CANADIAN MYSTIQUE IN LEONARD COHEN’S POETRY AND MUSIC

MSc. Adonay B. Pérez Luengo Assistant Professor
University of Holguín, Campus José de la Luz y Caballero, Av. de los Libertadores Km 3½, Cuba
Email: adonaypl@femsu.uho.edu.cu

PhD Manuel de Jesús Velázquez León, Full Professor
University of Holguín, Campus José de la Luz y Caballero, Av. de los Libertadores Km 3½
Email: mvelazquezleon@gmail.com

PhD Yunier Pérez Sarduy, Full Professor
University of Shantou, China
Email: yuniersarduy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Mystique is at the centre of the Canadian spiritual journey. The Biblical quote “A Mari Usque Ad Mare” transcends the nation-building endeavour of a transcontinental dominion aided by a lengthy railroad. It contains the vision of a passage to India with its landscapes beyond the horizons of the possible. Leonard Cohen’s life, poetry and music are expressive of that Canadian mysticism. Cohan’s vast literary work encompasses a constellation of texts that voice a human experience lived in searching frenzy. There were no borders to the contemplative dimensions of his spiritual exploration; there were no discernible limits to his artistic creations, many times aimed at a transcendent union with the absolute. The spectrum of themes is equally polychromatic: from the depths of philosophical, usually dark reflections about the nature of our existence to the elevated realms of our mundane world with their rainbow of colourful passions. The paper explores chosen poems and songs of this, very Canadian, very universal creator and singles out elements of aesthetic value. Emphasis is on Cohen’s opaque and many times controversial multiple levels of poetic creation. Now that Leonard Cohen definitely dwells with the great of all ages in timeless eternity, let us honour him and his beloved country while continuing to enjoy the wonders of his mind.

KEY WORDS

Canadian culture, Canadian literature, Leonard Cohen’s poetry and music
RESUMEN

La mística está al centro del peregrinaje espiritual de Canadá. La cita bíblica “A Mari Usque Ad Mare” trasciende el esfuerzo de construcción nacional de un dominio transcontinental apoyado por un extenso ferrocarril. Contiene la visión del pasaje a la India con sus paisajes más allá de los horizontes de lo posible. La vida, la poesía y la música de Leonard Cohen son expresiones de ese misticismo canadiense. La extensa obra literaria de Cohen comprende una constelación de textos que expresan una experiencia humana vivida en el frenesí de la búsqueda. No hubo fronteras para las dimensiones contemplativas de su exploración espiritual; no hubo límites discernibles para sus creaciones artísticas, muchas veces dirigidas a una unión trascendente con el absoluto. El espectro de temas es igualmente policromo: desde las profundidades de reflexiones filosóficas usualmente sombrías, acerca de la naturaleza de nuestra existencia hasta los reinos elevados de nuestro mundo secular con su arco iris de coloridas pasiones. El trabajo explora poemas y canciones escogidas de este, tan canadiense, tan universal creador y destaca elementos de valor estético. El énfasis está en los múltiples niveles de su creación poética, muchas veces opacos, muchas veces controversiales. Ahora que habita definitivamente con los grandes de todas las épocas en la eternidad intemporal, honrémosle y a su país amado mientras continuamos disfrutando de las maravillas de su mente.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cultura canadiense, literatura canadiense, la poesía y la música de Leonard Cohen
INTRODUCTION

Leonard N. Cohen (1934-2016) was a Canadian poet, singer, songwriter and novelist of world renown. In his poetic and musical compositions, Cohen explored a vast diversity of themes that include love, religion, sexuality, and even politics. He was a Companion of the Order of Canada, his country's highest non-military honour. Cohen was inducted in the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, in the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame and in the American Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He also received the Prince of Asturias Award for literature.

DEVELOPMENT

Leonard Norman Cohen was born in a Jewish family in Westmount, Montreal in 1934. Since very early in life, he was interested in music and poetry. He was particularly attracted by the poetry of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca and by Flamenco music. Still a teenager, he learned to play the guitar and organized his first musical group. Young Cohen was involved in the vivid artistic life of Old Montreal with its nightclubs and restaurants where he found themes for his early poetic compositions and for some of his best-known songs. Cohen attended McGill University where he obtained a B.A. in 1954. While at McGill, he actively participated in its vibrant literary life under the influence of professors Irving Layton and Louis Dudek. There, he won the Chester MacNaghten Literary Competition and published his first poems. He also came into contact with the poetry of William Butler Yeats, Walt Whitman, Federico García Lorca, and Henry Miller who were to influence his future poetic creations. In 1956, he published his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, thus beginning his prolific career.

After briefly studying at McGill’s Law School and at Columbia University, Cohen worked at odd jobs and concentrated in his writing. In 1961, McClelland & Stewart published his *The Spice-Box of Earth*, which helped expand the readership and won him credit as a rising Canadian poet.

After briefly living in London, England, Cohen moved to the island of Hydra in Greece where he was to find a perfect scenario for his bohemian dreams. Hydra, without automobiles and almost without electricity, moved at the speed of mules and seemed to have been magically frozen for four thousand years. It was here where he met Marianne Ihlen, the Norwegian woman with whom he would have a romance as large as Mediterranean skies.

In a small whitewashed house that he bought in Hydra with money inherited from a grandmother and with an Olivetti typewriter, he wrote his poetry collection *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), and the novels *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966). That year, he also published the poetry book *Parasites of Heaven*. These books received some critical attention and sold a few copies. Thenceforward, Cohen concentrated more on writing and recording songs. It was not until 1978 when he published his poetry collection *Death of a Lady’s Man* and 1984 when his *Book of Mercy* came to light. The latter, containing fifty poems that he called “prayers,” was the result of his readings and meditations on the Hebrew Bible and Zen writings. This
book won him the important Canadian Authors Association Literary Award for Poetry. Among his late publications were *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* (1993) and *Book of Longing* (2006) dedicated to poet Irving Layton, his mentor at McGill.

In the late sixties, after moving to the USA, Cohen started a career as folk music songwriter and singer. His first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967) contained his hit song “Suzanne.” The album was a success in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Some songs of its songs were covered by other popular singers. It was followed by *Songs from a Room* (1969) and *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971). In the seventies, Cohen started touring through Canada, the USA, Europe and Israel with a band called “The Army.” Some of his presentations were filmed and his songs “The Stranger Song”, “Winter Lady”, and “Sisters of Mercy” were featured for the soundtrack of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, a Western movie.

“Another Night with Telescope” is perhaps the best example of Cohen’s sad poems written in his long hours of depressive solitude.

*Another Night with Telescope*

Come back to me
brutal empty room
Thin Byzantine face
preside over this new fast
I am broken with easy grace

Let me be neither
father nor child
but one who spins
on an eternal unimportant loom
patterns of wars and grass
which do not last the night
I know the stars
are wild as dust
and wait for no man’s discipline
but as they wheel
from sky to sky they rake
our lives with pins of light

Here, Cohen’s poetry strives for simplicity in lines free of unnecessary ornament. However plain his style, he does well in the use of symbols in an oblique way to say things that make poems like “Another Night with Telescope” the tip of an iceberg of clever and impressive reflections on the meaning of the meaningless. The night of vigil is inevitably entrusted with the instrument for the quest for meaning in a world that is alien. In addressing his loneliness and his culture, the poet invites them to witness the emptiness of his renunciation—which he faces with dignity. He is strong in his demand—or is it a mercy he asks for? —to be freed from the sense of belonging and hope, he would be just a senseless instrument in a never-ending design that is, and this is disheartening, unimportant. Worse, in this cosmic arrangement—that is eternal, remember—the pains and the healings of man’s historical doings do not last long. Besides, cosmic chaos is not only beyond man’s ordering powers but also—in perfidy? Out of sheer indifference? —It lets us know that this is so.

During the following decades Cohen embarked in a hectic life of composition, experimentation, recording and extensive touring that produced a rich collection of songs, many with his distinct brand of sadness and all of superb quality. They include the acclaimed hits “Dance Me to the End of Love”, “Hallelujah,” one of the most memorable songs of history (performed by more than 200 singers in various languages), “Everybody Knows,” “The Future,” “Anthem,” “I’m Your Man,” “In My Secret Life,” “A Thousand Kisses Deep,” and many others. “Hallelujah” is perhaps one of Cohen’s best known songs.
"Hallelujah"

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

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Your faith was strong but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you
She tied you to a kitchen chair
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair
And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Baby I have been here before
I know this room, I've walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew you.
I've seen your flag on the marble arch
Love is not a victory march
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

There was a time when you let me know
What's really going on below
But now you never show it to me, do you?
And remember when I moved in you
The holy dove was moving too
And every breath we drew was Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Maybe there's a God above
But all I've ever learned from love
Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you
It's not a cry you can hear at night
It's not somebody who has seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name  
But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?  
There's a blaze of light in every word  
It doesn't matter which you heard  
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

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

Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

(...)

In its original version, “Hallelujah” evokes waltz and gospel music and contains several biblical references suggesting the stories of Samson and Delilah as well as King David and Bathsheba. Cohen’s view was that there are many different hallelujahs in poetry, which is reflected in his many covers with around 300 known versions. The different tones given to the song make it sometimes melancholic or fragile or blissful or elevating. Some consider it a sexual composition, even while others regard it as liturgically purifying.

In 1994, Leonard Cohen retired to the Mt. Baldy Zen Center (Los Angeles) where he would stay in seclusion for five years. In 1996, he was ordained as a Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk and took the Dharma name Jikan, meaning “silence”. Zen Buddhism was to have an impact in Cohen’s personal and artistic life. It is considered that it helped lift him from his depression.

Perhaps Cohen’s best known poems and songs are those which celebrate love relationships. With a considerable reputation of a lady’s man, Leonard Cohen was actually a man who loved the company of women. Marianne Ihlen was one of the first women in his life. Cohen met Marianne in the isle of Hydra where she had just been abandoned by her husband with a six-months boy. They engaged in a passionate and sometimes stormy relationship that lasted for around eight years. Marianne was his muse, an eventual relationship that was charmingly recorded for posterity in several of his most memorable songs, including “Bird on the Wire,” “So Long, Marianne” and “Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye.”

"Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye"

Yes I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,  
your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,  
many loved before us, I know that we are not new,  
in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,  
but now it’s come to distances and both of us must try,  
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

I'm not looking for another as I wander in my time,  
walk me to the corner, our steps will always rhyme  
you know my love goes with you as your love stays with me,  
it's just the way it changes, like the shoreline and the sea,  
but let's not talk of love or chains and things we can't untie,
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

Yes I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,  
your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,  
many loved before us, I know that we are not new,  
in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,  
but now it's come to distances and both of us must try,  
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

In July 2016, Cohen learned from one of Marianne's friends that she had leukemia. He wrote to her:

Well Marianne, it's come to this time  
when we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon. Know that I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine. And you know that I've always loved you for your beauty and your wisdom, but I don't need to say anything more about that because you know all about that. But now, I just want to wish you a very good journey.  

So Long Marianne

Come over to the window, my little darling,  
I'd like to try to read your palm.  
I used to think I was some kind of Gypsy boy  
before I let you take me home.  
Now so long, Marianne, it's time that we began to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

Well you know that I love to live with you,  
but you make me forget so very much.  
I forget to pray for the angels  
and then the angels forget to pray for us.

Oh so long, Marianne, it's time that we began ...  
to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

Oh so long, Marianne, it's time that we began ...  
to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

We met when we were almost young  
deep in the green lilac park.  
You held on to me like I was a crucifix,  
as we went kneeling through the dark.

Your letters they all say that you're beside me now.  
Then why do I feel alone?
I'm standing on a ledge and your fine spider web is fastening my ankle to a stone.

Now so long, Marianne, it's time that we began ...

For now I need your hidden love.
I'm cold as a new razor blade.
You left when I told you I was curious,
I never said that I was brave.

Oh so long, Marianne, it's time that we began ...
to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

Oh, you are really such a pretty one.
I see you've gone and changed your name again.
And just when I climbed this whole mountainside,
to wash my eyelids in the rain!

Oh so long, Marianne, it's time that we began ...
to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

Less than four months later, on November 11, 2016 Leonard Cohen followed Marianne to the landscapes of eternity, just “down the road.” Many years before, he had written a song, more of a prayer, as he used to say, which we must wish comes true. May it be His will that Leonard Cohen’s voice never be still.

"If It Be Your Will"

If it be your will
That I speak no more
And my voice be still
As it was before
I will speak no more
I shall abide until
I am spoken for
If it be your will

If it be your will
That a voice be true
From this broken hill
I will sing to you
From this broken hill
All your praises they shall ring
If it be your will
To let me sing

If it be your will
If there is a choice
Let the rivers fill
Let the hills rejoice
Let your mercy spill
On all these burning hearts in hell
If it be your will
To make us well

And draw us near
And bind us tight
All your children here
In their rags of light
In our rags of light
All dressed to kill
And end this night
If it be your will
And end this night
If it be your will

CONCLUSIONS

In his long and productive artistic life, Cohen crossed the frontiers of the different artistic genre again and again. His blending of music and poetry, his unique artistic persona and his dark, profound voice coloured an inimitable style of exceptional exclusivity. A reflection on some of his chosen poetry in the context of his passionate and intense life may shed light on the exceptionality of his creation. The range of his artistic subjects had infinite shades; it went from profound philosophical meditations about the essence of human nature to the highest regions of passionate experiences that he lived intensely. Leonard Cohen was one of those outstanding creators that Canada has brought to the world. His sometimes impervious poetic creation constitutes one of those cultural legacies of rare universal value. Now that Leonard Cohen definitely dwells with the great of all ages in timeless eternity, let us honour him and his beloved country while continuing to enjoy the wonders of his mind.

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AUTHORS

MSc. Adonay Bárbara Pérez Luengo, Assistant Professor. Bachelor in Geography. She teaches at the University of Holguín. Professor Pérez Luengo is doing a second major (English) and is writing her doctoral dissertation. She chairs a literary debate group at her university. She is the President of the CCLA Holguín Chapter.

Professor Manuel de Jesús Velázquez León, PhD. He teaches at the University of Holguín, VP of the CCLA, Visiting Scholar of the University of McGill, Chair of the William Shakespeare Study Center, James Madison Fellow.

Professor Yunier Pérez Sarduy has a PhD in pedagogy and is a Full Professor. He teaches at the University of Shantou, China. He has a vast experience in teaching studies of the English-speaking cultures. He has received several awards for his academic work.