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The Social and the Divine in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*

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Abstract

In this BA paper, the postmodern aspects, along with the social and religious relationships of Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* are examined. This paper mainly focuses on finding characteristics of postmodernism as well as defining them. Mainly, postmodern characteristics such as parody, irony, and intertextuality will be explored and studied in respect to the work. After that, this BA paper will focus on the social relationships prevalent in the novel. The goal of this thesis is to see if the novel, and the main characters of it can be analysed in terms of the ideas put forth in the philosophy of Martin Buber. The analysis section of the thesis focuses on novel in question, in terms of postmodern characteristics that are visible in it, as well as the connection between the social functions of the characters, also analysing their relationship with the divine, looking into it through the terms of Buber's two modes of being: *I-Thou* and *I-It*.

1. Introduction

Leonard Cohen, born on the 21st of September, 1934, in Montreal, Canada, was a prolific novelist, singer-songwriter, and poet. Cohen enrolled in McGill University where he sought competence in the studies of English. While there, he started his writing career when he published collection of poems, which came out one year after he finished his studies, with Cohen being twenty-two at the time. Throughout his twenties, as well as during the beginning of his thirties, Leonard Cohen published several other significant literary works, including a poetry collection titled *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) as well as his most controversial work, *Beautiful Losers* (1966). After his literary career Leonard Cohen moved on to a career in music, recording music and sparsely publishing a few more literary works and a few poetry collections until his death, in 2016.

Not only did Cohen reach a successful career in music, but his literary endeavours lead him to gain eminence amongst the critics and the press as well. Some scholars, critics, and newspapers upon the publication of the work even started to compare Cohen to James Joyce, as *The Boston Globe*, in relation to the *Beautiful Losers*, stated that Joyce is alive and lives in Toronto under the name of Cohen (Clarkson: 2013). Leonard Cohen has published several literary works before *the Beautiful Losers*. The first, a poetry book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), was a work that put the author on the literary map. Not only this, but the work showed the main themes and topics that repeat and are important in the whole bibliography of the author as well. The main themes of the work are connected with love, mythology, and religion. Stephen Scobie describes Cohen as a 'Black Romantic', following in the tradition of Baudelaire, De Sade and Rimbaud, Cohen focuses on individual perception, taking imagination and hallucination to an extremity (1978, 3). Of course, with the author being born in Canada, it is no surprise that his works follow the thematic patterns of such authors as Doug Jones and Margaret Atwood (*ibid.*, 5). This tradition of Canadian writing is mixed with the tradition of the 'Black Romantics', Cohen's writing is reminiscent of the followers of this movement, as both him and, for example, De Sade focus on the experiences of sex, madness, and demise. They are central to their works, however, there is a difference between him and other Canadian writers, as extremity is definitely not a thing commonly encountered in Canadian literature, rather, on the contrary, due to the 'garrison culture' prominent both in the lives of Canadians and the Canadian literary tradition, these topics along with such extremity that Cohen adds to the tradition, may cause feelings of repulsion to some rather than interest or a search for value in them (*ibid.*, 6). Finally, when describing the main themes of the author's work, the aforementioned theme of religion

must be mentioned again, as it is quite central to most of the author's work. In his writing, Cohen focuses not on the essential vocabulary of religion or piety, but rather on the grandeur of emotions that it comes from, he focuses on the intensity of a total, full experience of a human, and this, of course, can be found in two areas: religion and sex (ibid., 8). Leonard Cohen's first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1958), as Michael Ondaatje states, contains poetry written from ages fifteen and twenty. This can be understood both as a statement of astonishment of such complexity, as well as an apology for the work being so immature (1970:4). Even though the author was quite young when it was published, this work, as it is quite common for many authors and their debut, it is a work that has underlying themes that follow the author throughout his whole bibliography. Themes like death, egoism, and the mythologizing of friends comes up in most of his later works as well.

Now, moving on to the focus of the BA paper. The book in question – Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. The novel, which the second and final novel by Cohen, is a work that focuses on four main characters in three radically different parts of the book itself. The first part, named the History of Them All, which is narrated by an unnamed scholar focuses on his obsession with a 17th century Native American woman, Catherine Tekakwitha. She is a convert to Catholicism and is beatified after her death, her life consists of constant struggle and self-harm, as well as constant punishment mixed with hatred from others. The narrator is obsessed with the idea of her, he spends his time looking through, contemplating, and fantasizing about her life, and Catherine herself, which breaks time boundaries and goes back and forth between the time of French colonialists and 1960s Canada.. The narrator's wife, Edith is an offspring of the same tribe, however, she is the last of that tribe of people. His best friend from childhood, whom the narrator calls F. takes him through various trials, those which are emotionally as well as sexually moving by nature, after the narrator's wife dies in an elevator accident, implicitly stated to be a suicide. Moving on to F. himself, an owner of a factory and an important figure of the Québécois rebel movement. The narrator himself is immersed in the study of Catherine, which takes his life fully, and he spends his days locked up in his apartment focusing only on that. The second chapter, named "a Long Letter from F." makes an obvious switch in narration itself, by making F. the narrator. This is the part of the book where the theme of the love triangle becomes more explicit, the focus of this letter is F. and the description of his fantasies and his dreams as well as a plan of how he seeks to achieve them, as well as another objective which focuses on the liberation of the narrator (both sexual and spiritual). This is the part of the novel where F. describes his sexual ventures with Edith, as he believed that it is only with her that he achieve the perfect orgasm. After this he describes the further life of Catherine Tekakwitha, as

well as her death, which was considered a miracle due to the fact that her skin turned white. F. comments on this stating that the church where focusing on a symbol of racism, the colour of a person's skin. The last part of the book named "An Epilogue in the Third Person" makes a switch in time and narration both, as it shows F. already old and the narration is in the third person. The beginning of this section describes him as a paedophile and he meets with a boy, who wants to learn more about the natives of the past, which in turn shows the reader that F. has molested the boy in exchange for these stories before, and he finds out that the boy has already contacted the police due to this. F. runs away and finds a woman who picks him, all dirty and with a strong stench, up and asks him to perform oral sex. This cuts off to a scene in an arcade with the police trying to catch him but it ends with F. morphing into a theatre screen showing Ray Charles in the sky.

The novel itself, due to being published in 1966, was firstly analysed and classified as a postmodern novel by scholars. The novel itself is a combination and a composite of different mediums and genres, including comic books, cinema, and as Linda Hutcheon herself states, the end of the book "is rented to the Jesuits for use as a document requesting Catherine's formal recognition as a saint. (Hutcheon, 1974:55) There are clearly visible polarities in the novel, the most prominent opposition being between that of religion and the flesh (ibid., 49). It has also been read as a work focusing on the 'outsiders', the defeated. The name of the novel, as it is obvious at first glance, quite explicitly proposes opposition and a focus on the 'outsider'. Losers, who have been left in the outskirts in most of classical come into the foreground here. Even the way that formal conventions, such as the narrator and structure, come into the work differs, "the essential unity of the work lies outside the temporal and spatial confines of plot and character" (ibid., 42). However, it seems that Cohen has been quite successful in this choice, as Michael Ondaatje states: "To write Beautiful Losers in a safe formal style would have been to castrate its powerful ideas and its vulgar sanctity." (1970:49) Subsequently, it must be mentioned that the novel is often seen by critics and scholars as that of social critique, first of all, the aforementioned statement of historical racism proves this claim to be conceivable. The second aspect of this are the events during which the novel takes place. As Ondaatje states: "It may well be that Cohen here compiles the sum total of the 'Canadian Experience'" (ibid., 89). The novel focuses on many different periods of Canadian history, starting with French Jesuits and the Natives, and coming all the way up to 1960s Quebec and the Quiet Revolution. Apart from the already mentioned 'garrison' culture, the Canadian experience also consists of conflict. The one that is mainly foregrounded in the novel, the French revolt against British rulers stems from the Quiet Revolution (1960-1970), which the

novel references quite often and even puts F. as one of the catalysts for it. It must be stated that another characteristic is prevalent in the novel, the certain quest for the self, which is prominent and actively visible in American literature, but, as a contrast, is put forth in a quite passive manner when it comes to Canadian literature. And as a move from the Canadian tradition, it is exhibited quite robustly in the *Beautiful Losers*. “The whole pattern of the fight for life, of the dangers of annihilation, of a being that is considered as split striving for its unity, is observable in *Beautiful Losers*” (ibid., 91). Many critics and interpreters, including Frank Davey, have also focused on the aspect of postcolonialism present in the novel, as well as multiculturalism. However, Frank Davey states, that there hasn’t been a significant focus on the Quebec setting of the novel (1999: 12). Although he himself takes up interest in the topic and looks into *Beautiful Losers* as a postcolonial novel.

Even though the novel has been subject to various research focusing on postcolonialism, as well as politics, the majority of the research focused on religion and sexual desire. The abundant allusions to saintliness and sexual promiscuity with all its acts seems to remain the top focus when it comes to the research of this novel. On the other hand, the focus of this BA thesis is that of the social relationships that unfold in Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* as well as the relationships between with the divine and the social relationships that are prominent in this work of literature.

The postmodern aspect is as important as any other in this work, as it is one of the first novels of Canadian literature to be considered postmodern with such scholars as Linda Hutcheon analyzing it as a postmodern work, therefore this aspect will also be acknowledged and contemplated. The novels postmodern characteristics and tendencies will be analyzed as well as aspects which are relevant to the understanding of the work as a postmodern novel. The analysis will enlist two works, Martin Buber’s *I-Thou*, in which his ideas about the nature of relationships, both spiritual and those relationships that are connected with other humans, is foregrounded and analysed, which will be useful to this thesis as well, as relationships with society and God will be the main focus of the BA paper. Not only this work, however, will form the basis of the framework, but Linda Hutcheon’s *the Canadian Postmodern* will also be used, as, the novel is an important work of Canadian postmodernism, therefore some resources and time will be spent to look into these aspects as well.

2. Theoretical Framework

After looking through the author's works and the critical reception as well as what was focused considering the work in question, it is now essential to move towards the theoretical framework part of the work and draw out the specific ideas that will be analysed in the work. In this section the framework for the analysis of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* will be provided, which will be mainly based on two main concepts: the postmodern and its aspects, as well as the modes of existence which are elucidated upon by Martin Buber in his work *I-Thou* (1984). The first section of the framework will focus on looking through and describing the prominent characteristics of postmodernism, whereas the second part will focus on Martin Buber's philosophy and the aspects of different modes of being proposed, which will be the focal point of the successive section. These two sections of the framework shall provide the background and specific aspects which will be needed in the analysis part of the BA paper.

2.1. The Postmodern

Postmodernism is clearly a difficult term to distinguish, as even in its nature it is many things interconnected together. Steven Connor states that postmodernism itself is concerned mainly with presentness (2004:9). However, even though it is common to associate the term with the present day, Kroker and Cook state that postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary (cf. Kroker and Cook 1986). Postmodernism is different from modernism, as it is not mainly originating from Anglo-American culture as well as not being mainly popular in that culture. It has its roots and gains a lot of interest in Europe as well. (Hutcheon, 1988:4) Therefore it can be stated that it is somewhat a transcontinental movement. Furthermore, it has its differences depending on the medium that it is represented in. As Steven Connor (2004) describes it: "it is a condition in which for the first time, and as a result of technologies that allow large-scale storage, access, and reproduction of records of the past, the past appears to be included in the present, at the present's disposal, and in which the ratio between present and past has therefore changed." (10) Therefore, the main differences which have developed in postmodernism mainly, when compared to other literary (and arts) movements, is that of a mashing-up of time, the beginning and the past.

Defining this term is not an easy task. Of course, one possible way to define this movement (in the literary sense), is to look into the timeline and shared characteristics of postmodern works. However, some people, including Linda Hutcheon, an academic concerned with literary theory as well as postmodernism do state that it is near-impossible to do such a thing. She states that a definition restricts postmodernism and places it into a frame which does not suffice and accurately represent it. (Hutcheon, 1988: 4)

There are many attempts to say what postmodernism is as well as to say what it is not. Some scholars state that it is rather a process, more than a term. It is something that always changes and something that cannot simply be put into a stable definition. Therefore, it should be suggested, rather, to refer to it as a 'poetics', and to comment on it in terms of discourse, merely offering hypotheses, overlaps of concern, and contradictions. (ibid. p. 14). As opposed to literary modernism, literary postmodernism works *in* time, rather than on time itself. It assumes that literature is intrinsically narrative (Connor, 2004:63). Therefore, rather than looking to define the term, it would be much more useful to look into the main characteristics of the postmodern.

One characteristic that is quite wide-spread in the works of postmodernism is parody. First of all, it is necessary to understand the term 'parody' itself in the way that it is going to be comprehended and utilized in this BA paper. Parody, as Linda Hutcheon states, does not warrant for the understanding of it as it was thought of a few centuries ago. Parodic practice is a technique that can be understood as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity." (Hutcheon, 1988:26) Therefore, there is not necessarily a need to look for ridicule when dealing with parody, it is enough to see visible repetition. When moving on to the characteristics of parody and its manifestation in postmodern works, Linda Hutcheon states that postmodern works are parodic generally because of the fact that they are intrinsically historical and connected with the frame of politics as well. (Hutcheon 1988:23) Therefore, most postmodern works, in one way or another, interact with history and politics. Of course, there is no trace of historicity being bona fide in these works. The historical and the political are utilized there as material, or perhaps even tools to the work itself, the different mediums entangle themselves into history and shift it to make new meaning, and therefore give new life. (ibid. p. 25)

Another important characteristic of postmodernism that has to be discussed is intertextuality. In the era of postmodernism, no sole work can be considered as original, as it is irreversibly

intertwined with other works. (Ibid. p. 126) Every postmodern work written acknowledges their temporality, their place in history. Not only the past, but the present as well is textualized, writing history is in itself an act of fictionalization, the past in postmodern texts is stressed heavily, however, the understanding that the historical texts are the only way to see the past is underlined as well. (ibid. p. 128) This does not take away any value from it, however, as any historical text, just like a postmodern one naturally interact with others, it contests authority, and is connected with parody as well, as it is necessary to step away from history and take a look at it from a further, and critical, viewpoint, which is exactly what parody does in the way that it has been explained earlier. (ibid. p. 129)

After looking into the understanding of postmodernism, it can be stated that there is no one clear definition, postmodernism shifts and changes, and to put it into one single definition would be quite a faux pas. It is much more beneficial to look into it as a movement that shares characteristics due to the technological and cultural advancements, and to look for characteristics, such as parody and intertextuality, in the text.

2.2. Two Modes of Relationships with the World

After describing the first theoretical concept, it is important to move on to the second concept that will be the main focus of the analysis in this BA paper, Martin Buber's philosophical work, *I-Thou* (1958). The author examines the nature of human interrelationships, in this work, and looks into how they communicate and what the different possibilities for focus are when a person lives their life, and, importantly, what is the nature of the focus for the person, if he or she sees things as objects, or focuses on relationships, along with the outcomes. As Stuart Charmé (1977) states, commenting upon the chosen focal point of this work: "Buber thus sets a dual purpose for himself. He wishes to point the way to a renewed sense of personal relation with God and to truly human interpersonal relations." (161). The main dichotomy presented by the author is that of the relationships of *I-Thou* and *I-It* The first being a relationship that focuses on the connection itself, and the latter focuses on the object itself, as an object.. Both of these notions will now be described and discussed. The comprehension of 'I' in Buber's philosophy can only be elucidated by focusing towards the world and existence in general. The author expands on this idea by stating that, when born, a human being does not have the capacity nor the ability to understand and comprehend the idea of a subjective existence. It is only when he

or she becomes able to separate their own body from the surrounding world that the person starts comprehending himself as the subject, or as the *I*. The *I* comes forward and whenever an utterance comes out where the subject is *I* the sentence is evocative of a relation with the surroundings as objects. (ibid. p. 23) The main difference of *I-Thou* and *I-It* is this: the primary word *I-Thou* comes from a natural reality, whereas the primary word *I-It* arises out of natural separation. (ibid. p. 24)

A mode of existence governed by relations, albeit somewhat rudimentary, seems to come naturally from birth. As Buber himself states, even when a child's life is just existence that occurs between sleep and sleep, there is an attempt, even at that age, to relate to something, anything. As the author states himself: "The primal nature of the effort to establish relation is already to be seen in the earliest and most confined stage. Before anything isolated can be perceived, timid glances move out into indistinct space, towards something indefinite." (Ibid. p. 23) It can be stated, therefore, that even at an early stage of existence there is an onset of a struggle to conform and attach to some, or any, relationship. It may be something as simple as a need for sustenance, or trying to understand a form that is impossible to grasp fully during that stage of development, nonetheless, it may be perceived as a connection of sorts.

This sort of a relation, according to Buber, is a relation with the world is an attempt to realize the inborn *Thou*. And as time moves on, when an infant, a child turns into a man or woman, when they start to comprehend their subjective existence, they move away from the *Thou* connection, and only when this happens, only when a person grows interacting with the *Thou*, which, in turn grows him or her, can the second primary word come out. (ibid. p. 30) It shifts from a connection with *Thou* as something that cannot be controlled, or coordinated, into *It*, which as Buber himself declares: "Only when things, from being our *Thou*, become our *It*, can they be coordinated. The *Thou* knows no systems of coordination." (ibid. p. 31)

2.3.1. I-Thou

The I-Thou connection that is attainable focuses on the relationship itself, does not focus on the world as an object, but rather as a relationship between two things, people, or animals. This connection has two layers, the religious and the ethical. The religious layer of this connection describes the person's relation with God, as it is a connection which cannot be tied with the material world, therefore it is true. The second layer, which is the ethical expands upon human

interaction with the world, be it animals, things or humans. He states that when a thing is first encountered, there is no knowledge of the thing from the perspective of the person encountering it. However, after some time, the thing becomes known, and moves on into a purely material relationship. (ibid. p. 81) As Martin Buber himself states: “The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being.” (ibid. p. 174) A person becomes himself or herself only through their relation with the *Thou*. There cannot be anything surrounding it, no underlying ideas and nothing intervening between it. The author focuses on the thought that a subject can only become the subject when he relates to a connection with another as a *Thou*. “The *I-Thou* relation explicitly includes a relationship to the vitality of the human body and since, for [Buber], more generally, an I-Thou relationship to all natural entities is conceivable.” (Santmire, 1968: 263) This means that this type of a relationship can be analyzed not only in terms of a relationship with God, but also in connection to relationships with the material world, human relationship, and relationships with things existing in the world.

When examining the religious side of Martin Buber’s philosophy, it is crucial to perceive a relationship with God, with the lost Garden of Eden, even as an idea, as an I-Thou relationship, between mankind and divinity. Every single person must understand that: “mortal life swings by nature between *Thou* and *It*.” (Buber, 1984:52) A person, according to him, constantly moves back into and out of the holy place (the Garden of Eden), from where he was removed. (ibid.) It is that holy spirit which fills them with the ability to comprehend *Thou*, that lets a person interact with the world not in terms of material, but in the terms of a connection.

2.3.2. I-It

The second connection is called the I-It. “In this type, the second person becomes not another person, but an *it*, a thing to be manipulated.” (ibid., 54). As H. Paul Santmire (1968) states, the *I-It* relationship is only able to manifest itself when a person perceives the existing underlying relationship as purely materialistic, existing in the *material-vital world of nature*. (262) One characteristic of *It* that Buber chooses to describe foremost is one concerning its understanding and influence in culture. As he states himself, the world of *It* is very much so concerned with culture, it is culture that expands *It*, it is the absorption of foreign experience that expands this world. (Buber, 1984:37). It is also important to elucidate that this type of relation, *I-It* manifests itself mainly, and primarily, through two things: experiencing and using. The first constantly shifts the understanding and reforms the world around the person, whereas the second, as the

author states, sustains, relieves and equips human life (ibid p. 38) It is, therefore, quite a pragmatic outlook towards the world, in which expanding knowledge constitutes a view towards the world through the prism and terms of utilisation. The author describes this duality in detail, as the nature of human life. He states that “Every response binds up the Thou in the world of It. That is the melancholy of man, and his greatness. For that is how knowledge comes about, a work is achieved, and image and symbol made, in the midst of living beings.” (ibid. p. 40)

When describing the I-It connection that Martin Buber analyzes and examines so deeply, it is also important to look into what is thought of the two central components of two central components of modern society: economics and state. It seems, as the author himself states that communal life leads man straight into looking at the world through the prism of I-It, as one of these central ideas of communal life focuses mainly on the world in terms of profit, whereas as the aforementioned idea focuses on the understanding of the world in terms of power. (ibid. p. 48) Any single object can enter the structure of a person’s knowledge only when it exists as *It*, as an object to be comprehended, not as a relationship to be experienced.

2.3.3. The Social and Political Aspect of I-Thou and I-It

Of course, it is crucial when discussing life and existence to also look into the social and political aspects of humankind. The philosophy of Martin Buber, and the aforementioned modes of being are connected with this as well, and the philosopher seeks to further comment upon this topic likewise. In his work, he states that first and foremost, a nation begins to exist only through the mode of being connected with *Thou*, with a personal connection, through it and because of it, the man builds a home for himself and others, and because of this the man writes songs and sings them. (ibid. p. 54) Therefore, it can be stated that the modes of being govern not only the life of the individual, but the life of a nation, or as Buber states himself, “the history of cultures.” (ibid. p. 55) Ergo, a man is, in a way, an extension of the nation and if the mode of being of a nation switches from a relationship as *I-Thou* to *I-It* and if a nation does not believe in destiny and self-will, so then the man does not meet existence in a genuine way anymore, he is only controlled merely by things and instincts. (ibid. p. 59)

Moving on to the social aspect of these modes, it is important to state the function of *I* in them. First of all, Martin Buber makes it a point to separate two different possibilities of *I*. He claims

that: “the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*.” (ibid. p. 62) Knowing this, an assumption can be made that it is not only the essence of an object that depends on the relationship, but also the essence of the subject themselves. The subject is only genuine when they are sharing their existence, the more that is shared, the more genuine does the experience become. (ibid. p. 63) Hence the relationship shapes not only the the understanding of the object by the subject, but through the relationship, the subject is shaped and changed itself. What is especially crucial, when commenting upon the social aspect, is the difference between the person and the individual, which becomes apparent through these relationships and through the relation with his or her environment. Whereas the person that retains an *I-Thou* relationship with the world, he or she focuses on the aspect of co-existence, the individual that moves to the prism of understanding the world through relationships of *I-It*, of course, focuses on their individuality. (ibid. p. 64) So, in state life and in personal life, there are two separate forms of *I*. One in which the *I* focused purely on individuality, and one which is focused on coexistence, it is only possible for any human to be somewhere in the middle, always swerving more to one side or another.

Finally, after discussing the theoretical works that this analysis will be utilizing, the paper will now move onto the analysis part where the postmodern aspects of the novel will be analysed as well as the relationships between the characters in the novel.

3. Sexual and Spiritual Chaos: A Look into *Beautiful Losers* through Two Modes of Being

After looking through some characteristics inherent in postmodernism and analyzing the modes of being along with their characteristics presented by Buber, it is now essential to move to the novel in question, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, to do a couple of things. First of all, the aim will be to find postmodern characteristics in the novel and to see if it shares these characteristics that are commonly found in other postmodern works. Secondly, it is important to look into the relationships between the main characters presented in the work, as well as their separate relationships with divinity, and evaluate those relationships, and the outcomes that they lead to through the philosophy of Martin Buber.

3.1. *Beautiful Losers* and Postmodernism

As Linda Hutcheon stated, postmodernism, specifically that which originated in Canada, began blooming in the 1960s. (Hutcheon, 1989: 1) This puts the work in question, written in 1966, right into the thick of it. Starting with the specifics themselves, this section focuses on a few definitive parts of the novel, as well as its narrative and form found in the novel to see if it manifests some of the aforementioned features. As well as to ascertain if the work manifests those characteristics common in postmodern works of literature.

First of all, it is crucial to analyze the narrative structure and narrative conventions that Leonard Cohen employs in the novel. An important detail that becomes visible upon taking a closer look at the novel is the usage of different genres. It switches several times, from a novel, to a letter, to a history book, to a comic book. This blend of genres seems to come as the novel moves on, organically integrating every other genre that it meets at the time of the narrative. Starting with the form of something that looks like a classic form of a novel in the first person, with a homodiegetic narrator, the work switches narrators in the second part and is written as a letter from F. to the original narrator until finally in the third part of the book, aptly named "an Epilogue in the Third-Person" it once more shifts to a different type of narration, which features a heterodiegetic storyteller. Finally, at the absolute end of the narrative there is once more a break and the ending of the book is 'rented' to the Jesuits, who in turn, are asking for the beatification of Catherine Tekakwitha in French and English languages. This type of self-consciousness of the work is also noted to be a postmodern feature in postmodern narrative theory. This is prominent in two ways: firstly, the novel looks back at itself by coming back to

the exact thing that it started with, an Iroquois, Catherine Tekakwitha, the novel revisits its own past, secondly, the narrative shifts to a different narrator, self-conscious of that choice, explicitly stating that: “the end of this book has been rented to the Jesuits.” (Cohen, 1966:306) These features, self-consciousness, as well as revisiting the past of the narrative are emphasized by many commentators as being definitive characteristics of the postmodern narrative. (Currie, 54:1998)

As mentioned before, the novel begins with Catherine Tekakwitha, an Iroquois saint, and a direct call to her: “Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you (1656-1680)? Is that enough? Are you the Iroquois virgin? Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River? Can I love you in my own way?” (Cohen, 1966:3) The quote shows that the work, or to be more specific, the narrator, immediately makes a connection with history, and even addresses and questions the reality of historical fact by denoting it clearly, as a pure date, at the same time pondering if that is all that is visible. Not only this, but there is also a section, a reflexive one, where the narrator delves into himself, asking, perhaps rhetorically, if it is possible for him to love her in his own way. As all that is left of her at the time the story of the novel takes place, the 1960s, is simply historic accounts. As Linda Hutcheon states, a postmodern work is one that is intertwined with history, analyzes it as well as having a dialogue with it. On the other hand, it also contains self-reflexivity, which means that in the interaction of a postmodern work with other parts of history it is introspective with itself as well, as it is equal parts historically-grounded and looking back at itself. (ibid., 2) In the first part of the narrative, there are quite a few parts that visibly express this dichotomy. For example, this passage, where the narrator contemplates his life, in connection with Catherine Tekakwitha and the past:

*Why must I be lashed to the past by the words of a dead man? Why must I reproduce these conversations so painstakingly, letting not one lost comma alter the beat of our voices? I want to talk to men in taverns and buses and remember nothing. And you, Catherine Tekakwitha, burning in your stall of time, does it please you that I strip myself so cruelly? I fear you smell of the Plague. **The long house where you crouch day after day smells of the Plague. Why is my research so hard?** Why can't I memorize baseball statistics like the Prime Minister? Why do baseball statistics smell like the Plague? What has happened to the morning? My desk smells! **1660 smells!** The Indians are dying! The trails smell! They are pouring roads over the trails, it doesn't help. Save the Indians! Serve them the hearts of Jesuits! I caught the Plague in my butterfly net. **I merely wanted to fuck a saint**, as F. advised. I don't know why it seemed like such a good idea. I barely understand it but it seemed like the only thing left to me.*

Here I am courting with research, the only juggling I can do, waiting for the statues to move and what happens? I've poisoned the air, I've lost my erection. Is it because I've stumbled on the truth about Canada? I don't want to stumble on the truth about Canada. (Cohen, 1966:43)

This passage signifies a dialogue with history from the perspective of the narrator. He starts the first line by acknowledging the fact that history is something that is written by the victors, not the losers, and he is not happy, as it becomes quite clear due to his rhetorical question, with the fact that he can comprehend history only subjectively. In the middle of the passage the mixing of history is once again visible, one sentence focuses on the plague that ravaged the Indians and took many lives, whereas the one right after it focuses on the present, and turns out to simply be a simple complaint by the present narrator. Afterwards, the passage comes back to the repeating idea of having sexual intercourse with a saint, and to be more specific, with a historical figure, which signifies a full connection between two different times, a clear characteristic of postmodernism. Finally, the last sentences stand as the narrator's total disgust with the cruel nature of history, with the sins and wrongdoings of people throughout history, and it leads to sorrow, or rather, a desire for ignorance, rather than having to live with it.

The historicity put into question is very important of the novel, as the narrator himself is a researcher, focused on the life of Catherine Tekakwitha, which grounds the narrative both in the historical past and the present times described in the novel. The narrative itself is put into several different historic complexities. Firstly, it is focused on a fictional revolution based on the Silent Revolution prominent in Canada during the years of the novel's creation, the 1960s. The best friend and spiritual guru of the narrator, simply known as F., is at the same time the leader of the rebellion, organizing protests and terror attacks against the British rule. At the same time the whole narrative is soaked with references to the U.S., constantly intertwined with a longing for American culture that was never inherited, with both the narrator, who at one point weeps for missing out on an American boyhood that never was and F. who states that he wished he was one. (Cohen, 1966: 78) The whole narrative seems to be constructed on an element of historic violence and oppression that stays with humanity all along history, which the narrator simply summarizes by saying that: "The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us. (ibid., 236)

It is not only historicity, and the mixing of history that is a postmodern characteristic, however. As Linda Hutcheon states in her *Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodern works are also brimming with examples of border tension like the mixing of texts, for example: "the ones

created by the transgression of the boundaries between genres, between disciplines or discourses, between high and mass culture, and most problematically, perhaps, between practice and theory.” (Hutcheon, 1988:18) therefore, we can see that for a work to be seen as being characteristic of postmodernism when there is a clear amalgam between several different discourses, cultures, as well as the breaking of boundaries that were not crossed before postmodernism came into the forefront. This novel seems to have all of these components. Starting with the aforementioned differences in narration which are visible from the start of the book, as even the chapters are named accordingly (e.g. a long letter from F., an epilogue in the third person). It seems that the book easily and smoothly switches between one narrator and another, starting with the unnamed narrator in the first part of the novel, moving on to F. in the second part, and finally ending with a narration from the third-person perspective in the third part of the book, of whom the narrator is not even clear. This is combined with a mixture between high and mass culture as well, as the narrator seems to be studying Native American culture, through the life of Catherine Tekakwitha, which in turn, becomes a study of Jesuits and the study of Canada, Great Britain, and the United States of America itself. All of this is mixed in between comic books, cinemas, advertisements and other things that can be accepted as mass culture. The characters themselves get absorbed into the world of comic books, often referencing it, for example: “You wanted to be the Superman who was never Clark Kent. You wanted to live at the front of the comic. You wanted to be Ibis the invincible who never lost his Ibistick. You wanted SOCK! POW! SLAM! UGG! OOF! YULP! written in the air between you and all the world.” (Cohen, 1966: 148) Mass culture visibly seeps into the lives of characters in the books, with both F. and the narrator looking at advertisements for bodybuilding, one, for example, is a comic named: “HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME,” (Cohen, 1966:36) after reading which, F. is enamored with the idea of having the perfect body. This means that comics and advertisements do not only figure in the work, but also have a direct influence over the characters themselves.

When the question of historicity comes into question in this novel, it is very important to look into the connection between, the characters, their thoughts and actions, and history itself. As Linda Hutcheon states, commenting upon this novel: “we may indeed get few postmodern narrative representations of the heroic victors who have traditionally defined who and what made it into History. Often we get instead both the story and the story-telling of the non-combatants or the losers.” (Hutcheon, 1988:53) Therefore, when the story shifts to Catherine Tekakwitha, or to her tribe, which the narrator describes quite grimly saying that: “the very name of the tribe, A—, is the word for corpse in the language of all the neighboring

tribes. There is no record that this unfortunate people ever won a single battle, while the songs and legends of its enemies are virtually nothing but a sustained howl of triumph,“ (Cohen, 1966:5) it becomes quite apparent that the focus of the narrative is not on those who are the victors, in the traditional sense, but rather on a string of ‘losers’ as the book states, of which we have quite the amount, starting with the Natives, and ending with people who live on the same land in 20th century, the Canadians. However, the Canadians do not seem happier than the natives, as they always look up to the United States, feeling quite insecure themselves in comparison to their neighbors. Not only this, however, is visible in the novel, there is also the question of the beginning and ending of it itself. The book begins with a Ray Charles quote from the song *Ol’ Man River*, which in itself is a testament to another oppressed group, the African Americans, more specifically, the enslaved population that existed in the United States in the past, if one were to look into the lyrics of the song that the novel quotes, it is visible that the song too, focuses on the unfortunate and oppressed: “Here we all work, on the Mississippi/Here we all work, while the white folk play/Pulling them boats from the dawn 'til sunset/Getting no rest 'til the judgment day.” (Ray Charles, 1963)

Finally, as Linda Hutcheon states, characteristics of the postmodern, such as a connection to the history and the world, or in the case of this narrative, both, are prevalent in many other postmodern works as well. (1988: 54) Not only does this work, along with other postmodern works, reference history, and the world, but it weaves history into itself. The work does not seek to be genuinely representative of history itself but rather, as Hutcheon states: “what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to know the “ultimate objects” of the past.” (ibid., 24)

After looking into specific parts of the work, and the narrative itself, it becomes apparent that it does exude certain features that are prevalent in postmodern works. The clear connection between history, the world, and the novel, along with experimentation and fusion of different genres all make it into an example of a postmodern work, one of the first in Canadian literature.

3.2. The Relationships with God and Others in *Beautiful Losers*

Coming towards Martin Buber, and the two modes of being mentioned before, *I-Thou* and *I-It*, it is important to start off, by looking into the main characters, their points of view towards existence and, firstly, their relationship with God and spirituality, and finally, their relationship

with the world and society. This is a necessary step to make if one wants to look into the connection between the social and the divine in this work.

Starting with the narrator, a scholar of the saint Catherine Tekakwitha and his relationship with God. Throughout the whole work the narrator seems to go back and forth, in his relationship with God, between worship and accusation. It can become obvious, that he has a difficult relationship with religion, mainly due to attempting at comprehending and explaining God, and his actions, he asks, rhetorically: “Does God love the world?” (Cohen, 1966:49) And on another connected note, he looks at the church as something horrible, with even more accusations stating that the church is responsible for killing Indians and squashing Mohawk dances, amongst other things. (ibid., 59) In another moment, it seems as though he moves on to a personal prayer, asking God for help, for compassion for other, saying: “O God, If There Are Fiery Journeys Be With Edith As She Climbs. Be With F. If He Has Earned Himself Agony. Be With Catherine Who Is Dead Three Hundred Years. Be With Us In Our Ignorance And Our Wretched Doctrines. We Are All Of Us Tormented With Your Glory. You Have Caused Us To Live On The Crust Of A Star.” (ibid., 68) It seems that this relationship with both God and religion is quite difficult for him, ironizing and accusing the church at one moment, and at the same time turning to God to ask for something, having a one-sided conversation, full of sadness for the people that he knows who are long gone, and at the same time stating that God has forsaken humans by letting them live, as he states “on the crust of a star.” (ibid.) At the same time, this excerpt can be useful when beginning to analyze his connection with the world itself. In his prayer he remembers those, for whom he cared dearly. He asks God to be with them, without asking the same for himself.

Further on, moving towards the Narrator’s social relationships, it is possible to state that he has a relationship of what could be called, according to Buber’s definition more as an *I-It* relationship rather than *I-Thou*. Beginning with the relationship with his wife, Edith. Even though he keeps mentioning her time and time again, encountering her in different occasions, all he cares about in that relationship is the sexual prospect. He constantly comments her legs, is jealous of her affair with F., sneaks in her drawers, and mainly describes parts of the relationship which are purely sexual. On the other hand, when the focus shifts towards the narrator’s relationship with F, it becomes obvious and apparent that their relationship is quite different. Of course there some similarities between their relationship and the narrator’ and Edith’s, mostly the romantic part, there is a clear difference, the excerpt below illustrates it quite visibly: “We lay in each other's arms, each of us the other's teacher. We sought the peculiar

tone of each peculiar night. We tried to clear away the static, suffering under the hint that the static was part of the tone. I was your adventure and you were my adventure. I was your journey and you were my journey, and Edith was our holy star.” (ibid., 194)

In this excerpt the narrator describes his relationship with F. quite vividly, the parts most important for defining the relationship can be found in it. He clearly emphasizes the relationship between them as that of equals, focusing on the unison of them both. The narrator also states that there was an attempt at clearing away everything that surrounded them, naming it ‘static’, it is not quite clear what motivates this choice of words, if it is because, following the philosophy of Buber, they understood that a relationship should be taken at face value, or because the narrator still could not comprehend it and was fighting against something more than was possible.

On the other hand, it becomes quite obvious during the progression of the novel that F. mainly manifests the type the relationship that was described as *I-Thou* with the world, boldly talking about leaving names and possessions and looking at the world through a different prism. This firstly becomes visible when looking at his relationship with both the narrator and Edith. He has a romantic relationship with both, however he does not try to take any of them for just himself. He states the same for the narrator, in a rhetorical question, saying that: “surely you know by now that Edith could not belong to you alone.” At the same time, all throughout the narrator’s point of view is that of *I-It*, even more so mainly focusing on the sexual part of a relationship with another person. Coming to the naming part, it seems that F. fully understands that naming something is a preamble for possession, and he, manifesting the *I-Thou* relationship with the world is against it: “Connect nothing: F. shouted. Place things side by side on your arborite table, if you must, but connect nothing!” (ibid., 9) This leads back to Buber’s philosophy and stating that connection is the first thing that leads to subjectivity, and, naturally, towards possession, that which has no name cannot be possessed. Buber states that humanity has moved naming and categorization from the plane of *Thou* to *It*, and so the addressing of *Thou* switched to an *It*. (Buber, 1984: 75) Then, there is of course, the main and on-going theme throughout the whole course of the novel of having sexual intercourse with a saint, or as F. states bluntly and simply as fucking a saint. (Cohen, 1966:15) One specific way that F. notices the way that ownership in the world pertains objectivity is by names, here it is necessary to come back to Martin Buber’s ideas concerning naming, and the understanding of the world, as he stated, there can be no subject-object relationship (Buber, or the *I-It* relationship as he names it, without there being names and an understanding of possession, even more so, there

cannot be any realization of the subject as the *I* as well, therefore, if there should be a connection with the world, in the nature of *I-It* it will be realized in the field of names and terms. This is what F. believes as well, he states that: “of all the laws which bind us to the past, the names of things are the most severe. If what I sit in is my grandfather's chair, and what I look out of is my grandfather's window –then I'm deep in his world.” (Cohen, 1966:50) What he states in the preceding excerpt goes hand in hand with Buber's thinking, it seems that F. fully comprehends that names are exactly what binds the person to the world of objects. He goes further than that, going into the field of science as well, saying that: “Science begins in coarse naming, a willingness to disregard the particular shape and destiny of each red life, and call them all Rose. To a more brutal, more active eye, all flowers look alike, like Negroes and Chinamen.” (ibid., 51) Here he states that if all that a human has is a name for a particular category, they are going to see each individual of that category as similar to the other. Naming and categorizing roots out individuality and leads to seeing the world throughout the prism of *I-It*.

After looking into the characters of the novel, and analyzing their outlook towards the world through the prism of Martin Buber's philosophy, it is necessary to look into the ending of the book itself. As it was mentioned before, the book is divided into three parts, when discussing the ending it is necessary to understand that the third part of the book, *an Epilogue in the Third Person* is a logical and circumspect extension of the second part of the book, *A Long Letter from F.* As the letter was F.'s personal recollection of his life after he blew up the statue of the Queen of England, during the French protest in Quebec. The epilogue follows the narrator's life after he locks himself in, staying alone in his basement. When he comes out, he spends his last days in rags, filthy and disheveled, and in his pastime he molests little children, and is under investigation by the police for pedophilia. Although his solitude is not necessarily a negative thing, here it is useful to look into Martin Buber's idea of two different solitudes. He states that there are two kinds of solitude, the first one being due to seeking absence of experience and the using of things, this is important and beneficial, the second comes from absence of relation and with this type of solitude, which comes from isolation, then the man is forsaken. (Buber, 1984: 103) And so with this being the second case, as the narrator is eager to take influence from others and find himself in them, it turns out that in the end he is shunned by society, for his looks and his stench. In the end of the book he morphs into a screen showing Ray Charles playing *Ol' Man River*. It seems that along the way to freedom and independence, there was too much focus on things simply as objects, as F. candidly focused on himself, rather than others, apart from the first part of the book. In the end the sacrifice was for nothing, although, as he states himself, he managed to destroy the statue of the Queen, and in that way, managed

to rebel, as he always wished, against the English speakers and Great Britain, the overlords. As Linda Hutcheon states, that even though there is a loss of self quite visible in the characters of the work, it seems that a higher cause was lost somewhere along the way. (Hutcheon, 1974:48) All of them perish in one way or another, the narrator is lost in his constipation, always looking outward for an identity, as Buber would state, looking for something to possess, never understanding that identity comes from within, it is something that he himself is responsible for, not his friend F. Even when the narrator looks at F., his spiritual guide, he only sees something he can possess, something he can borrow. “I’ll pass off F.’s sayings as my own, become a wit, a mystic wit. He owes me that much.” (Cohen, 1966:44) Buber calls this sort of appropriation of other cultures, or of the other people and their experiences as something that expands the world of *It*. (Buber, 1984: 37) What happens to a man that falls to the world of *It*? It seems that even though the connection itself is not negative, as simple existence never is, the man is doomed. As Buber puts it: “if a man lets it have mastery, the continually growing world of *It* overruns him and robs him of the reality of his own *I*, till the incubus over him and the ghost within him whimper to one another the confession of their non-salvation.” (ibid., 46) Even the sex scenes, which are frequent and aptly described, remain isolated to oral stimulation and masturbation, remain to be a counterfeit to the original act.

It seems that the perishing of the characters comes from one or another type of flaw, for the narrator it is the inability to find his own identity, and so, he walks throughout the whole story looking at everything through the prism of *I-It*. For F. as it may seem in the beginning, it is different. He lives his life teaching others, not from any sort of a possessive relationship, on the contrary, he embodies the *I-Thou* relationship with the world perfectly, connecting nothing, having disbelief in naming and categorizing. However, this all changes in the scene of the Danish Vibrator, where he becomes a sexual glutton, as Linda Hutcheon (1974:53) puts it, and moreover, when he starts to understand that he can lead others where he himself cannot go, being an ironized version of John the Baptist, who would wish to be Jesus. It seems, that in the end, Leonard Cohen masterfully put lots of biblical passages and stories, and successfully ironized them in this work, as Hutcheon states: “faith is replaced by magic.” (1974:43) This, along with the imagery of religious figures turns the novel into “ironic or demonic parody of the Bible.” (ibid.) The lives of the characters also make it into a story of two different religions, “the religions of the spirit and of the flesh.” (ibid., 49)

4. Conclusions

To repeat the aims of the BA thesis, it was expected to try and analyze some prominent postmodern characteristics present in the work, as well as the relationships of the characters with God, divinity, and each other. Firstly, the characteristics of postmodern works of literature have been discussed, and it was determined that the characteristics shared by many postmodern works of literature are irony, going along with parody, as well as intertextuality, which is in turn connected to historicity and the work weaving itself into history, as well as vice versa, which creates a constant connection with history and questions its objectivity. After looking into the work, it was found that the work does indeed have a considerable amount of instances of all the aforementioned characteristics, such as an amalgamation of genres, a dialogue with several different historical texts connected with commentary from an ironic distance. It also has visible breaks and changes in the narrative, not being restricted to a singular one throughout all of it. Therefore, it can be stated that *Beautiful Losers* by Leonard Cohen is truly a postmodern work, a social, political and historical commentary focused on the contemporary lives of people, albeit with some parody, as well as a commentary upon the whole history of the nation, going through, and interpreting, the spiritual and social history and spirit of Canada from its beginning as a colony up until the 1960s. Afterwards, Martin Buber's two modes of being have been summarized, and applying them, the work in question was analyzed. It was found, as it was thought, that through the whole of the work, the narrative and characters followed a duality of the religion of the flesh and religion of the spirit. Their choices in the narrative have been analyzed, and it became visible that when Martin Buber's theories are applied to the narrative and characters, a pattern can be seen, that the characters do truly live in these two sets of relationships with the world and with God. Furthermore, that the characters and their lives are influenced by their choice of relationship with others, as it is seen with the narrator and his possession of the ideas of others, which leads him to misery, with F., who in the beginning embodies the idea of a messiah and a spiritual leader, but in the end he himself succumbs to the vices of the flesh, and finally with Catherine Tekakwitha, who chooses a religious path and becomes beatified, even though her absolute lack of proper connection with the natural world leaves her isolated and disconnected.

This thesis is clearly not inexhaustible concerning the postmodern aspects of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* it does provide the analysis of certain postmodern aspects that have been found in the novel and looks into the connection of the novel and postmodernism as a movement. The analysis and application of Martin Buber's *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships to the novel in question

have been made, but it would require more time and resources so that it could be analyzed further and more fully. All in all, Martin Buber's philosophy in connection to the novel does provide a useful way to look into the relationships prominent in the characters of the work, which in turn have a significant effect on their lives.

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6. Summary in Lithuanian

Leonardas Cohenas – garsus XX a. rašytojas ir muzikantas, parašęs keletą pasaulyje išgarsėjusių poezijos rinkinių ir romanų, tuo pačiu turintis milžinišką kiekvienam gerai žinomą diskografiją. Šiame darbe dėmesys skiriamas ko gero kontraversiškesniam jo romanui „Žavūs Nevykėliai.“ Kūrinio centre trys 1960-ųjų Kvebeko srities gyventojai ir Indėnė, tapusi katalikų šventąja. Šiame bakalauro darbe koncentruojamasi į postmodernius šio romano aspektus, tokius kaip parodija, ironija, ir intertekstualumas. Taip pat didelis dėmesys yra skiriamas garsaus filosofo Martino Buberio idėjoms, *Aš-Tu* ir *Aš-Tai* santykiams apibrėžti ir išanalizuoti kūrinį per šių idėjų prizmę. Postmodernizmo analizė remiasi Lindos Hutcheon teorijomis, o antroji analizės dalis anksčiau minėto filosofo idėjomis. Šio darbo tikslas yra siekis apibrėžti tam tikras postmodernizmo charakteristikas ir išsiaiškinti ar šiame kūrinyje yra randama šių postmodernizmo charakteristikų, taip pat išanalizuoti kūrinio veikėjų santykius su pasauliu ir dieviškumu ir, pritaikant Martino Buberio idėjas, įvertinti ar veikėjai gali būti suvokiami per jo prizmę, galiausiai, kaip jų požiūris į Dievą ir kitus žmonės nulemia jų gyvenimus. Užbaigiant, svarbu paminėti, kad šis kūrinys pasižymi daugeliu bruožų, kurie yra būdingi postmodernistiniams kūriniams, pati kūrinio struktūra koncentruojasi į ryšį su istorija ir savitą jos suvokimą, istoriniai reiškiniai ir kūriniai yra perteikiami naudojantis parodija ir per ironišką atstumą. Taip pat veikėjai kurie yra apžvelgiami, turi savitus ryšius tiek su pasauliu, tiek su Dievu, kas lemia tolimesnius jų gyvenimo žingsnius, pabaigas, ir visa tai, atitinka Martino Buberio pateiktoms filosofinėms idėjoms.