

Famous Blue Raincoat: - an approach to an integrated analysis of a song

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(For copyright reasons, the lyrics to *Famous Blue Raincoat* are not reproduced here, but see for example Sony Music's official Cohen-page:

<http://www.leonardcohen.com/famous.html>)

Famous Blue Raincoat first appeared in 1971, on Cohen's third LP *Songs Of Love And Hate*, and can also be found on the *Greatest Hits*- compilation of 1975. The *famous blue raincoat* really existed. In the commentary in the booklet of the *Greatest Hits* LP, Cohen writes

I had a good raincoat then, a Burberry I got in London in 1959. Elizabeth thought I looked like a spider in it. That was probably why she wouldn't go to Greece with me. It hung more heroically when I took out the lining, and achieved glory when the frayed sleeves were repaired with a little leather. Things were clear. I knew how to dress in those days. It was stolen from Marianne's loft in New York sometime during the early seventies. I wasn't wearing it much toward the end.

The song is written in the key of a-minor. The time signature is 3/4, which is slightly uncommon in the rock and pop genre, but is used by Cohen in several other songs as well, like *Chelsea Hotel #2* or *Take This Waltz*. The tempo is fairly slow and the musical arrangement is very sparse. Cohen's guitar is predominant and carries the song; additionally there are female background voices in the stanzas and the third bridge, and in some spots there is also a string section. The lyric itself is not written in a strict meter, but, especially during the stanzas, the speech rhythm is essentially dactylic, which fits well with a 3/4 time signature. Interestingly enough, in the stanzas, where speech rhythm and musical rhythm would naturally coincide, Cohen's phrasing is very free, with many entrances slightly ahead of or after the beat, , whereas during the bridges and the choruses, which are written in free verse, he sticks very much closer to the underlying beat. The melodic range of the song stretches from G to g, a range well within the normal parameters for the speaking voice. In the melody, seconds are predominant; occasionally, Cohen uses thirds, and, between bridges and choruses, octaves. In his singing, Cohen often glides from one note to the next, connecting the notes even more strongly. Since the volume of Cohen's voice stays on a moderate to quiet level throughout the

song, the vocals are very close to normal speech. this is especially apparent when compared to Jennifer Warnes' version of the same song, which is far more "musical", with the rhythm of the vocals far closer to the underlying beat, more nuances in timbre, tone color, and dynamics. The structure of the song stays close to standard stanza-bridge-chorus pattern often found in popular music, without adhering to it too strictly. The basic chord patterns are:

for the stanzas: **Am Am F F Dm7 Dm7 E7 E7**

for the bridges: **Am Am Hm Hm Am Am Hm Hm Am Am G G F F G7 G7,**

and for the choruses: **C C C C G7 G7 G7 G7 Am Am F F Em Em G G F F Em Em**

The song can roughly be divide into the following segments:

guitar intro (16 bars)

| | | |
|-----------|-------------|------------|
| stanza 1: | 16 bars | l. 1 - 4 |
| bridge 1: | 16 bars | l. 5 - 6 |
| chorus 1 | 16 +4 bars | l. 7 - 10 |
| stanza 2: | 16 bars | l. 11 - 14 |
| bridge 2: | 16 bars | l. 15 - 16 |
| chorus 2: | 16 + 4 bars | l. 17 - 20 |

guitar interlude: 8 bars

| | | |
|-----------|-------------|------------|
| stanza 3: | 16 bars | l. 21 - 24 |
| bridge 3: | 16 bars | l. 25 - 26 |
| chorus 3: | 16 bars | l. 27 - 28 |
| chorus 4: | 16 + 4 bars | l. 29 - 32 |

Outro: 7 bars

The structure of the song turns out to be fairly regular, with only the chorus being slightly unusual with additional four bars as a conclusion. 16 bar units as Cohen uses them here, are used very frequently in Western popular music, as Charles Hartman "Quatrains are by far the commonest song stanzas, and four-, eight-, or sixteen-measure sections are the musical units most comfortable for Western audiences." (Hartman 102).

Equal numbers of measures in the sections does not mean equal number of words or syllables, however: In the stanzas, Cohen fills the measures fairly evenly with roughly one syllable per beat, whereas in the bridges and the choruses, there are frequently breaks between phrases, or even within phrases, possibly to maintain symmetry between the separate sections. The guitar outro is a good indication of how used our ears to 4-based units are: the outro ends after measure 7 and the ear is irritated by the missing eighth measure, especially so since the outro ends on the minor dominant chord without a resolution.

In *Famous Blue Raincoat* Cohen does not use a strict rhyming pattern; instead, he creates a sound structure, or *phonological cohesion* as Traugott et al call it (Traugott et al. 69), by using rhymes, pararhymes, assonances, consonances inner rhymes and alliterations.

The following figure, the beginning of *Famous Blue Raincoat*, shows some of these structures

| | | |
|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | <i>It's four in the morning, the end of December</i> | assonances |
| 2 | <i>I'm writing you now just to see if you're better</i> | |
| 3 | <i>New York is <u>c</u>old, but I <u>l</u>ike where I'm <u>l</u>iving</i> | alliteration |
| 4 | <i>There's music on Clinton Street all through the evening.</i> | |
| 5 | <i>I hear that you're building your little house <u>d</u>eep in the <u>d</u>esert</i> | |
| 6 | <i>You're living for <u>n</u>othing <u>n</u>ow, I hope you're keeping some kind of record.</i> | |

This figure indicates that despite the lack of a strict rhyme scheme, the text is by no means unstructured on the phonological level. Cohen avoids an overly artificial-sounding lyric without making the lyric appear "formally ponderous or naive" (Hartman 98).

The song is a story about a love triangle, written by one of the people involved to another one. In the letter, the lyrical I gives an account of some loosely connected scenes of the past, which hint at the relationships of these three people with one another. The exact nature of these relationships however, is far from clear, as two attempts at interpreting *Famous Blue Raincoat* show. Christoph Graf for example writes in his Cohen monograph:

Is he the one writing the letter (*I'm writing you now just to see if you're better*) or is it somebody else? Is he the third person with respect to a couple, or is there a third person with respect to his relationship (*Well, your enemy is sleeping, and his woman is free*). Or does he, as L. Cohen write a letter to a third person and can this person be L. Cohen, which would make him the fourth person involved. The text remains unclear, probably intentionally. (Graf 1996: 126)

In another interpretation, Scobie writes:

The letter is addressed to a "you" whose sex is, unsurprisingly, unspecified (One image, "with a rose in your teeth", suggests female, via the Carmen stereotype; but "you" is also addressed as "my brother.") Other characters are "my woman" and, not necessarily the same person, "Jane". The song takes place against a network of personal relationships which are never made fully explicit. (Scobie 147)

Cohen himself does comment on the song in a BBC-Radio broadcast hosted by himself, but does not really clarify matters either:

The problem with that song is that I've forgotten the actual triangle. Whether it was my own - of course, I always felt that there was an invisible male seducing the woman I was with, now whether this one was incarnate or merely imaginary I don't remember, I've always had the sense that either I've been that figure in relation to another couple or there'd been a figure like that in relation to my marriage. I don't quite remember but I did have this feeling that there was always a third party, sometimes me, sometimes another man, sometimes another woman. It was a song I've never been satisfied with. It's not that I've resisted an impressionistic approach to songwriting, but I've never felt that this one, that I really nailed the lyric. I'm ready to concede something to the mystery, but secretly I've always felt that there was something about the song that was unclear. So I've been very happy with some of the imagery, but a lot of the imagery... The tune I think is good, I remember my mother approving of it, I remember playing the tune for her, in her kitchen, and her perking up her ears while she was doing something else and saying "that's a nice tune". (BBC 1)

Even Cohen is not sure, or not sure anymore, about the exact nature of the relationships in *Famous Blue Raincoat*; or he is just not willing to resolve an atmosphere of ambiguity that he might have created intentionally. Nevertheless, this quotation seems to confirm Scobie's observation, that the sex of the You is deliberately ambiguous (if one considers the phrase *my brother* to be purely biblical-allegorical.) The fact that Cohen speaks of a triangle, one the other hand, seems to speak against the notion, that more than three people are involved; the line *And you treated my woman*, seems to indicate that the author of the letter is Jane's husband, and not the third man, but as will be shown later, the other reading cannot completely be discarded. Especially in its ambiguity and with the third man as a kind of saint, and teacher figure, the constellation in *Famous Blue Raincoat* seems also similar to that of *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen's second novel.

Since this triangle is at the heart of *Famous Blue Raincoat*, the main emphasis in the following analysis will be on how Cohen slowly unfolds the situation before the eyes of his audience, and with a few brush strokes, as it were, creates a very strong atmosphere through very careful handling of fragments of information and use of imagery.

The first stanza (1-4) is the general introduction into the song, in which Cohen defines what Halliday/ Hasan call *field*, *mode* and *tenor*. *Field* is "the total event, in which the text is

functioning, together with the purposive activity of the speaker or writer” (Halliday et al. 22). In case of a fictional text like *Famous Blue Raincoat* one must, of course, distinguish between Leonard Cohen as the author of the song with the listeners as his audience, and ”L. Cohen”, the fictional author of the letter with a fictional addressee. The central line for this is 2, in which ”L. Cohen” tells the exophoric ”you” his reasons for writing the letter *I’m writing you now just to see if you’re better* (even this might not be the true motivation), and in which Leonard Cohen simultaneously supplies his listeners with information about the *mode*, ”the function of the text in the event, including therefore both the channel taken by the language (...) and its genre (...)” (Halliday et al. 22). The text is a personal letter, which also says something about the *tenor*: ”The tenor refers to the type of role interaction, the set of relevant social relations, permanent and temporary” (Halliday et al. 22). Cohen manages to convey all this essential information in just one line.

Whereas Line 2 contains information about what the protagonist is doing at the moment, lines number 1, 2, and 4 describe another component of the *field*: where and when the letter is being written.. Line 1 contains information about the time of day and the season, line 3 and 4 about the location. the mood is melancholic, it is late at night in a big city (*four in the morning*, l. 1; *New York*, l.3), it is winter (*the end of December*, l. 1), and accordingly, *cold* (l. 3), (*cold* might of course also be used in a metaphorical sense) the accompaniment, with its sparse guitar fingerpicking and the incomplete minor cadence (i III iv V) contributes to this atmosphere of ”gentle loneliness, as Scobie calls it. With the exception of *but* in l. 3, all the main clauses in this first stanza are connected asyndetically, which gives the stanza a rather associative character, and leaves the connections of the separate observations unclear. this is characteristic for the entire lyric: main clauses are mostly connected with and, or asyndetically; connecting devices which would indicate logical or other relations are missing, as are adverbials which could also define the propositions of the sentences more exactly. The lyric contains descriptions, but no explanations.

Aside from information about the I in the text, there is also some about the you: the line *I’m writing you know just to see if you’re better* implies, that the last time I and You were in contact, You was not well. This thread is then picked up again in the second stanza.

Line 5 then marks the beginning of the bridge, indicated musically by the following chord pattern: **Am Am Hm Hm Am Am Hm Hm Am Am G G F F G7 G7**

Whereas the stanza described the current situation of the I, the bridge describes the current situation of the You, who is retreating, into a (probably metaphorical) desert. Together with the chords in the accompaniment, which are predominantly minor, Cohen creates an atmosphere

of loneliness and isolation by using the desert-image and the laconic statement *You're living for nothing now*.

In the accompaniment there is a strict separation of minor and major chords; the change from minor to major coincides, with the switch of the focus from the You to the I: *I hope you're keeping some kind of record* shows the attitude of I towards you; there is still a degree of personal interest; on the other hand, I hear implies that currently there is no communication, another example for Cohen's subtle way of information management.

the next four lines make up the chorus, which in *Famous Blue Raincoat* is marked more by melody and harmony than by strict repetition of phrases. Lines 7- 9 are repeated in lines 29 - 31, the melody is repeated, slightly varied and with different words in lines 17 - 19 and lines 27/28. the beginning of the chorus is still dominated by major chords, later on the minor elements become more frequent again

C C C C G7 G7 G7 G7 Am Am F F Em Em G G F F Em Em

The third person in the triangle, Jane appears for the first time, and her relationship with You is mentioned for the first time: The motif of the lock of hair, especially in connection with the desert motif in the first bridge lets You appear as some kind of saintly figure, on the other hand, a certain intimacy between Jane and You is hinted at, especially considering *night* in line 9. The exact meaning of go clear is, unfortunately, not clear, but it seems to have some religious connotation as well. Nadel connects the phrase with Cohen's own spiritual search in the 60s:

Cohen's dislocated situation in New York led him to exploring different sexual, spiritual and pharmaceutical pathways, and one was scientology. In 1968, as he was driving down sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, with Joni Mitchell, she spotted a building with a number of women wearing saris and handing out material. Above the door a large sign which read "Scientology". "What is Scientology?" she asked Cohen. "Oh, some crackpot religion," he replied. A few weeks later, he called from New York to say that he'd joined them and that they were going to rule the world. But a few months later, Cohen told Mitchell he was disenchanted and that he'd had some difficulty extricating himself from it. Initially, Scientology offered the goal of a "clear path", ("Did you ever go clear?" he asks in "Famous Blue Raincoat"). Cohen had also heard that it was a good place to meet women. On June 17th, 1968, Cohen received a Scientology certificate awarding him "Grade IV - release." (Nadel 160).

She said in line 8 indicates, that I was not present when You left, and the question in line 10 shows that this was also the time, that the direct contact between I and You ended. *Came by* (l. 7) implies Jane and I, that the two are not living together anymore.

In this chorus, it is also significant, that Cohen uses a lot of phonologically cohesive elements.

the par rhyme *hair - her* connects the first pair of lines, the reiteration of *go clear* the second pair. What is also interesting is that, with the exception of *ever* (l. 10), all words consist of one syllable; Cohen uses the same device in the second chorus and the bridges, though less strictly.

the second stanza (l. 11 - l. 14) and the second bridge (15 - 16) together form a kind of flashback, in which the relationships between the three central characters finally become clear, and in which the last encounter of I and You is described. As he ties the several strands of the narrative closer together, Cohen also uses a stricter form: for the first time in the lyric he uses proper rhymes (*older-shoulder; train Marlene, life - wife*), which form an aa bb cc pattern. For the first time, we are given information about the addressee, but like the description of the situation as a whole, the description of the character remains vague; Cohen creates an image of a someone burdened by resignation and aimlessness; this becomes apparent in You's body (*you looked so much older*, l. 11) in his dress (l. 12) and his actions (*you'd been to the station to meet every train*, l. 13);

The motif of Lili Marlene as a mystical female saviour figure used in this stanza also appears elsewhere in Cohen's work, like in his well-known concert introduction to *Chelsea- Hotel #2*, which Nadel cites as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a hotel in New York City. There was an elevator in that hotel. One evening, about three in the morning, I met a young woman in that hotel. I didn't know who she was. Turned out she was a great singer. It was a very *dismal* evening in New York City. I'd been to the Bronco Burger; I had a cheeseburger; it didn't help at all. Went to the white horse Tavern, looking for Dylan Thomas, but Dylan Thomas was dead. I got back into the elevator and there she was. She wasn't looking for me either. She was looking for Kris Kristofferson [Laughter]. "Lay your head upon the pillow." I wasn't looking for her, I was looking for Lily Marlene. Forgive me these circumlocutions. I later found out she was Janis Joplin and we fell into each others arms through some divine process of elimination which makes a compassion out of indifference and after she died, I wrote this song for her. It's called the Chelsea Hotel. (Nadel 144).

The following bridge (15 - 16) is probably essential for understanding the triangular situation in *Famous Blue Raincoat*. Lacking a Lili Marleen, You turns to Jane, who is, it becomes evident here L. Cohen's wife. This essential information is only carried by the possessive determiner *my* in *my woman* (15). In line 15, for the first time in the song, there is a certain bitterness on the side of I towards You: *to treat someone to something* normally has positive connotations, whereas in this case, all that Jane receives from You is *a flake of your life*, a shallow fragment, and Jane pays a high price for this: *And when she came back she was nobody's wife* (l. 16). *Flake* is one of the few examples for poetic diction in the song, which is otherwise kept in a normal, everyday register.

If one takes biographical information into account, then this passage presents some unexpected problems, because the references to the *famous blue raincoat* (12) and to Lili Marleen draw parallels between Cohen's biography and the You, whereas the author of the letter signs it with "L. Cohen". And the "divine process of elimination which makes compassion out of indifference" seems a very fitting description of the situation between Jane and You. described in 15/ 16. Perhaps I and You represent different aspects of Cohen's personality. This shows the additional facets that need to be taken into account in the analysis of singer/ songwriter songs because of the multiplicity of overlapping "voices" in the song, like that of the singer, that of the lyrical I, and that of the author.

On the musical level, lines 17 - 20 are marked as chorus; the lyric continues the description of You ; then the attention shifts to I's situation. In this chorus, Cohen again uses the technique of hinting at connections by supplying seemingly irrelevant facts: *Well I see Jane's awake*, implies that Jane is staying with L. Cohen at the time the letter is being written and *she sends her regards* (20) indicates, that L. Cohen still tolerates further contact between Jane and You, despite what has happened, which points forward to the third stanza and bridge.

After this chorus, there is break, musically as well as in the narrative structure. After the guitar interlude, the perspective changes. Up to this point, the lyric has characteristics of a loose narrative. In the third stanza, the emphasis shifts onto the feelings of the lyrical I. As the stanza progresses, these feelings are described with increasing directness. the stanza starts with a question, which in itself expresses a certain ambivalence, by the very nature of questions as such as well as by the phrase *my brother, my killer* (l. 21), which probably alludes to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, and which might support the assumption that the two male protagonists represent two aspects of Cohen. The next phrase describes feelings more directly, but the ambivalence and distance is kept through the use of *I guess*. In contrast to this is the last line *I' nglad you stood in my way* unmediated and unmodified; this sudden expression of friendship is slightly unusual, considering what has happened so far in the lyric. *Glad* (24), together with *like* (3) and possibly *thanks* is one of the few words with positive connotations in the entire lyric.

The asyndetic connection of the main clauses gives this a very intense character, which is amplified by the frequent use of parallel structures, like the two *what*-questions (21/ 22), the noun phrases *my brother, my killer* (l. 21), and the two main clauses in l. 23 which are not only built parallelly, but also connected by the anaphora *I guess*. Line 24 as a conclusion is

connected to line 23 by the triple g-Alliteration (again each of them on the 1-beats) and with line 22 by the rhyme *say - way*.

This expression of forgiveness and reconciliation is complemented by the offer to enter again the net of relationships. the verb *come by* for the first chorus is echoed here, like the parallel structures. The parallelism *for Jane or for me* (l. 5) again indicates the fact, that there was a relationship between You and I and that I would not resent it, if the contact between You and Jane would be renewed in the future. In the next line, the use of pronouns is very interesting, because I refers to himself using third person proforms (*your enemy; his woman* , l. 26), which as in the case of *my woman* leaves a certain degree of ambiguity in the lyric.

The relationship between I and Jane seems to have suffered (*his woman is free*), but the dualism expressed in *brother my killer* is continued into the third chorus, we are finally given some hints concerning the relationship between I and Jane prior to You's arrival: *thanks, for the trouble you took from her eyes I thought it was there for good so I never tried*. Apparently, this relationship was not ideal either, and, in some respects, the encounter with You was also some kind of redemption for Jane, which ties in with the saintly character given to You earlier in the text. There is another interesting stylistic aspect to this phrase, as Scobie notes: "‘Thanks for the trouble you took’ it begins, then neatly turns and literalizes that conventional phrase by adding ‘from her eyes’". (Scobie 148)

The causal *so* in line 28 is one of the few conjunctions in the text which express the nature of the connection between two sentences or the actions described in them. Both this sentence and the one containing the final infinitive construction in line 2, describe an action (or the lack of one) of the lyrical I. The I is the only character that emerges somewhat clearly in the lyric; the other two characters are described only from an outside perspective, , described by an I who, as can be seen by the lack of conjunctions or adverbials, cannot explain what has happened, only describe it and even that only in a very rudimentary fashion. Adjectives which would complement nouns are almost as rare as adverbials. It seems that for the I, even his wife his beyond his comprehension, as the line *I thought it was there for good so I never tried* shows, and perhaps this is the reason why Jane responded to You. The I stays passive, just watching what is going on, as the verbs used in sentences with I as the subject show: *I hear* (l. 5), *I see* (19), *I hope* (l. 6); *I thought* (also *we saw* (l. 11)). the only verb describing an actual action of the I is *write* (l. 2), and the action is that of recording; You on the other hand acts.

The lyric ends with a repetition of the first chorus, in which the question *Did you ever go clear?* is replaced by *Sincerely L. Cohen*, which reminds the readers that the song is a letter. The sudden formality of this ending is a bit surprising, considering the very intimate nature of

the letter so far.

The song ends with a guitar outro, that uses the same pattern as in the stanzas, but ends after seven measures on the minor dominant, giving the ending an open, unfinished character. The final harmonic resolution is missing the same way as the resolution of the personal situation of the three characters in the song. In this instance, the musical structure of the song can be said to actually carry meaning independently of the text, an observation that leads to the question of the nature of the relationship between music and lyric in *Famous Blue Raincoat*

The question, of whether in a given song, it is the music or the lyric is predominant, is always a difficult one to answer, precisely because a song is more than just the sum of its ingredients. One could of course say that the melody does not contribute much to *Famous Blue Raincoat*, because it is fairly simple. On the other hand, one could also argue that this is a matter of choice, and that a simple melody fits the quiet atmosphere of the song better than a more intricate melody would (even though in Cohen's case, the melodic lines might also be influenced by the acknowledged limitations of his voice.)

but all in all, one can probably say that the function of the music in *Famous Blue Raincoat* is to support the lyric, rather than to supply an independent level of meaning, to constitute a second sign system, as it were. It supports the lyric in two ways: harmony and rhythm create a basic structure on top of which Cohen places the text. As described above, the musical structure is far more regular than that of the lyric, and the rhythm creates a foundation, upon which Cohen can phrase more freely without losing rhythmic coherence. On the level of sound, the music, with the minor key, the sparse instrumentation, the slow tempo and the evenly low volume helps creating the melancholic, sad mood that is inherent in the text. Development takes place in the lyric, the music essentially remains the same throughout the song, or at least throughout corresponding sections. The relatively subordinate nature of the arrangement also becomes evident when comparing Cohen's original version with that of Jennifer Warnes, with a completely different instrumentation. the nature of the song is changed far more by the fact that it is not Cohen himself singing than by the fact that the accompaniment consists of piano and fretless bass. It might be interesting to examine whether this assumption concerning the relationship between music and lyric holds true for all of Cohen's songs: In the BBC broadcast on 7/8/94, Cohen and Jennifer Warnes mention a marked change in Cohen's writing in his last records, when he was able to present his ideas more clearly to musicians by using a keyboard. In her study about of *Take this Waltz*, for example, Charlene Diehl-Jones writes:

If, for instance, we didn't find Vienna in the first line of the song, we would still recognize the Viennese heritage here, Strauss waltzes and the tradition of the lover's dance. And Cohen scores in the wheeze of the accordion, the pluck of the mandolin, conjuring the charm of another time, another place. The setting, I would argue, is critical to the functioning of "Take This Waltz": it positions the piece, acknowledges an ancestry. One of this song's delights is its directness of copy, the blatant waltz rhythm which refuses either decoration or disguise, the unapologetic instrumentation which recovers another tradition of folk-art music. (Diehl Jones)

In *Take This Waltz*, matters are obviously different than in *Famous Blue Raincoat*. Here instrumentation and musical genre seem to have a far greater influence on the overall meaning of the song.

At the end of an analysis like this one, there is always the question, whether the gain in information was worth the effort that went into it, and whether dissecting a song, especially a song, does not diminish its aura. As a singer I have been singing *Famous Blue Raincoat* for year, but nevertheless as the analysis progressed, I was increasingly amazed at how much there was I had not noticed all this time. and listening to it now, I do it with an increased awareness of the of the interplay of so many different elements, whose interaction make songs, and Cohen's songs, such an unique art form.

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