

# Critical analysis of "bird on the wire" by leonard cohen essay sample

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## **Critical analysis of “ Bird on the Wire” by Leonard Cohen Essay Sample**

Leonard Cohen has had a long and illustrious career as a poet and a songwriter. The Canadian songwriter has written many popular songs, and we all have at least one of his tunes stored up in the recesses of our minds. However, there are a certain few of Cohen’s that stand above the rest. Songs that were hits, and songs that in fact helped shape the period of time they were created in. “ Suzanne”, “ Bird on the Wire”, and “ So Long, Marianne” are a couple of these elite creations of Cohen’s mind. During this paper I will be analyzing the song “ Bird on the Wire”, interpreting its meaning and explaining what it is saying. This song was one of Cohen’s most famous songs, and was very influential during the ‘60’s- a time of turmoil and unrest. It has been covered by more artists, including Johnny Cash, than any of his other songs, and it is a prime example of Cohen’s signature style. The song is separated into two large sections, but after reading and thinking about it, you realize there are really six small sections to it.

The poem opens by giving you a first impression about the person speaking throughout the song. Lines 1-3 of the first stanza show the speaker trying to escape his problems, so that he can be “ free”. He wants to be “ Like a bird on the wire” (L1), meaning he wants to be able to sit above and away from his problems. He also alludes to becoming “ Like a drunk in a midnight choir”. A drunk is able to escape his worries and be carefree through drinking. The “ midnight choir”, refers to all the people drinking, partying and making noise at night.

This section is important to the poem because it helps you realize the situation and feelings of the speaker. This section also uses good imagery through allusions, such as "bird on the wire", and "drunk in the midnight choir".

After highlighting the speaker's situation, Cohen introduces another character. Lines 4-6 show how the speaker has given everything to this person ("I have saved all my ribbons for thee" (L6)), whom the speaker loves.

This section uses excellent imagery through symbolism. Line 4, "Like a worm on a hook", and line 5, "like a knight from some old-fashioned book", are excellent allusions showing how the speaker is going to give everything he has earned and captured, just like a worm captures a fish, and a knight captures trophies.

Having introduced the object of the speaker's affection, Cohen develops more of the relationship. Lines 7-10 show an apology from the speaker to this other person. The speaker says "if I have been unkind", then "I hope you can just let it go by"

(L7/8). This section is important, because it shows the conflict between the speaker and this other person, and it also gives you a hint to the cause of his problems he is trying to escape.

After showing how the speaker is trying to escape his problems, and how his problems involve this "other person", the next section begins to show the

cause of his problems. Lines 1-6 of stanza 2 explain how the speaker is admitting that he has "torn everyone who reached out for me" (L3), or has hurt other people. Next, the speaker commits to "make it all up to thee" (L6).

This section is important because it shows why he has the problems he is trying to escape from- he has been hurting the people close to him. The section also contains some great imagery, such as "Like a baby, stillborn" (L1), and "like a beast with a horn" (L2). These allusions illustrate how the speaker has hurt others, like a dead baby makes people sad, and a dangerous beast hurts people physically.

After outlining part of the reason behind the speaker's problems, Cohen looks at the deeper cause behind this man's problems- society. This section, from lines 7 to 10, shows how a poor, crippled man tells the speaker to "not ask for so much" (L8), while a well-off, pretty woman tells the speaker "Hey, why not ask for more?" (L10).

This song is critical to the whole of the song because it identifies the source of all the man's problems. Society in general has made him greedy, and through this greed, he has hurt others, creating problems, which he identifies his need to escape from in section one. Through imagery, Cohen identifies the man's greed and the society which encourages it. When the poor man says, "You must not ask for so much", you get the impression the man is greedy, and to a poor man, this is clearly evident. The pretty woman

represents society and the quest for the "high life", which is telling the man to become selfish and seek more for himself.

Having explained the man and his issues, the poem reiterates the first section over again, emphasizing its importance. Lines 11 to 12 of stanza 2 are the same as 1 to 3 of the first stanza. They once again highlight the man's desire to be free, and to be away from his problems, like a bird, or a drunk.

The poem unravels as you read it. First you discover that the man has problems from which he desires to escape; next you learn these problems involve another person. After this, you learn that the man has problems because he has hurt other people, and finally, you learn that he has hurt other people because of his selfishness which has been established by the success-driven society we live in. The song is very effective in teaching us a valuable lesson about seeking for ourselves: that ultimately we will only hurt ourselves and cause problems.

This man is a sad victim of the inevitable grip of society's greedy claws, which threaten to suck us all in. Through amazing imagery and compelling emotion, Leonard Cohen has communicated his view on society to us by not merely telling us facts and opinions, but by putting his views on a human level, and connecting them with a man with whom we can associate with and emotionally identify with. This is an inspiring song and a prime example of Leonard Cohen and his great work.