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The Struggle Between the Powerless and the Powerful

“A kite Is a Victim” is the opening poem to Cohen’s 1961 collection of poetry entitled, The Spice-Box of Earth. On the surface, it is a rather pleasant account of kite-flying, but because of the effectiveness of the metaphors throughout, the poem succeeds at working on several different levels.

Chiefly an imagery poem, it would appear that Cohen has chosen to use free verse rather than any definite rhythmical or metrical pattern in order to create a more effective and concise poem. His vivid, sensuous, yet precise word choices evokes a highly compelling mood, and helps to create the richly complex images of the kite that Cohen methodically develops using “a rising series of comparisons” (Scobie 26). It is these comparisons that are the backbone of the poem’s structure. Through his use of a series of metaphors, Cohen succeeds in accentuating the numerous connotations of his title—that above all else, the “kite is a victim” (Cohen 1). Although the first stanzas present a balanced impression, it can be seen that the poet subtly remains in control. The falcon is “desperate” but “trained” (Cohen 6), the fish is “already caught” (Cohen 10), and the poem is “given to the wind” (Cohen 16) only “until someone finds you / something else to do” (Cohen 18-19). The poet’s control is only humbled with the cordless moon; but as we will see, even that will appear premeditated.

The kite image itself is one of the Cohen’s most successful images and may be interpreted in several different ways. In a general sense, it seems to imply a struggle between independence and control—in the literal sense, this indicates the kite—but because Cohen has been true to the emotional integrity of this level, the image is able to expand onto other levels as well, one of which is the “kite as a poem” (Scobie 26). This struggle between freedom and domination is well known to any writer, as the degree to which a poem will seem to take on a life of its own. As a more personal symbol, the kite may represent a relationship in which power games are played. Conversely, the kite may also symbolize a general conflict between personal control and our original and free-thinking selves.

In all these cases, the objects initially appear as something to be controlled, but are soon manipulated to believe an illusion of freedom in the “high sweet air” (Cohen 7). In reality, power is never truly relinquished and these objects may be “tamed in your drawer (Cohen 9), at any time, and they are “victims you are sure of” (Scobie 27).

This image is not complete with the role of winning domination. As the objects compared become increasingly independent, there will be eventual success with the complete liberation of the “cordless moon” (Cohen 25). With this image, the roles appear to be reversed, the victim now “prays” (Cohen 24) to be found “worthy” (Cohen 26). But it appears that ultimate gratification is found in this glamorous defeat, that the loss is intentional, and this too, has been calculated and controlled. Hence, the paradox endures and the domination remains, unsurrendered. Even as a victim, the objects do not possess any more individuality because they have been synthesized to prevail. It appears that even the masters of this victim are still, in a sense, “victims he is sure of” (Scobie 28).

Beneath the surface beauty of the poem, sadistic aspects of Cohen are revealed. His tendency to hold captive “a victim you are sure of” (Cohen 1) and a fish “already caught” (Cohen 10), being played with “carefully and long” (Cohen 12), to prolong its suffering, apparently in the name of sport, or art, seems to indicate a sadistic personal power. As so often happens in Cohen, this is ultimately reversed in the final stanza when master becomes slave and the personalities are interchanged (Scobie 23).

The use of figurative language and literary techniques in the poem exists perhaps, more frequently due to the lack of rhythmic or metric structure. The fixed rhyme scheme may have been given up in favour of these other kinds of wordplay. Thus various examples of alliteration, consonance, assonance, oxymoron and metaphors, as well as personification, may be found. Alliteration is illustrated in line 22, “friends with the field,” and consonance is demonstrated with “travelling cordless” in line 25. Assonance is apparent in line 9, “your drawer” (Cohen 24), “the whole cold night before”. An example of an oxymoron may be seen between lines 13 and 14, “won’t give up, / or the wind die down”, and in line 6, “desperate trained”, as well. Metaphoric comparisons are drawn between the kite and a falcon, fish, poem, and a “contract of glory”. The poem employs personification as the kite “pulls”, and “calls you master/fool”.

Conceptually, the poem may be seen as an example of the theme of victimization, or the struggle between the powerless and the powerful.

Overall, this poem appeared somewhat of a testimonial on the role of the poet, Cohen attempts to denounce his role as poet and demonstrate the “powerless/powerful enigma” one experiences when creating a written work which manages to “take on a life of its own” (Scobie 25). As the opening poem of the collection, “A Kite Is a Victim” manages to present the themes, and set the tone for the entire volume of Cohen’s book, The Spice-Box of Earth.

Works Cited

Scobie, Stephen. Leonard Cohen. Vancouver: Douglas and Mcintyre ltd., 1978. Print.

A Kite Is a Victim

Leonard Cohen

A kite is a victim you are sure of.

You love it because it pulls

gentle enough to call you master,

strong enough to call you fool;

because it lives 5

like a desperate trained falcon

in the high sweet air,

and you can always haul it down

to tame it in your drawer.

A kite is a fish you have already caught 10

in a pool where no fish come,

so you play him carefully and long,

and hope he won’t give up,

or the wind die down.

A kite is the last poem you’ve written, 15

so you give it to the wind,

but you don’t let it go

until someone finds you

something else to do.

A kite is a contract of glory 20

that must be made with the sun,

so you make friends with the field

the river and the wind,

then you pray the whole cold night before,

under the travelling cordless moon, 25

to make you worthy and lyric and pure.