On Leonard Cohen’s Everybody Knows

Everybody Knows is a grim view of both the current and future states of the world.

Among the claimed issues that the song addresses, I will focus on three: the injustice and corruption prevalent in society, the downward spiral of the world, and the overreaching theme: mankind’s apathy toward its own impending demise. The last point serves as a container for the previous two, giving insight into one of Cohen’s messages existing here: that man’s unwillingness to take any action to change his situation directly prevents any hope of recovery from society’s problems, and yet “everybody knows”.

To begin, it is important to mention the rhetorical device Cohen uses throughout the song: repetition. This plays a significant role in my analysis. The majority of the lines in the first stanza begin with “Everybody knows” followed by a grim circumstance. This is important because as Cohen reiterates the phrase, it takes on a similarity to a cultish chant, demonstrating the indoctrinated nature of the society detailed in the song. The words also are repeated so frequently, that they become commonplace, demonstrating mankind’s acceptance of whatever happens as just how things are. In this way, the saying that “Everybody knows” is meant to be ingrained into the reader, becoming a matter of fact that isn’t even given much notice as the song progresses. This brings the reader into the mindset of the mankind detailed in the work, a mindset of indifferent acceptance and apathy.

In the first part of the work, the song focuses on injustice and corruption that are present in the society therein detailed. Cohen brings these two traits to light by referring to loaded dice, fixed fights, a captain telling lies on a sinking boat, and the upper class benefiting while the poor stay impoverished, which is also mentioned after the chorus with “Old Black...
Joe...still pickin' cotton”. The same exploitation that existed during slavery still is ongoing. “Joe” stands for a generic man hopelessly working so that everyone above him (who probably wouldn’t even care enough to hear his real name) can live lives of luxury. Things just aren’t fair. The people all want “a box of chocolates” or a rose. The rose and chocolates could symbolize love, and the people’s “want” demonstrates a certain entitlement that they feel for these things. Despite the injustice of the world, the people still try to get ahead anyway with “fingers crossed,” fully knowing that they’re going to lose. In response, the phrase “That’s how it goes” emphasizes that such is life; there’s nothing anyone can do to change the state of the world. At the end of the stanza, Cohen speaks of the “broken feeling” everyone has at the unfairness of society and relates that feeling to losing one’s “father or dog”. This juxtaposition of a human life with the life of an animal is at first confusing. It is also significant, however. It shows how, in a world like the one Cohen depicts, meaninglessness is produced. All action is inconsequential; man does not think he can effectively do anything to change his situation, so whether it’s a dog or father that meets demise, it doesn’t really matter. This fruitlessness traces back to the theme of apathy; if no action produces change, then there is no point in caring. This indifference, the thread that ties the song together, leads into the future and the idea of society’s downward spiral that Cohen also details.

Right after the chorus, Cohen establishes a sense of urgency with the phrase “now or never”. He says that it’s “me or you,” emphasizing the dog-eat-dog nature of times to come and points to cocaine as an escape from the situation. The urgent tone is reinforced when Cohen refers to the “Plague” that is coming and “moving fast”. To interpret the meaning of the word “plague” here, one can look to the lines that follow it. Therein, Cohen says that the “naked man
and woman” will become a “shining artifact of the past.” This, while trying to decipher the usage of plague, inserts another obstacle in the way of the analysis: what is symbolized by the naked man and woman? Again, further reading yields a possible interpretation. The “scene” mentioned in the next line paints a picture of the naked man and woman together. This image and its description of being “dead” point to the thought that the man and woman represent love, sex, and human interaction, all of which will soon be irrelevant. Any sort of interconnectedness from person to person will be lost in the time to come and will be looked back upon with longing, seen as a “shining” relic of better times. The next line mentions a “meter on your bed” that tells a fact that everyone knows. This, then, seems to imply (since the bed is not likely used for pleasure anymore), that the days until man’s death are simply ticking away: a fact about which everyone is conscious. With that obstacle cleared, the next stanza offers more insight into an interpretation of the plague. Cohen says that man is “in trouble”. His situation is dire. And after all of mankind’s collective experiences over time: from Calvary to Malibu, the bad and the good, society is “coming apart”. The world is urged to “take one last look at this Sacred Heart”. The heart is a symbol for Christ, which ties into the allusion to Calvary earlier, and which (in a more general sense) symbolizes deliverance from destruction. This crashing society is being told to take its last, fleeting look at goodness and salvation “before it blows,” or before it is lost forever. The fact is that it will be lost forever. Man is past the point of no return; it’s simply being suggested that he see what is being lost and perhaps develop some shred of regret before it’s gone. From all this, it can be surmised that the plague mentioned in the previous stanza likely symbolizes the fall of man, the plunging of civilization
that is rapidly approaching. The storm is coming, and everybody knows. Man sees his
downward spiral and his own impending destruction, yet he doesn’t care.

This nonchalance once again calls upon the overarching theme of apathy present in

*Everybody Knows*. Demonstrated specifically in the third stanza, Cohen speaks of a lover who’s been faithful “give or take a night or two.” The relaxed tone used in the stanza, for example:

“there were so many people you just had to meet / without your clothes,” takes the real, harsh
meaning of the line: “You cheated on me and slept with so many people,” and makes it softer.

This reflects the casual tone, which points to the fact that the speaker doesn’t care, that
nothing really matters anyway. This apathy is a theme throughout, and forms the problem that
perpetuates the problems that face mankind in the song. Society seems not to care about its
grim present and future because that’s just how the world is and there’s nothing anybody can
do to change it. The fact that man simply accepts his situation and lets himself fall ensures his
destruction, making it certain that all of the world’s vices will continue.

Leonard Cohen’s *Everybody Knows* is a cynical look at a humanity that simply waves its
hand and shrugs its shoulders at present injustice and the grim future that awaits. This apathy
perpetuates man’s downfall, and prevents any hope of salvation. Cohen, here, is depicting a
society where “everybody knows” where they’re going and where they know the “deal is
rotten”. However, for how foreboding the future looks, *nobody* cares enough to *do* anything to
change it.

*they just sit here waiting for Godot
or
Radiohead song, "Waiting for something to happen" song called The Bends

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**Overall comments:**
*Solid analysis and you do a thorough job of expanding upon the themes and ideas present in the song*
*Nice “chunking” of quotes throughout to lend support for your points*
*I agree the professor wants you to “pare it down and simplify” but I still think you need to create a bit of an argument and
get some of your astute “Bar baisms” in there. Mrs. Boyd and myself both want to see students analyze, analyze and
interpret a symbol, language, etc. to glean the meaning out of a work of literature or prose.
*I suggest maybe taking a bit of an angle as far as disagreeing or refuting his claims. Maybe Cohen is the most guilty of
this “apathy towards his demise” because he is the most cognizant of it and writes an entire song about it, but does
NOTHING to help his fellow man.*
--What’s your THESIS?? What are you arguing or proving?
*Check with your professor and see what he says and remember he’s the grader/ audience not me
Thanks for sending me the paper; I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and would like to see more of your papers. I also like the
song......very Johnny Cash meets John Paul Sartre.*