

THE BIG LEBOWSKI

A plethora of blogs and internet pages attempt to answer the question ‘What is *The Big Lebowski* about?’ An appreciation of the Qabalistic symbols informing it allows us to form an accurate picture. My argument is that the central theme of the Coens oeuvre is the proper role of the spoken or written word as a vector of the silence and the heart. This is represented in *The Big Lebowski* by the conception of a child by Jeff Lebowski jr. – the Dude – on Maude Lebowski, one of the numerous ‘chatterers’ in the films, who all represent in their different ways the abuse of the word. Maude lacks a heart while the Dude lacks the words, and together they will produce, in their child, the ideal. Let us first identify the central symbols:

Jeff Lebowski the elder: The ‘Big Lebowski’ of the title, as the film explicitly tells us, and he undoubtedly represents Kether, the Godhead of the uppermost Sephirah of the Tree of Life. His wheelchair-bound condition has two symbolic meanings: first, his role as the ‘unmoved mover’, and second, his role as the Gnostic God Bythos (a Kether Variant), who moves the wheels – the orbits of the planets and other heavenly bodies – of the universe. Lebowski snr. is in this way cognate with Moses, who moves the wheel of the tower clock in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; the Blind Seer in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*; Roland Turner (‘roll and turn’) in *Inside Llewyn Davis*; and the wheelchair-bound father in *Burn After Reading*. Bowski is a slang name for marijuana made from bow; and in the angel scene in *The Hudsucker Proxy* Hudsucker is shown holding a spliff. Smoking, particularly pot smoking (see also Danny Gopnik and his pals in *A Serious Man*) is always symbolic in the oeuvre of communion with silence and the heart. The present film could then have justifiably been titled ‘The Big Spliff.’ The Coens must have had a chuckle over this.

Jeff Lebowski the younger: The Dude may be identified with the Fool. In the Tarot the Fool maps to path 0 of the Tree of Life, which is located ‘above the Abyss’. The Fool can thus commune with the Godhead in the region of the silence and the heart. However, he could also be identified with Chokmah, the Sephiroth lying in the Siupernal Triad at the summit of the Pillar of Mercy. This latter ascription would have the benefit of incorporating the trait of wisdom, which belongs to Chokmah (see Fig. 1). His last words in the film are ‘The Dude abides.’ This is a reference to 1 Peter 1:25 ‘But the Word of the Lord abides forever.’ Consistently with this second interpretation is the great scholar A. E. Waite’s referencing of the Zohar to the effect that ‘the Son who is the Word is in Chokmah’ (*The Holy Kabbalah*, p. 363). The Dude’s quality of wisdom is evidenced in his unravelling of the mystery surrounding Bunny’s disappearance.

The Lebowski snr. mansion: Thus, the Dude can pass through the great doors leading into Lebowski snr’s office.

The doors: These represent, like the other doors throughout the films, (see Ch. 000) the path of Daleth, Hebrew for 'door', which stretches horizontally between the Sephiroth of Binah and Hokmah, and so represents the bourne of the Supernal Triad located 'above the Abyss', where Kether and the Fool reside. Thus the only characters ever seen in the office are Lebowski snr, the Dude, and Walter Sobchak.

Walter Sobchak: The John Goodman character bears the allegoric value here, as in *Barton Fink*, of an underworld god, a Dis or Pluto. Thus he too resides 'above the Abyss' and can commune with Kether. Implicitly here, and explicitly in *Barton Fink*, the Goodman character is associated with the element of fire. This is the element which Heraclitus claimed to be the ground of all being, and so also is located 'above the Abyss'. Fire for this reason plays a key role in *Burn Before Reading*, and also bears its customary allegorical value in *Miller's Crossing* and *The Hudsucker Proxy*. There may be a reference also to the Devil card of the Tarot (path of Ayin). Sobchak insists on his Jewishness, as his wife had been a *Juive*. This is always in the films a symbol of communion with the silence-heart – the Qabalah after all is a Hebrew development (see Ch. 20).

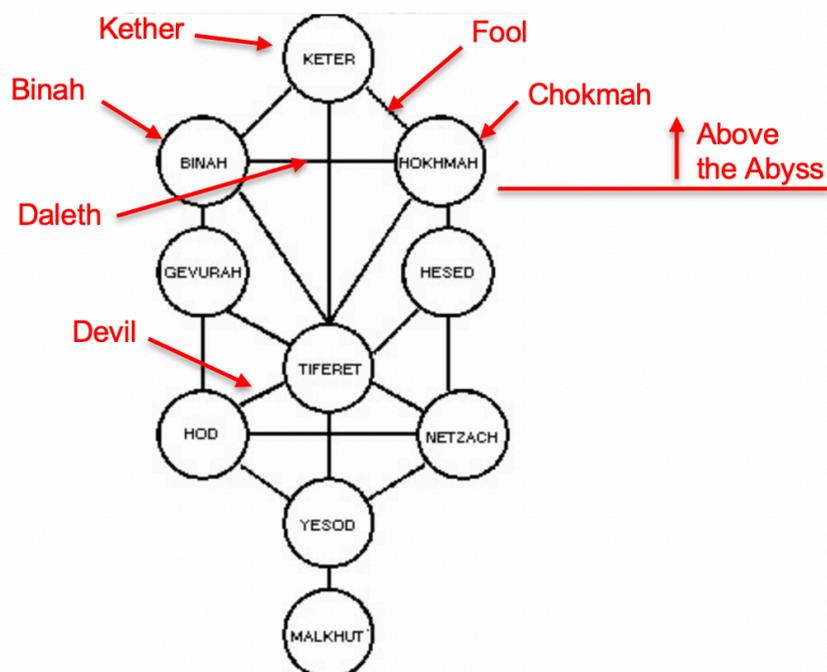


Figure 1 Sephiroth of Kether, Binah, Chokmah; paths of Aleph (Fool), Daleth (Door), Ayin (Devil)

Bunny Lebowski: The wife of Lebowski snr. represents, like Abby in *Blood Simple*, Verna Bernbaum in *Miller's Crossing*, and Vivienne Samsky in *A Serious Man*, the famous Shekinah. The Shekinah is associated with the Mystery of Sex. She resides 'above the Abyss' but can also travel down the middle pillar of the Tree of Life to the gross material world of Malkuth. Thus Bunny is initially seen at the Lebowski mansion, and later

disappears and is seen driving a red sports car apparently having 'fun, fun, fun'. Finally we see her car crashed against a fountain in front of the Lebowski mansion – this represents the Shekinah's return to the Supernals. She points out to the Dude the 'nihilists' in the Lebowski pool. The pool represents here, as in *Hail Caesar!*, and as the sea does always in the films, the sea of Binah, in the region of the Supernal Triad. Bunny asks the Dude to blow on her toes to dry her polish. The Dude is thus associated with the element of air, as is the Fool in the Qabalah. The word 'fool' comes from the Latin *follis*, 'windbag', and so implies the sense of formlessness and emptiness. The element of air will be dramatically prominent in this sense in *No Country for Old Men*.

The screenwriter. Walter and the Dude visit the home of the screenwriter. He is in a iron lung, and so of course is completely silent, like his young son. The Supernal Triad is the region of the silence, 'the sound of one hand clapping' as Hinduism says. The silence will also be represented by, amongst others, Aloysius the janitor in *The Hudsucker Proxy* and the poet Johnny Five in *Inside Llewyn Davis* (see Ch. 16).

Maude Lebowski. Maude represents the familiar figure in the films of the 'chatterer', who stands in polar opposition to the silence. The chatterers all in some way abuse the ideal of the word as vehicle of the silence (see Ch. 18). Maude has a peculiar locution, hard and judgemental and utterly devoid of emotion and mercy. This confirms her identification with the Sephiroth of Geburah, 'Severity,' which lies below Binah in the Tree of Life.

The rug. Much is made of the Dude's rug. To understand its meaning we go back to the underworld symbolism of hair in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, where the protagonist is a barber. This symbolic value of hair has authority in ancient myth – the long dark tresses of the Hebrew underworld Goddess Lilith being a fine example. The dots are joined for us in *Miller's Crossing* where we find the character of 'Rug' Daniels, who wears a hairpiece. We may therefore postulate that the rug also is an underworld symbol. This is confirmed by Maude Lebowski's statement that the rug was a gift from her mother (Binah - Geburah is situated immediately below it in the Tree of Life). This leads to the improbable but logical conclusion that Maude's mother is Bunny Lebowski. The home invaders peeing on the rug is a reference again to the dark sea of Binah.

Anal sex. Time and again in the films we find anal sex as a symbol of communion with the silence and the heart. Thus in *A Serious Man* the highly spiritually developed Arthur Gopnik is gay. In *Hail Caesar!* the film director Laurence Laurentz, who transforms Hobie Doyle from a trick pony into an actor of depth, is likewise gay, and the ring formation of the swimmers into the middle of which DeeAnna Moran dives, letting out a fart as she goes (the element of air, associated with the Fool) suggests an anus. The pool here again refers to the sea of Binah. Outside the screenwriter's house (the silence-heart) Walter finds a red sports car, and proceeds to destroy it with a crowbar, declaiming repeatedly, 'This is what happens when you fuck a

stranger in the arse.’ The sports car is symbolically identical with the one driven by Bunny Lebowski in her adventures in Malkuth, as representing the gross material world. Aleister Crowley gave the same value to anal sex, which forms the basis of the highest (eleventh) degree in his Ordo Templi Orientis (O. T. O.) organisation.

Donny. Theodore Donald Karabatsos bears the symbolic value of the silence and the heart. A motif of the film is Walter’s repeated injunction to him to ‘Shut the fuck up Donny.’ His death from a heart attack at the moment of the conflict between Walter and the nihilists indicates that he symbolises the metaphorical heart. The embrace of the Dude and Walter as they stand covered in Donny’s ashes conveys the love enabled by the faculty of heart. For the significance of the Dude’s repeatedly calling Walter ‘arsehole’ in this scene, see the previous item.

God. The handlebar-moustachioed cowboy who tops and tails the film is another God or Kether figure. He upbraids the Dude for his habitual use of ‘cuss’ words. The familiar four letter words symbolise always in the films, like smoking, communion with the heart and silence ‘above the Abyss.’ The cowboy God reproaches the Dude for his profanities because the heart-silence must be incorporated into words in a sophisticated way to become truly divine. This skill of words is supplied by Maude Lebowski. Maude lacks a heart while the Dude lack the words, and together they will produce, in their child, the ideal.