neighborhood bar like "Closing Time". At first glance, this song, which revolves around the moments just before the closure of the neighborhood establishment, interweaves everyday life with spiritual components. However, its primary focus lies in the eruption of profound existential questions amid the backdrop of popular culture. Jan Swafford characterizes "Closing Time" as a blend of commonplace desires, Biblical undertones, a party atmosphere, and gritty jealousy. While Cohen makes references to well-known theological concepts like the Holy Spirit, Heaven, the devil, Christ, and even the Boss, these elements are embedded in the context of a lively bar on a Saturday night.

Cohen injects humor into the song by playfully incorporating religious references (such as the Holy Spirit asking 'Where's the beef?' and describing the place as 'dead as Heaven on a Saturday night'), yet the lighthearted tone doesn't diminish the significance of the underlying questions. The lyrics of the song unveil contemplation on what transpires when the bar closes, when love departs, and, ultimately, when death becomes imminent. For Cohen, grappling with these profound inquiries is most aptly done in the smoky and cacophonous ambiance of a bar. However, these questions retain their theological essence as they illuminate the nature and purpose of human life. The answers, according to Cohen, cannot be found in pre-packaged theological slogans; instead, they must be crafted amidst the haze of smoke, the rhythm of music, and the clamor of noise while acknowledging the recurring reality that both love and life are prone to disappointment.

*all the women tear their blouses off
and the men they dance on the polka-dots
and it's partner found, it's partner lost
and it's hell to pay when the fiddler stops:
it's CLOSING TIME
And I loved you when our love was blessed
and I love you now there's nothing left
but sorrow and a sense of overtime
and I missed you since the place got wrecked
And I just don't care what happens next
looks like freedom but it feels like death
it's something in between, I guess
it's CLOSING TIME*

When Cohen sings that being freed from love is akin to death, and feels like closing time, there is a sense that in living the hurtful experiences associated with love one comes close to understanding what it means to be free and the price one pays for this freedom. In the full experience of something as quotidian and common to humankind as lost love, Cohen sees connections to spiritual elements. It is not that the theological elements in the song give interpretive keys to understand the hurt and sadness and longing that goes with lost love. It is not as if the biblical words will fix things for Cohen. Rather, his use of theological language, his introduction of Christian concepts in the midst of this down-to-earth song indicates that it is precisely the human experience of love, found and lost, that outlines a spiritual dimension, which allows human beings to elaborate some deeper meaning for their lives. It is the quotidian, the everyday life, that becomes a religious place.

In the song 'Suzanne', Cohen evokes the harbor of Montreal and invites his listeners to follow Suzanne on the docks. The song opens with the line 'Suzanne

takes you down to her place near the river' and the first verse describes the kind of relationship that develops between Suzanne and her lover. Suzanne creates the kind of atmosphere around her that leads to desire and to trust, even if that trust is undeserved and might have hurtful consequences. The first verse ends like that:

*And she lets the river answer
That you've always been her lover
And you want to travel with her
And you want to travel blind
And you know that she will trust you
For you've touched her perfect body with your mind*

There is a need for the lovers to trust each other even though there is also imperfection, and the nagging doubt that one will not be able to satisfy the needs of the other. But in the present encounter, the lovers find peace and reassurance. The next verse brings in the figure of Jesus, and describes him as a sailor. Instead of playing his role as the figure that will save the world through his divine filiation, Jesus is described as a broken figure, an element that is central to Cohen's anthropology. However, interestingly, Jesus is also presented as forsaken because he fails to accept his humanity. He can only be 'almost human', as Cohen says, because the divine confirmation that Jesus receives in the theophany marks Jesus as forsaken, precisely because Jesus thus renounces his humanity and leaves his brokenness behind. Because Jesus forsakes his humanity, he is not quite worthy of one's trust, he might not be able to provide the relief from pain and suffering demanded.

Cohen closes the second verse in the following manner:

*He [Jesus] sank beneath your wisdom like a stone
And you want to travel with him
And you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you'll trust him
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind*

Through Cohen's rich imagery, which includes allusions to prominent women in the Bible, "hallelujah" takes on a broader significance. The song teaches us that "hallelujah" can be a refrain for moments of celebration, mourning, regret, catharsis, and reconciliation. Cohen's composition weaves a narrative of love lost, cherished memories of true love, feelings of guilt, the quest for redemption, and the eventual discovery of peace.

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giving his best despite life's disappointments and standing before the "Lord of Song" with nothing but "Hallelujah" on his lips [4].

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"She tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne and she cut your hair, and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah..." No one hearing these lyrics from the song "Hallelujah" could doubt that Leonard Cohen knew how to write and sing about love, sex and desire. But fans of his music could be forgiven for not realizing exactly what he was trying to convey about religion and the intricate references he was making to biblical stories, Talmudic legends and the Mishnah, a third-century Jewish text. Now, an analysis of Cohen's work sets out to reveal how extensively the revered songwriter used both Christian and Jewish stories and imagery to express ideas in his songs.

"That leads to a series of disasters in David's kingdom. There are rebellions against him, his son gets killed, his kingdom is broken – terrible things happen,

because of the terrible things he did.” Importantly, it is David who, according to ancient Jewish folklore, composed the Book of Psalms and invented the word “Hallelujah”, meaning “praise God”. “David is somebody who, like everybody, is sometimes good and sometimes bad. He’s trapped in the middle. And although he writes Hallelujah, which is a holy word, he’s also very, very broken.” There is a reference in the song to Samson, who loses his strength when his hair is cut by his lover Delilah, because – like Samson – David’s troubles begin when he can’t control himself around a woman. “I think Cohen is opening himself up in his songs. I think he’s trying to say: love can be wonderful. And love can be terrible. It can go horribly wrong and ruin your life.” Cohen suffered from depression and, Freedman believes, would have identified strongly with David, a fellow musician. “David messed up. David’s kingdom was destroyed. And yet he sang Hallelujah. Because when you don’t know how to make sense of anything, when you’ve failed, when things go wrong, all you can do is sing Hallelujah. All you are left with is ‘praise God’. It’s a very religious idea”. In Hallelujah, for example, Cohen, David has her husband killed.

When faced with difficulties, the text implies that abandoning the human for the divine is not a viable solution. Instead, one must preserve the thread of light present in every human life, irrespective of its challenges. The message cautions against using God as a facile escape from pain and hurt, reinforcing Cohen’s sentiment in “Amen” that individuals must confront the world’s pain and horror independently before finding the capacity to give and receive love. This struggle may reveal traces of the poet’s authentic voice before succumbing to the constraints of servitude once more. It is crucial to acknowledge the tension between Cohen’s desire to craft a “manual for living with defeat” and the muse’s inclination toward songs that alleviate pain and foster serenity.

As biblical scholars, it becomes imperative for us to reflect on our own perspectives and lenses when approaching biblical texts. We must consider whether we seek authority and power in these texts to affirm our beliefs or if our goal is to engage in a dialogue with fellow human beings who share similar questions and doubts.

In conclusion, biblical imagery permeates Cohen’s texts, but it is never a mere appropriation. Instead, these metaphors undergo negotiation, transforming and reworking traditional theological concepts within Cohen’s universe. Cohen’s appropriation of biblical language creates a form of hybridity that resists easy categorization, challenging conventional labels like Jew, Buddhist, or Christian. This hybridity disrupts dominant cultures, engaging them in ways that deconstruct and create something new.

Cohen’s engagement with the Bible prompts a reconsideration of its cultural impact, fostering liminal spaces. Drawing inspiration from Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “in-between” space, Cohen’s work innovatively reconfigures the past, offering insights into humanity that transcend specific religious affiliations. The biblical metaphors in Cohen’s world, divorced from exclusive Christian or Jewish associations, become queered and reconfigured in a space that aligns with Cohen’s overarching narrative of imperfection and frailty.

Cohen’s world is characterized by an “in-between” space, a crack that provides insight into humanity without adhering to a particular religious current. The biblical images, far from being confined to Christian or Jewish traditions, find a new identity in Cohen’s world. Here, the past is not worshipped nostalgically but is instead employed to confront the challenges of the present creatively. Cohen encourages us to think with the texts, to be adventurous in exploring whether they

can still inform our daily questions, guide our love lives, and help us navigate the chaos that surrounds us.

Leonard Cohen, the renowned Canadian singer and songwriter, has been referred to as a “prophetic voice in music” with an “almost biblical significance and authority”. Influenced from an early age by the Hebrew Scriptures, which evoked profound emotions in him, Cohen’s lyrics possess a spiritual depth and sensuality reminiscent of the Hebrew ketuvim. His captivating voice and simple melodies bring prominence to his profound lyrics, delivering a clear spiritual message: the essence of being human involves striving to revere God and genuinely love others, even in the midst of our limitations, finitude, and sexuality. With a message deeply rooted in and resembling the Hebrew Writings, Cohen encourages his audience to reflect on the wisdom found in his initial muse: the ketuvim. Through this exploration, we may discover a wisdom within the Writings that challenges Cohen’s message and, perhaps, our own spirituality and way of life.

Perhaps his most famous song (thanks to Jeff Buckley’s heartbreaking rendition and other artists’ interpretations), “Hallelujah” serves as a *tour de force* of Cohen’s poesy, commingling sex and the sacred, referencing Scripture and offering a *ketuvim*-like message.

The song “Hallelujah” begins in the Psalter, where we are invited to sit and listen to the Psalmist play. Cohen writes,

I’ve heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord
But you don’t really care for music, do you?
It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth
The minor fall, the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Cohen urges his audience to explore the Psalter, seeking the mysterious chord that brings delight to the LORD. While the idea that sound can transmit vibrations pleasing to God might be challenging to grasp, both Cohen and the Psalter endorse the appropriateness and virtue of creating music devoted to the LORD. Yet, the “secret chord” goes beyond a simple strum on a stringed instrument. By outlining a fundamental chord progression found in pop music (“It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth...”), Cohen suggests the essential elements of a prayer that resonates with the divine: a plea for guidance, protection, and salvation (the fourth, the fifth, the major lift), coupled with a keen awareness of human flaws, sin, and finite existence (the minor fall). The ketuvim offer a harmonious blend of minor setbacks and significant uplifting moments, intricately weaving together earthly practicalities with transcendent supplications.

An example of this amalgamation is evident in Psalm 51, which commences with a direct entreaty: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions”. The psalmist then advances the supplication by seeking God’s purification, expressing the belief that a divine cleansing would eradicate all iniquity and sin.

After imploring God for mercy and symbolic purification through a metaphorical bath, the psalmist turns inward to contemplate her sins, characterized by Leonard Cohen as the “minor fall”. She openly acknowledges her transgressions, affirming, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight...Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me”. Following this admission, the

psalmist reverts to seeking divine guidance, described as the “major lift”: “Teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, wash me...”

Cohen’s verse, “The baffled king composing, ‘Hallelujah,’” resonates with the psalmist’s commitment to singing praises after seeking mercy: “My tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance...my mouth will declare your praise” (14-15). The psalm culminates with a conclusion that Cohen likens to the essence of the “secret chord”: “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”. This profound realization echoes a sentiment found in another Cohen song, “The Window”. Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack, a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.

Perhaps, our fractured spirits and imperfect selves find greater favor in the eyes of God and serve a more profound purpose than traditional burnt offerings. It’s plausible that revealing our complete vulnerability and unfiltered authenticity before the divine requires more trust and courage than the ritualistic act of sacrificing at the temple. In this context, both Cohen and the ketuvim suggest a shared perspective on honoring and satisfying God: present your finite and imperfect self to the LORD as a sacred offering; approach His presence with your vulnerabilities, limitations, and shortcomings. This shared sentiment emphasizes the idea that a genuine and unguarded connection with the divine transcends the formalities of religious rituals.

Acknowledging the potent and overwhelming influence that women can have over men, Cohen draws imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the accounts of David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, which also affirm the power of femininity. In the ketuvim, women are depicted as formidable forces; a man, regardless of strength or spirituality, becomes vulnerable in the presence of a woman. The Writings are replete with stories of women wielding power and influence over men. In the tale of Esther, a woman uses her beauty to sway a king and prevent genocide against her people. The story of Ruth showcases a woman taking initiative with a man to save herself and her mother-in-law from shame and starvation. In the Song of Songs, a woman proves to be as forceful and passionate in sexual intimacy as any man. However, unlike Cohen, who seems to focus on the potential destruction caused by women, the ketuvim recount stories of women using their feminine attributes to avert death and bring about life. Of course, the Writings also recognize the reality of the *femme fatale*. In Proverbs, the student is advised to steer clear of the wayward woman, who will lure you into herself until you are trapped, broken, broke and powerless (Prov. 5:8-10). The woman serves as the personification of waywardness in order to convey how attractive unruliness can be and how easily one can fall into it. Women are not the personification of looseness because women are naturally wayward (certainly not!), but rather because women are so damn attractive and men desire them so passionately. At the same time, Proverbs uses a woman as the personification of wisdom, again suggesting how a woman’s feminine charm may also bring good.

With this comparison, we see Cohen and the *ketuvim* both agreeing on the power a woman holds over a man and the potential harm she can bring. However, the *ketuvim* also offers more positive perspectives on the woman as a *femme vitale*, as a woman using her power over men to bring life.

Lovers and Beautiful Losers

Another verse of *Hallelujah* again suggests sexual intimacy while remaining vague and ambiguous,

*I did my best. It wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you*

These lines reflect an effort to express both sensual and sincere love. Cohen endeavors to be the best lover possible, yet acknowledges his limitations. He recognizes the crucial role of unfiltered honesty in the realms of love and sexuality.

Cohen guides us to delve into the Song of Songs, where we encounter a love dynamic involving reciprocity, mutual giving and receiving, initiation, acceptance, and the shared experience of each other. “Hallelujah” taps into this love that goes beyond mere reception and indulgence in love (“I couldn’t feel”), aspiring instead to give and engage in love (“so I tried to touch”). The latter part of this emotionally charged verse reads:

And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Here, Cohen delves into a theme that unfolds profoundly in the Writings: the act of worshiping God amid profound loss and misery. Job, having lost all his possessions and children, proclaimed, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” [6].

In the book of Lamentations, a similar expression of praise arises in the midst of anguish. After depicting distressing scenes such as famished infants perishing on the streets, distressed priests, violated women, and desperate mothers resorting to consuming their own offspring, the lamenting individual turns to God with hope: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”.

Expressing praise amidst desolation not only reflects a profound faith in God but also holds God accountable. Rolf Jacobson explains how praise can be employed as a form of accusation against God. Holocaust survivor and best-selling author Elie Wiesel suggests that in times of extreme injustice, “the only way to accuse God is by praising him”. Through praising God, we remind Him of His goodness and unwavering love. When we perceive the world around us as anything but good and loving, we are essentially accusing God by praising Him for something that is not visibly evident. We present theodicy to God by declaring, “God, you are loving and sovereign. I am suffering in a world that is chaotic and unloving, but God, you are loving and you are sovereign”. Instead of posing the question to God, “How can you be loving and sovereign when everything around me suggests otherwise?”, praise, in essence, poses the question to God. Praise prompts God to ask the question. The authors of Lamentations, Job, and even Leonard Cohen might all be challenging God’s justice by praising His name, by singing «Hallelujah».

«You Want It Darker»

On his eighty-second birthday, Leonard Cohen unveiled “You Want It Darker”, a contemplative and introspective composition that delves into the perception of God and the internal world of a believer. Despite leading a secular

lifestyle, Cohen, a Canadian Jew, has consistently intertwined his artistic endeavors with Judaism, often incorporating biblical motifs and reflecting a deep connection with Israel. Notably, his works also feature Christian imagery.

At this juncture in his life, Cohen, now eighty-two, confronts mortality, engaging in a profound dialogue with God. The lyrics unfold in two distinct elements: Cohen's candid accusations directed at God and his calling to the Almighty, expressing readiness with the biblical Hebrew term "Hineni" meaning "Here I am". This dialogue, though bereft of answers, establishes a belief in God's existence.

In the initial part, Cohen articulates a philosophical argument, contending that God is the cause of pervasive suffering, and crimes have been committed in His name. Interestingly, Cohen's conversation with God reveals a believer's perspective, challenging the conventional notion that the absence of religion would result in a better world.

Cohen further posits that God has deliberately made human existence arduous and painful, repeatedly stating, "You want it darker". This seemingly paradoxical and anti-religious argument echoes sentiments expressed by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The songwriter contends that God is not only the source of good but also the origin of human misery, suggesting that salvation lies beyond this life.

The juxtaposition of man and God in Cohen's lyrics reflects a provocative tone, challenging the perception of God as an ideal to emulate. The singer boldly declares a preference for being on the side of sinners and wrongdoers, rejecting the notion of God as the ultimate source of good.

However, this bold confrontation is counterbalanced by the recurring element of the song, "Hineni", denoting a state of complete obedience and submission before God. This term, often used by biblical protagonists, signifies a readiness to negate personal desires and thoughts when facing the Almighty.

The essence of the song lies in the interweaving of two contrasting states of mind – a bitter believer disillusioned by unmet divine expectations and a profound believer anticipating death in religious terms. The song's music mirrors this duality, blending modern rhythms with Jewish cantorial singing, ultimately concluding with a synagogue choir. "You Want It Darker" stands as a testament to the coexistence of modernity and religious sentiments in the face of life's existential questions. Future historians may scrutinize this composition to unveil the intricate dynamics between the seemingly secular Western civilization and its enduring religious undercurrents, particularly when confronted with the profound mysteries of life and death.

Cohen incorporated religious themes into his music as a means to delve into questions of identity and mortality in a manner that might not immediately reveal the religious nature of his lyrics. Nevertheless, "You Want It Darker" is rooted in a religious tradition that has fueled accusations against God for over three millennia. As Cohen reproaches God for the affliction of humanity, it's crucial to recognize that he actively joins an existential discourse that dates back to biblical times. Examples include Abraham challenging God's treatment of the people of Sodom, Moses rebuking God's intent to annihilate the Israelites, and David pleading with God to alleviate his personal suffering. Cohen, acknowledging this historical context, positions himself as a continuation of ancient voices that raised unanswerable questions centuries ago. You Want it Darker begins with a personal invective against God that accuses Him of refusing to alleviate the speaker's suffering:

*If you are the dealer,
I'm out of the game
If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame*

*If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame
Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified, in the human frame
A million candles burning for the help that never came
You want it darker
Hineni, hineni
I'm ready, my lord*

Cohen makes no distinction between the God revered by Jews and Christians. The phrase “Thine is the glory” finds mention in Jewish texts like 1 Chronicles 29:11 and appears in apocryphal texts, initially written by Jews but later embraced by Christians, such as 1 Esdras 4:59 and Prayer of Manasseh 1:15.

However, its most prominent use is attributed to Jesus during his renowned Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew 6:13, acknowledged as the most “Jewish” of the Gospels. Cohen intentionally introduces religious ambiguity by referencing diverse traditions, a theme that persists throughout the subsequent lyrics of the song.

Cohen perceives human suffering as an intrinsic element of sacred texts, marked by inherent paradox. The question of moral responsibility for the speaker’s pain becomes a complex matter, implicating any of the three entities involved: God, the enigmatic “they” later mentioned in the poem, or even the speaker himself:

*There's a lover in the story
But the story's still the same
There's a lullaby for suffering
And a paradox to blame
But it's written in the scriptures
And it's not some idle claim
You want it darker
We kill the flame
They're lining up the prisoners
And the guards are taking aim
I struggled with some demons
They were middle class and tame
I didn't know I had permission to murder and to maim
You want it darker
Hineni, hineni
I'm ready, my lord*

Cohen’s admission that he was unaware of having “permission to murder and to maim” implies that individuals are using their faith to justify violence, attributing their actions to a divine mandate. Initially, I interpreted this phrase as an acknowledgment of personal wrongdoing, thinking Cohen had committed a grave error. However, as the song progresses, it becomes apparent that this line is more a reflection on God than a confession of Cohen’s past regrets.

By inflicting physical harm and death upon human beings, God, in a way, implicitly sanctions similar actions by humans. The concept of *Imitatio Dei* extends beyond Judaism, suggesting that this line doesn't pertain to Cohen’s actions but rather underscores what God has done. When considering human beings causing harm akin to God's actions, Cohen places the responsibility for human evil squarely on God's shoulders, suggesting that if God desired a different outcome, He would

have orchestrated it accordingly. The last stanza makes the relationship between divine evil and human evil explicit:

*Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified, in the human frame
A million candles burning for the love that never came
You want it darker
We kill the flame*

By intertwining Christian and Jewish symbolism within a singular image, Cohen surpasses religious distinctions. The initial line draws from Jewish liturgy, rooted in Psalm 92:2 and 99:3, and is juxtaposed with the second line reminiscent of Jesus' death. This juxtaposition highlights how human violence has been utilized to consecrate the name of God. The concluding two lines explicitly convey that, while God may will human suffering, it is human actions that actualize it.

The final stanza of the song, “if you are the dealer, I’m out of the game”, echoes the opening lines. However, while in the initial stanza, Cohen’s words serve as an accusation – expressing his reluctance to engage in this dance with God any longer – in the concluding stanza, Cohen’s words reflect a sense of resignation:

If you are the dealer, let me out of the game
If you are the healer, I’m broken and lame
If thine is the glory, mine must be the shame
You want it darker.

The process of confronting God was ultimately all that Cohen needed to come to terms with his vulnerability. The song closes with an affirmation of the opening lines:

*Hineni, hineni
Hineni, hineni
I’m ready, my lord
Hineni Hineni, hineni
Hineni*

In various post-release critiques of this song, many reviewers assumed that Cohen’s composition served as a negative commentary on organized religion. However, I remain unconvinced. Cohen’s grievance is not directed at organized religion but rather at God Himself. God, permitting suffering, becomes the focal point, and while individuals inflict pain in His name, ultimately, God is held accountable for these human transgressions.

Yet, in the end, Cohen acknowledges that accepting his mortality is an inevitability. He continues to address God as “my Lord”, signifying God’s continued influence over Cohen, who resigns himself to the uncertainties – both in understanding the world’s workings and in confronting his own mortality.

“You Want it Darker” aligns with a tradition in Jewish literature that compels God to face judgment. This model finds biblical precedent in Psalm 39, attributed to King David, where God is accused of indifference toward the suffering of His creations. The psalm presents a perplexing ambiguity regarding the source of the speaker’s anguish. While it appears that God directly inflicts suffering upon David at times (see v.10; “I am worn down by the blows of your hand”), at other times.

David seems more concerned with the actions of the wicked and God’s reluctance to intervene (see v.1; “I will keep a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence”). The psalm, however, is addressed not to the wicked; it is addressed to God. Regardless of who is the direct perpetrator of evil, God or wicked people who are causing human suffering, David holds God responsible. And this responsibility correlates with God’s general indifference towards the brevity of

human life. God's indifference is first referenced as simply a reality that the speaker has to deal with. But later in the psalm, this reality is amplified into an accusation. Compare verses five and eleven:

39:5: *You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.*

Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.

39:11: *'You chastise mortals in punishment for sin, consuming like a moth what is dear to them; surely everyone is a mere breath.'*

In 39:5, the speaker only states that God has made human life brief. But in 39:11, the speaker argues that the brevity of human life is what makes God value the human experience so little.

In the end, no resolution is achieved. The speaker concludes that any relationship between the human and the divine will inevitably lead to suffering, because this is the inherent nature of a relationship characterized by a disparity of power:

39:13: *Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more.'*

The Hebrew term for "am no more" is "Eineni", derived from the contraction "ein ani", meaning "I am not". This word stands in stark contrast to the central theme of Cohen's song, encapsulated by the term "hineni", a contraction for "hayn ani", translating to "here I am".

Cohen's song leads to a remarkably different conclusion than the lament expressed in Psalm 39. While the biblical author suggests that a relationship with God inevitably involves intense suffering, Cohen embraces a relationship characterized by perpetual uncertainty – because that is the way God desires it.

Similar to many enthusiasts of Cohen's music, I sense a unique connection to him when I engage with his compositions. However, this feeling, though not exclusive, resonates universally. All individuals, in one way or another, grapple with the inevitability of their mortality. For those who are religious, navigating a relationship with God, often perceived as one-sided, becomes an additional challenge. The irony of finding solace in Cohen's lyrics, which mirror his profound existential solitude, intensifies the pain of his absence for those who sought comfort in his music.

With an eerie melody and a rhythmic pulse, "You Want It Darker" channels the ironic tone reminiscent of Cohen's classics like "Everybody Knows" and "The Future". The opening verse confronts a mysterious "you", seemingly directed at God, echoing atheistic skepticism about the existence of a benevolent deity in the face of widespread human suffering. However, Cohen skillfully twists this notion with ironic sensibility, proposing that, contrary to conventional belief, God desires a darker reality. The lyrics "Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name / Vilified, crucified, in the human frame" suggest that God represents an elevated truth beyond our grasp, existing in an elusive celestial realm, and that the physical world's darkness is integral to maintaining celestial light.

This paradoxical paradigm explores the interconnectedness of positive and negative concepts, offering Cohen's commentary on the perplexities of the world's atrocities. The satirical tone emerges in lines like "I struggled with some demons / They were middle class and tame", implying that our struggles may not be as formidable as we perceive, urging a less serious self-reflection. The mention of "a lullaby for suffering" and a "paradox to blame" underscores the song's exploration of the intricate nature of contradiction [6].

Despite the superficially dark and gloomy lyrics, the song hints at a theme of faith – both in a religious context, believing in the existence of God, and a broader sense of faith as an unwavering belief that things will eventually improve, even in the absence of immediate evidence. The song suggests a convergence between these interpretations of faith, blurring the lines between religious and existential faith.

After presenting the central theme of confronting demons in the shadows through “You Want It Darker”, the album unfolds with eight more grandiose songs, completing its nine-track composition. The romantic loverman persona, for which Cohen is renowned, takes a backseat, making room for poetic reflections on mortality and God – a fitting shift considering his octogenarian status during the album's creation. Attempting to maintain a persona of a seductive figure wouldn't be plausible at his age, and Cohen gracefully transitions into the role of a wise elder, infusing his recollections of pain and loss – be it faith, love, or life – with quiet poignancy and a newfound emphasis on letting go. Death, rebirth, repentance, and forgiveness weave through the album, reflecting Cohen's lifelong struggle with depression, earning him titles such as “the high priest of pathos” and “godfather of gloom”.

The ambiguous addressing of the “you” by Cohen's narrator persists throughout the album, simultaneously referencing a lover and God. It appears that he addresses both, blurring the lines between the love of God and the love of another person, especially in the aftermath of personal love's passage. In the second track, “Treaty”, the lyrics express this ambiguity with lines like “I wish there was a treaty between your love and mine”, conveying a sense of anger, weariness, and the desire for reconciliation. The melody, driven by a soft piano, resonates with contemplation and emotion, fitting for Cohen's mature perspective. The album concludes with a near-instrumental revisitation titled “String Reprise/Treaty”, where the melodic orchestration of cello, viola, and violins creates a beautiful, stripped-down classical piece. Cohen's voice returns at the end, delivering concluding lines expressing the longing for a treaty between love.

The interplay between light and dark, as well as physical and spiritual love, remains a recurring theme throughout the album. In “On The Level”, Cohen explores this dichotomy with the lyrics “When I turned my back on the devil, I turned my back on the angel too”. This profound statement suggests that facing one's demons, accepting and confronting the darkness, leads to ultimate sanctuary from pain and a dismantling of simplistic human distinctions such as good versus bad or us versus them.

Another prominent theme revolves around enduring pain, whether emotional or physical, and the quest for a remedy, often depicted as something spiritual lurking in the shadows – an element that must be embraced, be it in this life or the next. This sentiment is vividly portrayed in the lyrics of “Steer Your Way”, urging one to navigate through the more tangible pain that surpasses mere illusion, disrupting cosmic norms and blinding perspectives. The plea not to venture into that realm, whether a god exists or not, echoes the ongoing struggle against affliction, progressing year by year, month by month, day by day, and thought by thought.

“Steer Your Way” initially debuted as a poem in *The New Yorker* before finding its musical incarnation on the latest album. This dual expression suggests Leonard Cohen's primary identity as a writer and poet, overshadowing his role as a singer-songwriter, especially considering his absence of formal musical training. Cohen revealed that his songwriting foundation rested on six chords taught by a flamenco guitar-playing Spaniard, whose tragic fate preceded their fourth lesson. This six-chord progression became the cornerstone of all his compositions,

underscoring a crucial lesson for emerging artists – that musical success may not hinge on technical proficiency, but rather on the adept use of available tools to convey creative visions effectively.

Cohen's music often emanated a minimalist quality, with melodies serving to complement the lyrics rather than taking precedence. His effective formula compelled listeners to truly absorb the message, emphasizing that while catching every line may not be essential, the value lies in experiencing emotional peaks through poetic imagery or analytical exploration of each song. Despite Cohen's limited technical musical prowess, his songs delved into profound themes such as suffering, sadness, grief, loss, compassion, yearning for meaning, and, fundamentally, love.

Leonard Cohen's success as a romantic figure can be attributed, in part, to his ability to express romantic sentiments genuinely without veering into clichés. Titles like "Death of a Ladies' Man" (1977) encapsulate his modesty and self-effacement, blending earnestness with a touch of parody. His allure stemmed from acknowledging his appeal to women while simultaneously striving for self-improvement as a lover. He maintained honesty without flaunting or boasting, often revealing insecurity as a romantic partner. Cohen's charisma was described as irresistible, appealing to both women and men alike.

In the self-mocking "Tower of Song" (1988), Cohen humorously acknowledges that his singing voice was never his primary charm. While his vocal style leaned more towards spoken word poetry and a singsong delivery rather than traditional melodic singing, his voice deepened with age, becoming huskier and breathier. Despite this evolution, his unique speak-singing style remained effective. Cohen's experience as a poet and writer allowed his voice and persona to serve as conduits for delivering his words and music. Throughout his career, Cohen continued to prolifically contribute to the world of poetry, publishing over a dozen books from the 1950s to 2012.

"You Want it Darker" features a somewhat minimalistic sonic palette, placing emphasis on piano and strings-driven downtempo melodies while downplaying percussion. Background female singers and occasional religious-inflected chanting contribute to the atmospheric composition. The overall tempo is notably slow, consistent with Cohen's musical style, which occasionally features more upbeat compositions. In this album, the deliberate slowness serves not only as a reflection of Cohen's aged and physically-ailing state but also as a collection of mesmerizing, spiritual odes [7].

The subdued sound is accompanied by contemplative reflections on God and mortality, occasionally bordering on nihilism. The thematic thread involves questioning everything and rejecting meaning in both tangible and intangible realms. However, it might be more accurately interpreted as projecting an enlightened perspective, akin to the Buddhist concept of "nothingness". This perspective transcends physical form, aiming for a state of consciousness reflecting our true spiritual beings. The Buddhist concept of "Śūnyatā", with its various interpretations, including "emptiness", "not-self", and meditative states, underscores the metaphorical use of light and dark in the album. Rather than conveying loneliness and sadness, the focus on the dark reflects the reflections of an elderly man seeking, and possibly attaining, true peace by acknowledging and exploring the void, despite perpetual physical pain. Lyrics from "Leaving the Table", such as "I don't need a lover / So blow out the flame", resonate as melancholic musings yet also express surrender, freedom, and contentment through acknowledgment.

In “It Seemed the Better Way”, the theme of challenging and questioning truth and faith resurfaces. The lyrics explore the initial appeal of a certain path and the subsequent realization that it is not the truth today. The song concludes with reflections on holding one’s tongue, taking one’s place, lifting a glass of blood, and attempting to say grace – a depiction that echoes a loss of belief in God or, at least, religious faith. The nuanced exploration of the difference between religious and spiritual faith is a central focus, with Cohen delving deeply into this theme on this album more prominently and directly than ever before.

Results and discussion

Leonard Cohen’s song lyrics are abundant in biblical allusions and imagery, showcasing his profound fascination with religious and spiritual themes. Here are some of the prominent biblical motifs in his songwriting:

1. “Hallelujah”: Cohen’s most renowned song, “Hallelujah”, prominently features the word itself, which originates from Hebrew and means “praise the Lord”. This term is commonly employed in religious songs and texts.

2. “David and Bathsheba”: In “Hallelujah”, Cohen skilfully weaves in references to the biblical narrative of King David’s ill-fated romance with Bathsheba. This reference deepens the exploration of love and desire in the song.

3. “Samson and Delilah”: Cohen’s composition “Samson in New Orleans” draws inspiration from the biblical tale of Samson and Delilah, symbolizing themes of strength, vulnerability, and betrayal.

4. “The Tower of Song”: In “Tower of Song,” Cohen metaphorically describes his creative process as the construction of a “tower of song.” This imagery parallels the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, where human ambition led to linguistic confusion. Cohen’s use of this metaphor conveys the dual notions of aspiration and the challenges intrinsic to artistic creation.

5. “Sacrifice and Atonement”: Several of Cohen’s songs, such as “Suzanne” and “Take This Waltz,” incorporate elements of sacrifice and atonement, central themes within Christian theology. These themes are intricately woven into the narratives of his songs, often exploring the intricacies of human relationships.

6. “The Devil”: In “A Singer Must Die,” Cohen confronts the devil, a recurring figure in biblical and religious narratives symbolizing temptation and malevolence.

7. “Promised Land”: “Closing Time” references the “promised land,” an allusion to the biblical territory pledged to the Israelites. This signifies a sense of yearning and fulfillment.

8. “Redemption”: The concept of redemption, a prevalent biblical theme, surfaces in many of Cohen’s songs. His lyrics frequently delve into the notion of seeking redemption, discovering grace, or making amends for one’s actions.

9. “Psalm-like Imagery”: Cohen’s poetic lyrics often mirror the style and language of the Psalms from the Bible, characterized by expressions of devotion, lamentation, and praise [3 p. 1].

Cohen’s adept incorporation of these biblical allusions and references enhances the depth and intricacy of his songwriting, offering listeners a distinctive and thought-provoking means to explore themes of spirituality, love, redemption, and the human experience.

Conclusions and prospects for further research

Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) is recognized as a poet, novelist, and songwriter of the highest calibre. He became a global icon, filling arenas around the world and performing to widespread acclaim. Cohen’s work was deeply influenced by personal losses, particularly the early death of his father during his childhood. He found solace in his father's poetry, which shaped his future path in literature and music. Singer had complex love affairs that he reflected in his music and literature. His relationships with various women were a significant part of his life and creativity. His song “Hallelujah” contains numerous biblical allusions and symbolism, showcasing his deep interest in religious themes. This song explores a wide range of emotions, from joy to sorrow and worship. Cohen skilfully combined various religious and spiritual themes in his music and poetry, creating a unique style and means of expression. His artistic legacy remains important and influential for new generations of artists and fans.

All these aspects make Leonard Cohen a significant figure in the worlds of music and literature, and his work continues to touch the hearts and souls of audiences and listeners.

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