

Makes Me Wonder: The History and an Interpretation of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven'

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Jenny dedicates this article in memory of her cousin Gene Lee Plager, who died of cancer in October 2012, and in memory of her father, Harlan F. Plager, who died in October 2015, in part due to complications from the same type of cancer. Gene and Harlan farmed together for 40 years and were role models to Jenny for their strong work ethic.

Jenny and her husband, Tim, reside in Syracuse, Nebraska with their three sons, Jacob, Jared, and Brodie. Her paper was presented at the January 2014 meeting of the Southeast Nebraska Torch Club.

After the song "Stairway To Heaven" was played at the October 20, 2012 funeral of my beloved cousin, Gene Lee Plager, I learned that there is a lot of controversy over the meaning of this particular song. I decided to come to my own conclusions.

A Brief History of Led Zeppelin

Led Zeppelin is an English rock band formed in 1968, consisting of Robert Plant, vocals, Jimmy Page, guitar, John Paul Jones, bass and keyboard, and John "Bonzo" Bonham, drums. Page had been in the Yardbirds, and he and Jones were already legendary London session musicians; Plant and Bonham were slightly younger, relatively unknown musicians from the English Black Country. The members of Led Zeppelin were together for a period of about 12 years, during which time they became the biggest band of the 1970s (Fricke 8).

Unfortunately, on September 25, 1980, Bonham, age 32, was found dead due to asphyxiation related to extremely heavy drinking. No other drugs were found in his system. Shortly after Bonham's death, Page, Plant and Jones disbanded Led Zeppelin. "We wish it to be known," they stated in a December 4, 1980, press release, "that the loss of our dear friend and the deep respect we have for his family, together with the sense of undivided harmony felt by ourselves and our manager, have led us to decide that we could not continue as we were." It was signed simply "Led Zeppelin."

Robert Plant was later quoted, "The band didn't exist the minute Bonzo

died" (Fricke 10). When Led Zeppelin received Kennedy Center Honors in 2012, Robert Plant was in tears during a rendition of "Stairway to Heaven," likely due to the emotions evoked by the song and the loss of his good friend many years ago. Plant stated, "John was the drummer of Led Zeppelin [. . .]. I struggle sometimes, just thinking about trying to create some magic again when he's not there. He was a very, very dear friend of mine, that I miss every day" (LeDrew).

Makes Me Wonder: Why Is There a Lasting Interest In Led Zeppelin?

One only has to type "Led Zeppelin" into a search engine to find that there is still a great deal of interest in this musical group that disbanded over thirty years ago. In some respects, the band's early demise may have added to its continuing popularity. As stated by David Fricke in the CD booklet accompanying *Mothership*, a Led Zeppelin compilation album, "Led Zeppelin did not last long enough to fail. Instead, they have a unique, eternal life in this music that can never be tainted and will never be topped. The band is gone. The thrill is not" (11).

The official Led Zeppelin website contains a timeline of its many accomplishments, including their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995 and the induction of "Stairway to Heaven" into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2003. In 2007, the three surviving members of Led Zeppelin, along with John Bonham's son, Jason, broke the world record for the "Highest Demand for Tickets for One Music Concert" for their one-performance-

only reunion at London's O2 Arena. Tickets were secured through a worldwide lottery.

Led Zeppelin's best known song remains the eight-minute "Stairway to Heaven," composed by Robert Plant and Jimmy Page and released in 1971 on the band's untitled fourth album, commonly referred to as "Led Zeppelin IV." The song's length meant it was never released as a single, but it was soon ubiquitous on FM stations using the "album-oriented rock" format.

Not having any definitive comments from the songwriters has certainly kept this song's mystique alive for many years.

Page told *Guitar World* (1998) that a huge portion of the lyrics flowed from Plant over a single night of spontaneous improvisation. Plant himself said, "I was holding a pencil and paper, and for some reason I was in a very bad mood. Then all of a sudden my hand was writing out the words, 'There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold / And she's buying a stairway to heaven.' I just sat there and looked at the words and then I almost leapt out of my seat" (Songfacts.com).

Makes Me Wonder: What Did the Authors of "Stairway to Heaven" Intend It to Mean?

I was only able to find one comment from the songwriters about the song's meaning. The explanation of the lyrics that Plant gave *Total Guitar* (1998) was

that "Stairway to Heaven" "was some cynical aside about a woman getting everything she wanted all the time without giving back any thought or consideration." Not having any definitive comments from the songwriters has certainly kept this song's mystique alive for many years. Robert Plant indicated that the song's "abstraction" may be one reason for its popularity, adding, "Depending on what day it is, I still interpret the song a different way—and I wrote the lyrics" (Songfacts.com).

In the early 1980s, allegations were made that that hidden satanic messages were contained in many rock songs, including "Stairway to Heaven," through a technique called "backmasking" (incorporating a sound played backwards into the track). Robert Plant expressed his dismay at the allegations in a 1983 interview with *Musician* magazine:

"Stairway to Heaven" was written with every best intention, and as far as reversing tapes and putting messages on the end, that's not my idea of making music. It's really sad. [...] I heard it on a news program. I was absolutely drained all day. I walked around, and I couldn't actually believe, I couldn't take people seriously who could come up with sketches like that. There are a lot of people who are making money there, and if that's the way they need to do it, then do it without my lyrics. I cherish them far too much. (Songfacts.com)

Led Zeppelin audio engineer Eddie Kramer called the allegations "totally and utterly ridiculous. Why would they want to spend so much studio time doing something so dumb?" (qtd. in Davis 335). He has a point. Would musicians really figure out how to write a song that had satanic messages in it, but only when played backwards? Let's forget the conspiracy theories and consider the song itself.

An Interpretation of "Stairway to Heaven"

Verse 1

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven
When she gets there, she knows if the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven

The first verse introduces the "Lady," the central figure in the song. Like the rest of us, the Lady holds mistaken beliefs. She is "sure" that all that glitters is gold, which of course we know is not true, and her purchasing a stairway to heaven suggests she believes she can buy her way in. If that fails, "with a word she can get what she came for," as though she could talk her way in by saying the right things.

In the next verse, clues hint that she may be wrong.

Verse 2

There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings
In a tree by the brook there's a songbird who sings
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven
It makes me wonder
It makes me wonder.

The Lady encounters some confusion as she tries to determine what she really needs to do to get into heaven. The "sign on the wall" from which one could hope for directions is unhelpful because sometimes words have two meanings. The songbird singing that "Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven" hints that we can be misled about the right thing to do with our lives. Finally, the line "it makes me wonder" is sung here for the first time,

suggesting the confusion we all face about making the right decisions.

The next verse addresses mortality, mourning and questioning why certain things happen.

Verse 3

There's a feeling I get when I look
to the west
And my spirit is crying for leaving
In my thoughts I have seen rings
of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand
looking
It makes me wonder
It really makes me wonder.

The Lady can
choose either one,
but there is an
opportunity to
change and get
on the good path
if she chooses
to do so.

This is how someone might feel toward the end of his or her life—not someone who dies suddenly, but rather someone who is facing the end of a long illness or has lived a long life and is facing his or her own mortality. The line “A feeling I get when I look to the west” suggests the feeling of being ready to move on to the next stage in the spiritual world, while also feeling held to the earthly existence, creating conflict. The speaker whose “spirit is crying for leaving” may be facing a difficult or painful death.

The rings of smoke through the trees signal this person to go on to the spiritual afterlife. Holding the person

back, however, are the “voices of those who stand looking,” the people left behind who are not ready to face life without the loved one. The speaker does not want to leave them, and this feeling holds them back, even though their spirit is crying for leaving. The repeated lines, “It makes me wonder, it really makes me wonder,” now seem to echo our questioning of why some people have to go through suffering at the end of their life, or of why someone’s life would end at a young age.

The next verse introduces us to a new character, the piper.

Verse 4

And it's whispered that soon, if
we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to
reason
And a new day will dawn for
those who stand long
And the forests will echo with
laughter

This verse brings to mind Robert Browning’s poem, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” wherein a piper is hired by a town to lure rats away by playing a magic pipe. When the town refuses pay the piper, he uses his pipe to lead all the children away from the town, presumably to their death. The legend certainly has an ominous ending, but the piper in the song hardly seems an evil figure. The piper is telling people when it is their time to move on to the afterlife, not vindictively, but to “lead us to reason.” The piper is leading us to reason by helping us learn that we need to choose the good path in life.

“And a new day will dawn for those who stand long” tells us that someday we are going to be reunited with our loved ones who passed on before us, and “The forests will echo with laughter” when we are all together again.

The theme of change and renewal continues in the next verse.

Verse 5

If there's a bustle in your
hedgerow, don't be alarmed
now
It's just a spring clean for the
May Queen
Yes, there are two paths you can
go by
But in the long run
There's still time to change the
road you're on
And it makes me wonder

We begin to understand the change that the Lady needs to make to if she wants to get on the stairway to heaven. Some type of serious event or revelation—a bustle in your hedgerow—results in a “spring clean” for the May Queen. Spring is often seen as a season of change and renewal, and whatever happened to draw this to the Lady’s attention is helping her clean up her life and renew herself.

Our new character, the May Queen, is the girl who leads the parade for May Day celebrations wearing a white gown and a crown to symbolize purity. However, in British folklore, the tradition had a sinister twist—the May Queen was put to death once the festivities were over (“May Queen”). Like the piper we met earlier in the song, the May Queen could have an ominous meaning, but I think she personifies the truth that death is a part of life and ultimately a renewal in itself.

The “two paths you can go by” are a path to good or a path to evil. The Lady can choose either one, but there is an opportunity to change and get on the good path if she chooses to do so.

This time, the “makes me wonder” statement seems to question whether we are on the right path.

In the next verse, the final verse of the first section of the song, the Lady is facing the end of her life, but we still do not know whether she did the right thing in changing her life or not.

Conclusion

Jimmy Page has commented, “The wonderful thing about ‘Stairway’ is the fact that just about everybody has got their own individual interpretation to it, and actually what it meant to them at their point of life. And that’s what’s so great about it. Over the passage of years people come to me with all manner of stories about what it meant to them at certain points of their lives. About how it’s got them through some really tragic circumstances [...]. Because it’s an extremely positive song, it’s such a positive energy [...]” (Page).

Would I have heard the same meaning in this song before October 20, 2012? Probably not. I view this song the way I do because of a very specific event in my life. I believe that I will see my cousin again one day. He is now one of “those who stand long.” We will meet again when the forests echo with laughter. And, as I readied this paper for publication, I learned that I will now meet my dad there, too. As you wind on down the road, perhaps you can formulate your own conclusion. Cause you know, sometimes words have two meanings.

Makes me wonder . . .

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Verse 6

Your head is humming and it
won’t go—in case you don’t
know
The piper’s calling you to join
him
Dear lady, can you hear the wind
blow
And did you know your stairway
lies on the whispering wind?

The Lady’s head is humming, and she is not sure why. The piper is now calling the Lady to join him, summoning her to her death. And the lady is now being asked whether she thinks she did the right thing. Can she hear the wind blow? Does she know her where her stairway lies?

At this point in the song, the music changes: the tempo lifts in an anthemic charge, the drums enter, and the guitar is now electrified. We have a soaring guitar solo by Page. When Plant comes back in, the singing is more intense, and the subject is no longer what the Lady needs to do to get into heaven, but what *we* need to do.

Verse Seven

And as we wind on down the
road
Our shadows taller than our soul
There walks a lady we all know
Who shines white light and wants
to show
How everything still turns to gold
And if you listen very hard
The tune will come to you at last
When all are one and one is all,
yeah
To be a rock and not to roll.

As we go through life, we accumulate baggage—all the bad things we have done, or things we failed to do. By the time we get to that point on the winding road of life, many of us will have accumulated a lot of baggage. The “shadows” are this baggage. And the shadows can get so big that it seems like they outweigh the good things we did and become taller than our soul.

We are then re-introduced to the Lady “we all know.” Only now, the Lady herself has passed on. She has found her way and she is trying to show us what to do. We know she changed her life because she now shines white light and wants to show us that everything still turns to gold. The white light certainly seems to be a reference to a light guiding us to heaven. We are told to listen very hard so the tune will come to us at last—meaning that we will find our way to heaven just as the Lady did, but lots of things probably will not make sense to us until we get there. The statement, “When all are one and one is all, yeah,” seems to tell us that there are not going to be any more conflicts in the afterlife.

The second to last line in the song is, “To be a rock and not to roll.” This simple phrase really tells us the key to getting into heaven. Be a rock for your family, friends and those in need. Use your talents for the good of all. The reference to “not to roll” tells us to stand firm and not let anyone stop us from staying on the right path. And this is also a final acknowledgment of the style of music being performed — Rock and Roll.

And the very last line is similar to where we started out, only it has a different meaning now: “And she’s buying the stairway to Heaven.”

This is the only line of the song to be sung *a capella*. I also note that at the beginning of the song, it sounds like Plant sings, “she’s buying *a* stairway to heaven,” but at the end, it sounds like he sings, “*the* stairway to heaven.” A subtle change, but it points to the transition from individualism at the beginning of song to the “all are one and one is all” concept expressed at the end. Buying *the* stairway to heaven is not buying with money, but doing the right things to the best of our ability. And there is still time to change the road you’re on if you listen very hard and hear the tune that is calling you to reason.