



## Hallelujah – Leonard Cohen - Notes



- **Activity type:** "A think in English"
- **Level:** Upper-Intermediate / Advanced
- **Notes:** Leonard Cohen spent five years writing about 80 verses for this song, four of which were eventually included on his 1984 album *Various Positions*. It has become his most covered song, although most versions (including many of Cohen's subsequent live performances) are inspired by John Cale's 1991 recording. Critics often cite Jeff Buckley's 1994 cover as the definitive version.
- The lyrics feature many biblical references, referring to King David, Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, and possibly the immaculate conception. Cohen has said of the song's meaning: "It explains that many kinds of hallelujahs do exist, and all the perfect and broken hallelujahs have equal value."
- **Further Reading:**  
<http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/appleyard.html>  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7787355.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7787355.stm) (*with link to covers quiz*)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah\\_\(Leonard\\_Cohen\\_song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah_(Leonard_Cohen_song))

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English language teaching worksheets are normally designed to increase the learner's receptive and productive competence in the four skills. This worksheet, a 'Think in English' worksheet, is different. Its purpose is to practise the fifth or, better, the **underlying skill** – Thinking in English. Without thinking there can be no language formulation and no production.

As we listen to songs, they bring back memories, stir our feelings, make us dream, take us into a whole interior world of our own in harmony with and in reaction to the song. We don't "sing along", we "think along". This worksheet encourages you to do just that. And what more stimulating, deeply felt, in many ways puzzling, song than Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*?

As will become clear from what follows, the song invites more questions than attempts to answer them. That, of course, is an essential characteristic of all good art: music, literature, the visual arts. A great deal of our thinking consists of asking ourselves questions.

So just think your way through this worksheet, and move your lips to the words when it seems appropriate.



## Hallelujah – A Think In English



1. “Hallelujah” is a word that makes all religions one. It cancels out differences.

Hear the word in your head.

- Whisper it to yourself to express appreciation.
- Exclaim it to express relief.
- Sigh it to express hope.
- Raise your head and pronounce it to express thanks and praise to God.
- Hear it in your head again as **music**.

2. Listen to the song. In the parts where “Hallelujah” is repeated several times, can you hear

- appreciation
- relief
- thanks
- praise to God
- hope
- music?

Rank them to show, in your view, which predominates.

3. Here are the other lines in which “Hallelujah” occurs. What does each line suggest about Hallelujah? What does it make you see/feel? Does it tell some kind of story?

- The baffled king composing Hallelujah.

*Is he composing on a harp? Is he mouthing the words of a psalm as he writes them? Is he dictating to a scribe?*

*Ask yourself questions of this kind for each of the other lines.*

- And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah
- It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah
- And every breath we drew was Hallelujah
- The holy or the broken Hallelujah
- With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

4. The first three lines of the song use the first person (I = Cohen), the third person (David = Kind David) and the second person (you, singular or plural). Who is, or are, “you”? Is it the same person who “needed proof”? And who is the other third person (She)? Is this the same “she” that “I” made love to (“when I moved in you”)?

5. The song seems to have many interrelated themes. Listen to it and underline parts that suggest the song is “about”

- Music
- Belief in God
- Creating music and poetry being a link between Heaven and Earth
- Love
- Sexual love
- Frustration
- Finding salvation
- The physical and the spiritual sides of life
- Love which kills
- Love is suffering

6. David is King David, the second King of Israel who wrote the psalms, considered to be poems, in the Book Of Psalms. He was a musician too. 1 Samuel 16.23 in The King James Bible is the text that presumably inspired the first part of Cohen’s song. Here it is.

*And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.*

How does this relate to the first lines of the song, do you think?

What is the “secret chord”? Cohen describes it with a composer’s precision:

The fourth, the fifth

The minor fall, the major lift

... but King David himself seems not to know how he arrived at the “secret chord”:

The baffled king composing Hallelujah

7. However baffled, he seems to have been inspired to find the connection between the physical and the spiritual.

What references does Cohen make to the hard, cruel, sensual experiences of life, human relationships, physical love, physical beauty? Some of them are easy to picture (“she cut your hair” – but whose hair? Is this Delilah cutting Samson’s hair? Is it a metaphorical way of referring to such a woman removing all a man’s virility?)

8. What saves us, then? Music? It would seem so:

I’ll stand before the Lord of Song  
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Is music the link between the physical and the spiritual?

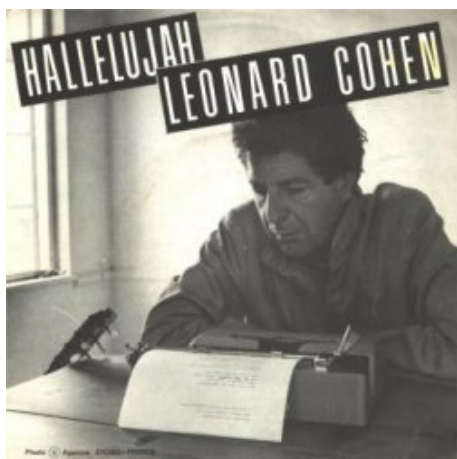
9. Cohen takes his inspiration from David and his composition of the psalms. Here is the first part of Psalm 40. It’s message can be closely related to Cohen’s song. Turn it over in your mind.

1. *I waited patiently for the LORD, and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.*

2. *He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.*

3. *And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD.*

4. *Blessed is that man that maketh the LORD his trust, and respecteth not the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies.*



10. U2 made this into the song “40”. Listen to it (you can find it on [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com)) and read the lyrics.

I waited patiently for the Lord  
He inclined and heard my cry.  
He brought me right out of the pit,  
Out of my miry clay.  
I will sing a new song,  
How long to sing this song?

He set my feet upon a rock  
And made my footsteps heard.  
Many will see,  
Many will see and fear.  
I will sing, sing a new song.  
How long to sing this song?

11. U2’s “40” has an important question to ask: “How long to sing this song?” In the context of being granted life, what does this mean?

Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* is torn between a “holy” and a “broken Hallelujah”. He will “stand before the Lord of Song / With nothing on (his) tongue but Hallelujah”. Are there any certainties in life? Where does the gift of music come from?

King David was “baffled”. If we had a logical series of answers to all these questions that we ask ourselves, and that *Hallelujah* makes us ask ourselves, what would be lost? Some of the following words might help you, though not one of them is intended to be an answer to the question.

Mystery / Deep feeling / The suffering that leads to understanding / Love / Values / The sense of life.

Fortunately, there is no answer. Or perhaps there is: everything of any real value.



## Hallelujah – Leonard Cohen – Lyrics



Note: there are six verses printed here, but not all are in each version of the song.

Now 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 and 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

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 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  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah