

**From American Dream to American Reality –
An Analysis of Working-Class Isolation in Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska***

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Master's thesis abstract

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>Bruce Springsteen is a significant figure in American popular culture. He is known as a chronicler of the American experience: engaging in how the political, cultural and social landscape of the United States has changed from the 1970's onward. Most of all, Springsteen is seen as a voice of the working-class in America and spokesperson of the importance of community. In 1982, Springsteen released his sixth studio record, <i>Nebraska</i> which consists of ten songs set in the socioeconomic landscape of America in the early 1980's, when the working-class were facing economic and existential struggles caused by the worst economic recession since the Great Depression.</p> <p>The aim of this study is to examine the theme of isolation in <i>Nebraska's</i> lyrics: How Springsteen's characters experience isolation, the consequences of it, and the reasons for their circumstances. The analysis was conducted by close reading with a focus on the key elements of social identity, the American Dream, place, belonging, community, unemployment, and social exclusion. To accomplish this study, I have used academic studies and critical essays written about Springsteen's lyrics, interviews conducted with him, and factual bibliography about Springsteen's life as well as theoretical material relevant to each key element in support my analysis.</p> <p>The analysis indicates that isolation is a central theme in <i>Nebraska</i> with each key element being a contributing factor to the isolation which the characters experience. The common element on the record is that the characters feel alone and downtrodden by forces beyond their control, but each song tells a different story. There are characters that try hard to solve their problems, those who lose sight of themselves and act irrationally, sometimes with fatal results, and some who become paralyzed by their isolation and do not act at all. They are outcasts disconnected from their communities and disillusioned with the world around them.</p> <p>This study provides an overview of isolation in Bruce Springsteen's <i>Nebraska</i>. Song lyrics have relatively recently become academically accepted as a form of literature alongside poetry, and the research here could consequently be seen as an addition to studies in the field of song lyrics, both Bruce Springsteen's and song lyrics in general.</p>	
Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, Nebraska, isolation, the American Dream, social identity, place, belonging, community, social exclusion, unemployment, lyrics, songs, alienation, working-class, culture	
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the music of Bruce Springsteen, to my mentors and each and every person who has given me support and helped me get this far, to all my haters, and to MM 95 for the inspiration. Never forget.

Most importantly, I dedicate this to my mother and to the loving memory of my father and my best friend Remu. I made it.

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1. Introduction

“We are such stuff / As dreams are made on”, writes Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, affirming our human aspirations and the marvellous adventure of living. As do the Bard’s plays, Springsteen’s songs likewise pursue the stuff of dreams and the heart’s often conflicted longings. And just as Shakespeare at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* confirms through Puck’s epilogue the ability of art both to represent and to speak truly to our individual and collective realities, so Springsteen’s songs, as critics and fans alike have attested, comprise a kind of soundtrack for contemporary American life.

(Streight & Harde 2010: 19)

We live in a time when many people suffer from isolation in one form or another due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions and health-related reasons have forced people to take distance from each other, subsequently causing many to lose touch with their former communities and ways of living. Familiar geographical places of gathering and communication that have provided security and belonging have moved to unfamiliar online spaces and despite attempts to make things work, not everyone has been able to cope with the change. The isolation and lack of physical contact has pushed many into the darkness on the edge of society, socially excluded and alone with either no way to reach for help or lacking the power to do so. The pandemic has also been hard on the economy worldwide as many lines of work and business have had no choice but to downsize, rearrange their way of operating, or completely shut down: leading to a lot of people losing their jobs. These changes in employment came unexpectedly and few were prepared to make such sudden adjustments to their lives. As unemployment took away both income and social identity from a large number of people around the world, all they were left with were debts that no honest person can pay and a shattered sense of self. It has been a time of survival when many ideologies and faiths have been shaken and questioned, such as the trust and belief the American working-class has in hard work bringing prosperity as the American Dream promises. In 1982, Bruce Springsteen wrote and recorded an album dealing with these same issues, *Nebraska*.

During the early 1980’s, America was troubled by an economic recession which caused unemployment and poverty levels to reach heights not seen since the Great Depression. Many working-class citizens suffered from the recession due to factories and businesses closing around America with no replacements appearing. The promise of the American Dream, upward mobility and prosperity for hard working people seemed to

fade in the distance for the ones subjected to this malaise and people were having a hard time surviving day to day. The consequent social disarray, isolation and disillusionment with America that many felt inspired Springsteen to voice his concerns by dedicating an album's worth of songs to the working-class's struggles.

While not his most commercially successful record, it was his first step into social commentary in his work: a direction which would characterise him in the future. It showed a new side of Springsteen's songwriting as he took on a narrative role that saw him jump into other character's shoes and present the world through their point of view, something he would continue to do on later records such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, *Devils & Dust*, and *Western Stars*. What started as a demo recorded in his cabin at Colt's Neck on a simple four track tape recorder would become the record itself after failed attempts to rerecord it with the E-Street Band. Upon release, *Nebraska* did not produce any significant hit singles but garnered critical praise and marked the beginning of Springsteen's evolution as a songwriter.

Bruce Springsteen is regarded as an American cultural icon, a voice of the working-class, and one of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed recording artists in the world. While already an established artist by 1982, it was his 1984 record *Born in the U.S.A.* that made him a worldwide superstar and cemented him a place in music history. Together with the E-Street Band and as a solo artist, he has recorded and toured for over 50 years, sold over 120 million records, received multiple Grammy awards, an Oscar, and was also the recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors in 2009 as well as the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama in 2016 (Sony Music 2021). A testament to his career and influence, his publishing rights were sold for half a billion dollars to Sony in 2021, the highest paid amount of money so far for any artists recording catalogue, surpassing the likes of Bob Dylan and Neil Young who recently sold their publishing rights as well (Serjeant 2021).

Bruce Springsteen was born into a poor working-class family in New Jersey and he felt a kinship with the people he wrote about, because he himself had come from the same kind of circumstances. Even if Springsteen had already enjoyed commercial success by 1982 and was in a lucrative economic situation, he had not forgotten what it was like to be a loner, an outsider who does not belong anywhere, and to be excluded from the community around him.

Springsteen's lyrics have been widely academically studied from various perspectives across different disciplines such as politics (Mackey-Kallis & McDermott 1992), nostalgia and identity (Seymour 2012), immigration (Chouana 2019), social change (Murphy 2012), image and authenticity (Frith 2004), exile (Sheehan 2019), and class (Smith 2022) among other topics. The books *Reading The Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* (Harde & Streight 2010), *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies and the Runaway American Dream* (Womack, Zolten & Bernhard 2010) and *Racing in the Street: the Bruce Springsteen Reader* (Sawyers 2004) are also compiled from academic studies and critical essays written about Springsteen's lyrics from various interdisciplinary approaches which, as professors Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight declare, makes them "literary works of interest in their own right" as "Springsteen's attentiveness to the language and form of his lyrics, apart from, but not excluded from, the music, lends a legitimacy to taking a critical approach to reading his song lyrics" (Harde & Streight 2010: 9).

Although song lyrics have been academically studied for decades, the notion that they are equal to poetry in the field of literature has been a contested, scrutinized and debated issue in academia (Sisario, Alter & Chan 2016). This dispute has somewhat been put to rest since Bob Dylan received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 (Ibid.). As the Nobel committee awarded Dylan "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" (*The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016*), I argue that Springsteen deserves the equal kind of academic acknowledgement for his lyrical contribution to the same tradition. I think the speech prior to Obama awarding Springsteen his Presidential Medal of Freedom sums up his literary merit and legacy to a tee:

As a songwriter, a humanitarian, America's rock and roll laureate, and New Jersey's greatest ambassador, Bruce Springsteen is, quite simply, The Boss. Through stories about ordinary people, to Vietnam veterans to steel workers, his songs capture the pain and the promise of the American experience. With his legendary E Street Band, Bruce Springsteen leaves everything on stage in epic, live, communal live performances that have rocked audiences for decades. With empathy and honesty, he holds up a mirror to who we are, as Americans chasing our dreams, and as human beings trying to do the right thing. There's a place for everyone in Bruce Springsteen's America.

(Ivie 2016)

Bruce Springsteen is a chronicler of working-class life in America, American identity, the American experience, commentator and critic of the American Dream and a contributor to American culture. His 1975 album *Born to Run* was among the first 100 recordings of American music and speech to be deemed of such cultural and aesthetic importance that it was added to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress, and his writings have been compared to both Walt Whitman and John Steinbeck (Harde & Streight 2010: 3). While not his most lyrically poetic release, one would have to explore his earlier and later records for that, *Nebraska* nevertheless is a prime example of his enduring power and appeal as a songwriter. And what is that appeal? McDonough (2018) offers a simple answer to this question:

The appeal of Bruce's songs lies in his ability to find heroism in the struggles of normal, everyday life. His songs connect with his audience on an intensely personal level — it's not hard to find pieces of yourself lurking within the characters that inhabit his songs.

The idea for my topic came from Dave Marsh's book *Two Hearts: The Definitive Biography 1972-2003* (2004), where Marsh comments on *Nebraska*, saying that “*Nebraska's* songs are about the utter inability to communicate and the isolation that results. [...] But it is also about family betrayals and failures, dreams that are wasted, hopes that are blasted, a longing for death as a release from the pitiful consequences of life” (2004: 275). This sparked my interest to engage in a study with the objective of finding out just how the theme of isolation is prevalent in *Nebraska*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes isolation as “detachment from others often involuntarily” (*Merriam-Webster, s.v. Isolation*), meaning that there are several causes of isolation. Therefore, in this thesis, I will analyse the lyrics to the songs in the record *Nebraska* to find how Springsteen's characters experience isolation, the consequences of it, and the reasons for their circumstances. Since there are many contributing factors to isolation that need to be taken into consideration to fully comprehend the character's emotions and actions, I have chosen five key themes that I will focus on regarding its manifestation:

1. Social Identity
2. The American Dream
3. Place and Belonging
4. Community
5. Social Exclusion and Unemployment

These factors are all to be considered when discussing isolation as they contribute to the possibility of becoming isolated. The characters in *Nebraska* are all working-class people who deal with these issues in different ways and by analysing the songs on *Nebraska*, I hope to be able to examine and discuss how Springsteen portrays isolation in the record's lyrics. I justify my study by stating that despite there being an extensive literary and academic bibliography of Springsteen and his lyrics, there do not seem to be any studies that concentrate solely on isolation in *Nebraska*, making my topic a relevant addition to Springsteen studies.

I acknowledge that there are several ways to interpret the lyrics and to view them from different angles, therefore my analysis is not a definite account but rather my interpretation and understanding of them. I only commit to explore the themes I have chosen as this narrows my scope and makes the topic suitable for a Master's thesis. I will now present a background section on Bruce Springsteen along with *Nebraska*. I will follow it with a presentation of my methods and materials for this study, a theoretical section of the themes I am analysing, a song-by-song analysis of *Nebraska* and lastly a discussion and conclusion.

The background chapter on Springsteen is based on the biography of Bruce Springsteen and his life mentioned above, *Two Hearts: The Definitive Biography 1972-2003* (2004) written and compiled by the acclaimed music critic and author Dave Marsh (Duffy 2021) with additional discussion material provided by Alan Rauch in "Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue" (1988). For the second background chapter regarding the record *Nebraska*, I will present a short descriptive summary of it with the help of *It Ain't No Sin to Be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* by Eric Alterman (2010); *Songs by Bruce Springsteen* (1998); "From 'My Hometown' to 'This Hard Land': Bruce Springsteen's Use of Geography, Landscapes, and Places to Depict the American Experience" by Marya Morris (2007); *Born in the U.S.A.: Springsteen and the American Tradition* by Jim Cullen (1997); "A Meanness in this World: The American Outlaw as Storyteller" by Ryal Sheeler (2007); *America in the 1980's* by Michele L. Camardella (2006); *Something Happened – A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* by Edward D. Berkowitz (2005); and Springsteen's own thoughts on the record and its subject matter from an interview conducted by Kurt Loder for *Rolling Stone* (1984).

2. Background

In this chapter I will present a short biography of Bruce Springsteen in order to better understand the man behind the songs and the contributing factors to his songwriting. Bruce Springsteen has lived a multifaceted and colourful life with much to be told and discussed, but I will narrow his story to only the facts that I find to be relevant to the context of my thesis. After that I will present a brief description of *Nebraska* as I believe it is helpful in order to understand the themes and the characters on the record along with the context of my thesis

2.1. Springsteen

“When I was a kid, I really understood failure. In my family, you lived deep in its shadow”

(Marsh 2004: 221)

Bruce Springsteen was born September 23, 1949, in Freehold, New Jersey, a decaying factory town where his family had resided for several generations (Marsh 2004: 244). Springsteen spent his childhood in what he describes as the “wrong side of the railroad tracks” in the “Texas” neighbourhood of Freehold, where immigrant factory workers occupied the “rundown two-family houses” (Marsh 2004: 210; 16). Many of these immigrant workers had migrated to Freehold from the South in search for jobs as the town was close to many industries and had a few factories themselves, the largest being a Nescafé factory (Ibid.). Next to Springsteen’s neighbourhood was Freehold’s black ghetto and while Springsteen has claimed never to have known the kind of poverty that the neighbouring community did, his family never had much money (Marsh 2004: 196; 211). Growing up in Freehold, it seemed to him that all the post-war prosperities the rest of America were enjoying just passed them by (Marsh 2004: 196).

Springsteen has told lots about his father and their troubled relationship through the years, their dysfunctional relationship being a central theme in many of Springsteen’s songs. Springsteen’s father Douglas was a troubled and discouraged working-class man who was not able to hold a steady job throughout Springsteen’s childhood (Marsh 2004: 245). Douglas could never find any meaningful work for himself as he constantly felt that everything he did took much more from him than what he got

back (Ibid.). The distress caused by his failures left him feeling depressed and defeated, and Douglas often poured his frustrations out on his family (Marsh 2004: 17). Springsteen has said about his father that “[m]y pop, sometimes he went to bed, sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes he got up. Sometimes he didn’t get up” (Ibid.). The Springsteen family stayed in Freehold despite there being better opportunities for work elsewhere because Douglas had lost his spirits and also because they had to take care of Douglas’s parents, who sometimes had to move in with them (Marsh 2004: 244). While Springsteen’s father lacked steady employment, his mother made up for Douglas’s shortcomings by faithfully going to work every morning in order to support their family and to give them a sense of security (Marsh 2004: 245).

I grew up in this dumpy, two-story, two-family house, next door to this gas station [...] And my father, he worked a lotta different places, worked in a rug mill for a while, drove a cab for a while, and he was a guard down at the jail for a while. I can remember when he worked down there, he used to always come home real pissed off, drunk, sit in the kitchen. [...] At night, about nine o’clock, he used to shut off all the lights, every light in the house. And he used to get real pissed off if me or my sister turned any of ‘em on. And he’d sit in the kitchen with a six-pack and a cigarette. My mom, she’d set her hair and she would come downstairs and just turn on the TV and sit in the chair and watch TV till she fell asleep. And she’d get up the next morning and go to work again.

(Marsh 2004: 17)

Bruce felt close to his mother but distant to his father. Bruce and Douglas did not have a healthy relationship with each other as Douglas was not communicative and did not show much paternal emotion towards him, causing Bruce to feel resentment towards his father (Marsh 2004: 246). They would often fight and Bruce was even afraid of him sometimes (Marsh 2004: 17). This kind of excluding behaviour that his father was prone to show was something Bruce despised, yet it seemed that this kind of social exclusion was a common thing in the Springsteen family, a tradition even (Marsh 2004: 245). Douglas had been an outsider all his life, just as his parents were, and Bruce was scared as a young boy that he would inherit this generational behaviour of social isolation (Ibid.). He was afraid that he could never learn to fit in anywhere.

I lived half of my first thirteen years in a trance [...] People thought I was weird because I always went around with this look on my face. I was thinking of things, but I was always on the outside looking in.

(Marsh 2004: 16)

Springsteen went to Catholic school during his first eight years of education, a feat his parents managed to achieve by scraping together just enough money (Marsh 2004: 16). Bruce was a loner growing up as he didn't fit in with the others around him. He was not popular in school either and didn't make many friends, something which lasted throughout his education. According to himself he could not "even make it to class clown" because he was so excluded from social circles (Marsh 2004: 246). The disciplined and socially restrained environment of the Catholic school system made Bruce's rebellious sense of alienation and unhappiness worse as his behaviour would often lead him into trouble (Marsh 2004: 23). Springsteen suffered emotional trauma as well as physical disciplinary measures during his time in school. In third grade, he was stuffed into a garbage can by a nun because she felt that he belonged there and later another nun ordered a younger student to slap Bruce in the face for misbehaving (Marsh 2004: 16). He experienced further humiliation by having "the distinction of being the only altar boy knocked down by a priest during Mass" (Ibid.).

Amidst his turbulent time growing up, music became a means of escape for Springsteen. Once he discovered music, he became obsessed with it and it became his identity: giving him a sense of self-worth and purpose that he was missing (Stonerook 2012: 209). He also found that by playing guitar he could vent his frustrations and find some solace in his life, crediting it for freeing him from his depressing upbringing (Marsh 2004: 19). Seeing Elvis Presley's performance on the Ed Sullivan show had captivated him and he joined a band called "The Castiles" in his teens (Marsh 2004: 20). They played shows and managed to garner some interest on the New Jersey bar scene and even managed to play some concerts in New York's Greenwich Village, but their career was short lived and Bruce soon moved on to playing in other bands (Marsh 2004: 27).

If you grow up in a home where the concept of art is like twenty minutes in school every day that you hate, the lift of rock is just incredible. [...] There's a little barrier that gets broken down, a consciousness barrier. Rock and roll reached down into all those homes where there was no music or books or anything. And it infiltrated the whole thing. That's what happened in my house.

(Marsh 2004: 152-153)

Despite his lack of enthusiasm towards school, Springsteen did graduate from the local Freehold public high school but did not attend his graduation (Marsh 2004: 246).

Springsteen also went to a community college for a short while but found that he didn't fit in there either (Marsh 2004: 30). He kept drawing negative attention to himself from school authorities and fellow students due to his personality and looks and left soon after a number of students petitioned for his dismissal (Ibid.). This feeling of constant rejection from all around him deepened Springsteen's connection to music. Amidst this social isolation, music was the only thing that released him from his depressing environment, connecting him to the world and making sense of everything in an almost religious way: "Music became my purpose in life [...] it was never just a hobby, it was a reason to live" (Marsh 2004: 26). But Springsteen's parents did not support his decision to pursue a career in music and scolded him for choosing to follow his newfound passion instead of finding a regular, honest job (Marsh 2004: 158).

[O]ne day my mom and pop, they come to me and say, 'Bruce, it's time to get serious with your life. This guitar thing... it's okay as a hobby but you need something to fall back on'. My father, he said, 'You should be a lawyer.' [...] 'Lawyers, they run the world'. But I didn't think that they did – and I still don't.

(Marsh 2004: 158)

Springsteen found success in 1975 with the release of his seminal *Born to Run* record which made him a star and helped him overcome his economic and social detriments, yet he still felt a resistance to conforming with certain social conventions, due to the inner turmoil he still felt from his childhood (Marsh 2004: 242-243). One of them was finding a place to call home for himself. Owning a house was something he refused to do for a long time because he had trouble feeling any sense of belonging in any given geographical place, he never wanted to attach himself anywhere (Marsh 2004: 243). This sense of rootlessness contrasted the ideals in his songs which he acknowledged himself: "[It] is funny, because the things that I admire and the things that mean a lot to me all have to do with roots and home, and myself, personally, I'm the opposite" (Marsh 2004: 243). Bruce did not buy himself a house until long after he had become a wealthy man and opted instead to rent apartments as places to store his belongings or to stay on the road and keep moving (Ibid.).

I always felt most at home when I was like in the car or on the road, which is, I guess, why I always wrote about it. [...] Independence always meant a lot to me. I had to feel I could go anywhere, anytime.

(Marsh 2004: 243)

Springsteen's passion for the open road is familiar to his fans as it is prominent in his work, a rare thing he and his father had in common (Marsh 2004: 16). Springsteen's aforementioned difficult relationship with his father has enriched his song writing and given him lots of inspiration as Springsteen has used this method to come to terms with his feelings and paternal issues. Despite the success he achieved by pursuing his passion in music and the praise he received for his talent, words, and music, Springsteen never seemed to get the acceptance of his father for doing so (Marsh 2004: 152).

There are many opinions and thoughts about what makes Springsteen's music so important to people and what the secret to his success is but one definite ingredient is his songwriting and lyrics. In his article "Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue", Alan Rauch (1988) discusses Springsteen's use of the dramatic monologue in his lyrics to connect with his audience, which he identifies as an important feature in Springsteen's work. In the article, Rauch analyses songs from *Nebraska* and other songs from Springsteen's catalogue and concludes by saying:

The accomplishments of Springsteen's lyrics is that they sensitize listeners to very real contemporary problems. Rather than glorified heroes, the characters of Springsteen's songs are models of flawed, but understandable, behavior. As we hear them tell their personal stories, we not only learn about the social dilemmas that have brought them down, but about the way that we might, by recognizing their flaws in ourselves, avoid being defeated by similar circumstances. To identify with the characters of Springsteen's lyrics would be to admit defeat to a system that the activist Springsteen knows very well can appear insurmountable. Rather than offer songs with messages that are hollow in their optimism, Springsteen offers hope in the form of the dramatic monologue of the kind of improvement that requires personal initiative, discipline, and a sense of self.

(Rauch 1988: 46)

These aspects help to understand the content of Springsteen's songwriting as he often writes songs based on his own experiences and thoughts, putting them into half-autobiographical stories led by characters who portray them in a vivid world of imagination mixed with reality. This is prevalent through his early records, *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* to *The River* where his characters and stories all reflected his own feelings and themes that were topical for him in his current state of mind. As Springsteen grew older, so the subject matter changed. In *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.*, his stories revolve around young people looking for romance and adventure in the

night, a theme that was also present on his second record *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* which culminated on *Born to Run*. By *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, he began singing about less optimistic themes of failure and broken dreams instead of the hopeful adolescent romance and ambition found in his previous records. Successively, by the time of *The River*, Springsteen had turned thirty and wrote about subject matter that he experienced and felt was topical at his age. By the time of *Nebraska*, as he had gotten more socially and politically conscious, Springsteen decided to write stories of different characters than those he had written about before, and this time from a narrative point of view. But he never let go of his past and his experiences, they were always present in his songwriting. As Rauch (Ibid.) finely describes, Springsteen has been able to tell stories that resonate with people, they recognize themselves in them, and painted a picture of America that they identify with.

4.2. Nebraska

The songs on *Nebraska* connected to my childhood more than any record I'd made. The tone of the music was directly linked to what I remembered of my early youth. We lived with my grandparents until I was six. Thinking through these songs, I went back and recalled what that time felt like, particularly my grandmother's house. There was something about the walls, the lack of decoration, the almost painful plainness. The centrepiece of our living room was a single photo of my father's older sister who died at the age of five in a bicycle accident around the corner by the local gas station. Her ethereal presence from this 1920s portrait gave the room a feeling of being lost in time.

(Springsteen 1998: 136)

Bruce Springsteen released his sixth studio album *Nebraska* in 1982. The music on *Nebraska* is minimal with just Springsteen's voice, an acoustic guitar and harmonica along with a few other instruments accompanying him because the record needed "that austere, echoey sound, just the one guitar – one guy kinda telling his story" (Alterman 2010: 69). Musically, the album is more in the vein of traditional folk music than the brand of rock n' roll Springsteen's audience had previously known, which the singer acknowledges as well by stating that "[m]y *Nebraska* songs were the opposite of the rock music I'd been writing. These new songs were narrative, restrained, linear, and musically minimal. Yet their depiction of characters out on the edge contextualized them as rock

and roll”(Ibid.). The songs on the album are simply constructed and thematically dark. Springsteen thought the uncomplicated melodies played an important role in the storytelling as “[t]he simplicity and plainness, the austere rhythms defined who these characters were and how they expressed themselves” (Alterman 2010: 126).

Springsteen has said that it did not take long to write the record because of the similar features and themes of the songs, and that he was influenced by the works of writer Flannery O’Connor and the movie *Badlands* by Terrence Malick during that time (Springsteen 1998: 136). The first song he finished for *Nebraska* was “Mansion on the Hill” and “My Father’s House” was the last (Ibid.). All except two songs on the album, “Reason to Believe” and “Johnny 99”, are told from a narrative perspective as Springsteen (1998: 138) has recalled that he “wanted to let the listener hear the characters think, to get inside their heads, so you could hear and feel their thoughts, their choices”. He adds that “I wanted the music to feel like a waking dream and the record to move like poetry. I wanted the blood on it to feel destined and fateful” (1998: 139).

Jim Cullen (1997: 173) observes that a central theme on the album is “the problem – the nature – of evil”, further explaining that “Springsteen posits evil as a force that defies demographic specificity or rational explanation”. Indeed, many of the characters do evil things on impulse without really understanding why they do it. The album reflects in a sense on how evil the human spirit is capable of becoming when someone loses their sense of purpose in life. Springsteen comments on this in a *Rolling Stone* interview:

I think you can get to a point where nihilism, if that’s the right word, is overwhelming, and the basic laws that society has set up - either religious or social laws - become meaningless. Things just get really dark. You lose those constraints, and then anything goes. The forces that set that into motion, I don’t know exactly what they’d be. I think just a lot of frustration, lack of findin’ somethin’ that you can hold on to, lack of contact with people, you know?.

(Loder 1984)

Described by Ryan Sheeler (2007) as “a harsh and unflinching look at American life through the eyes of outlaws, poor folk, estranged families, and other unseemly characters”, the album takes a stark look at the lives of people living out of reach of the American Dream in in the early 1980’s caused by the economic recession. As the new white-collar economy rose, the blue-collar working-class were left in turmoil. *Nebraska*

touches upon this turmoil and as Marya Morris (2007: 12) argues, on the album “Springsteen documented in a very detailed way the hardships that Reaganomics brought upon people on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder – the working poor”.

In the summer of 1982, bankruptcies and foreclosures reached levels not seen since the Great Depression as the national unemployment rate in America had reached 10,8 percent while the poverty rate was at 14 percent, the highest it had been in 40 years (Camardella 2006: 33). Many cities and towns suffered from the recession as businesses and factories closed or moved elsewhere, leaving many working-class people unemployed and unable to find work which left them depending on welfare (Ibid.). Many were left with debts they could not afford to pay anymore and were forced to sell their belongings in order to sustain their lives. Edward D. Berkowitz book *Something Happened* (2005) documents the closing of a Singer sewing machine factory in Elizabeth, New Jersey in the late 1970’s as production moved overseas where labour was cheaper. Berkowitz (2005: 70) states in the book that “[w]hat happened in Elizabeth occurred, in one form or another, in communities across America [...] As factories closed, people worried that new ones would not spring up to take their place”.

The record was thereby set in the socioeconomic landscape that was America in the early 1980’s where unemployment was rising and the working-class suffered. But it is not only about isolation caused by economic circumstances, it was also about isolation caused by severed human relations and loss of faith. There are murderers with nothing to lose, honest citizens down on their luck, bruised paternal relationships, and choices between duty and family. These stories are varied, and they all present this alienation in different ways, but the common denominator is that each character in every one of the stories is struggling with isolation in some form. I will end this chapter with a quote from Springsteen regarding the theme of the record:

Nebraska was about that American isolation: what happens to people when they’re alienated from their friends and their community and their government and their job. Because those are the things that keep you sane, that give meaning to life in some fashion. And if they slip away, and you start to exist in some void where the basic constraints of society are a joke, then life becomes kind of a joke. And anything can happen.

(Loder 1984)

3. Methods and Materials

The primary material for this study will be the songs on *Nebraska*. Other primary sources that I will use for context about Springsteen tying into the study are the edited volumes *Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader* by June Skinner Sawyers (2004), *Reading The Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* by Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (2010), and *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies and the Runaway American Dream* by Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten and Mark Bernhard (2012).

I will analyse the isolation experienced by Springsteen's characters and how it is affected by social identity, the American Dream, place and belonging, community, unemployment and social exclusion. The analysis will be conducted by close reading and I will pay attention to details that explain the characters' feelings and circumstances relevant to the study and how they form the whole of each song's story. I will then discuss the results and present a conclusion.

The chapter *Social Identity* is important because the working-class have a strong sense of identity to their social class. The loss of this identity is prominent in the lyrics to *Nebraska* and the cause of much disarray in the characters' lives. The loss of social identity is not easily regained and is closely tied to causing isolation. Michael Wearing (2005) introduces the theory of social identity in his book *Social Identity* which I then follow deeper into with James Martin's essay "Identity" which is found in *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts* (Atkinson et. al. 2005). I will present the Marxist thought of working-class social identity found in "Estranged Labor" (Marx 1959) followed up by thoughts on dislocation of identity from Ernesto Laclau's *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and *The Making of Political Identities* (1994), which will be important for the thesis as the lyrics to *Nebraska* are a very great deal about the loss of working-class identity. Next I will discuss the importance of work in the working-class identity with the help of Gregory Pappa's *The Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community* (1989) and Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (2004). The notion of work is the very foundation on which the working-class identity and culture is built, and unemployment can cause devastation for the people in this group psychologically which is discussed in Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Paula G. Leventman's *Professionals out of Work* (1981), and by Pappas (1989). From there I will go on to discuss the image of the American working man and how important

that is to the working-class identity and a key concept in the idea of the American Dream with the help of Pappas (1989), *After the Waste Land: A Democratic Economics for the Year 2000* by Bowles, Gordon & Weisskopf (2015), *America's Working Man* by David Halle (1984), along with essays by Peter Dreier (1982) and Michael Frisch (2000). The chapter will be concluded by presenting Springsteen's own views on the subject matter as stated in an interview conducted by Will Percy for *DoubleTake* (1998).

The chapter *The American Dream* deals with the working-class values and beliefs in hard work bringing prosperity, a notion which America could be said to be built upon. The working-class faithfully believe in the promise of the American Dream and its values, and a loss of faith in it is tied to loss of identity and thus also linked to isolation. Springsteen has written a lot of songs that comprise of the promise of the American Dream and this is discussed by Ann Bliss (2010) in her essay "Growin' Up to Be a Nothing Man: Masculinity, Community, and the Outsider in Bruce Springsteen's Songs" which can be found in Harde & Streight (2010). After that, I will present a brief theory of the American Dream based on Heidi Girén's (2009) research with additional insights by Bernard DeVoto (2005) and Rita Parks (1982). Both are quoted in Girén's thesis and I found them necessary for mine, but I found them either not substantial enough or misquoted so I went to their sources in order to acquire the right material I needed. I will go on from there to discuss the values of hard work and equality within the American dream from researching Duncan and Goddard's *Contemporary America*, Timothy E. Scheurer's *Born in the U.S.A.: The Myth of America in Popular Music from Colonial Times to the Present* (1991) and Jim Cullen's *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003). In conclusion I will again present Springsteen's own thoughts on the subject matter, this time via a speech he made during Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 as found in Jeff Burger's *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters* (2013).

The chapter *Place and Belonging* discusses how place and space and the feeling of belonging somewhere, or the lack of it, enforce feelings of both inclusion and isolation. The theory of places and spaces in regard to geographical contexts play a big part in Springsteen's lyrics as he often sets his stories in distinct surroundings which are important to his stories overall. Places and spaces produce feelings of alienation and belonging, and both are crucial to Isolation. The chapter will begin with an introduction to the topic of place and space and a discussion of the concept for which I have used Mike

Cadó's and Teresa V. Abruzzese's essay "Tracking Place and Identity in Bruce Springsteen's *Tracks*" found in Harde & Streight (2010) for help. I will then go on to how belonging relates to place and space for which I have used Henri Lefevbre's *The Production of Space* (1974), Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" (1967) and "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the Outside" (1987), Elspeth Probyn's *Outside Belongings* (2016) and "New Geographies of Citizenship" by Luke Desforges, Rhys Jones & Mike Woods (2005). The discussion will then move forward to Springsteen's use of place, space and sense of belonging in his lyrics which are discussed via Marya Morris's "From 'My Hometown' to 'This Hard Land': Bruce Springsteen's Use of Geography, Landscapes, and Places to Depict the American Experience" (2007), Bob Crane's "A Place to Stand: A Guide to Bruce Springsteen's Sense of Place" (In Sawyers 2004) and Robert Santelli's "Twenty Years Burning Down the Road: The Complete History of Jersey Shore Rock n' Roll" (In Sawyers 2004). The chapter is concluded by Springsteen's thoughts on place and space in his songwriting from both an interview with Trevor Noah from the Daily Show (2020) and his book *Songs* (1998) which draw a parallel to how Phil Hubbard discusses in his essay "Space/Place" (In Atkinson et al. 2005).

The chapter *Community* continues with the importance of places and spaces where people feel that they belong, as community brings security and enclosure. When a community is broken up, or someone finds themselves excluded from a community, isolation sets in. The working-class are often associated with a community of their own consisting of the sense of values and customs. First I will present the theory of how the same sense of identification and belonging in a community builds social identity as discussed by Cindi Katz in her essay "Social Foundations: Thinking About Society, Identity, Power, and Resistance" (in Clifford, Rice & Valentine 2009). Then I will present Benedict Anderson's theory about imagined communities from *Imagined Communities* (1983). In short, the theory is that even if people feel a mutual sense of identity and sameness in a community, there are differences. Following this, I will offer a view of how Springsteen portrays and values community in his lyrics guided by Bryan K. Garman's "The Ghost of History: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and the Hurt Song" (In Sawyers 2004), Jefferson Cowie's and Laura Boehm's "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the USA.'- Social History and Working Class Identity", Anne Bliss's (2010) aforementioned work, and Judy Wieder's "Bruce Springsteen: The Advocate Interview (In Sawyers 2004). Finally I will discuss why the word "community" is somewhat contested and

difficult to conceptualize, using Gillian Rose's "Imagining Poplar in the 1920's: Contested Concepts of Humanity" (1990) and conclude the chapter with Springsteen's own view of what community means to him taken from the Will Percy interview for *DoubleTake* (1998).

Finally *Social Exclusion and Unemployment* will consider how losing a job can disrupt an individual's social identity, belief in the promise of the American Dream, make them feel alienated from their surroundings, loss of status in a community, and eventual social exclusion which leads to withdrawal and isolation. In a working-class community, if someone loses their job it can have severe consequences to their mental health and economy. One might fall out from their normal routines and see themselves excluded from their old community as they do not fit in anymore, maybe they even lose their economy and make unreasonable and fatal mistakes. The chapter starts with an explanation of what social exclusion is and how it begins using "Social Exclusion" by Anne Powers (2000), "Social Exclusion in Britain 1991-1995" by Tania Burchardt, Julian Le Grand & David Piachaud (1999) and "'Out of Place', 'Knowing One's Place': Space, Power, and the Exclusion of Disabled People" by Rob Kitchin (2010) for reference. From there on I go deeper into the reasons behind social exclusion using "Outsider and Insider Expertise: The Response of Residents of Deprived Neighbourhoods to an Academic Definition of Social Exclusion" by Liz Richardson and Julian Le Grand (2002), "Explanations of Social Exclusion: Where Does Housing Fit In?" by Peter Somerville (1996), "Linking the Micro- and Macrolevel Dimensions of Community Social Organization" by Robert J. Sampson (1991), *Social Exclusion* by David Byrne (2005), "Dangerous Youth and the Dangerous Class" by Robert MacDonald (In MacDonald 1997), and Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud (1999) as reference.

Then I will discuss unemployment, its consequences, and how unemployment causes social exclusion. I will use Gregory Pappas (1989) book for the bulk of the research with additional references from Harvey M. Brenner's *Mental Illness and the Economy* (1973), Marie Jahoda's *Employment and Unemployment: A Socio-Psychological Analysis* (1982), C.C. Harris's *The Family and Industrial Society* (1983) and Susan Gore's "The Effect of Social Support in Moderating the Health Consequences of Unemployment" (1978). To conclude the chapter, and the theory part of my thesis, I will discuss Jason P. Stonerook's thoughts on the state of America in the early 1980's and

his conceptualization of Springsteen's views on the matter from "Springsteen's Search for Individuality and community in Post-1960's America" (2012).

In *Approaching Nebraska* I will then analyse the song lyrics four stanzas at a time, but if necessary in more at a time. I acknowledge that there are several ways to interpret the songs lyrics and I may not find or understand everything as other research might, so this is not an absolute analysis, rather an interpretation of how Springsteen's working-class characters in *Nebraska* suffer from various degrees of isolation and what their actions are. In two songs, "Nebraska" and "Atlantic City", I will use additional sources beside the song lyrics because it will be necessary to explain their contexts. "Nebraska" because it is based on a true story, and "Atlantic City" because of the city's history. In "Nebraska" I will reference to Alterman (2010), Marsh (2004), Springsteen (1998), and "Deliver Me from Nowhere: Place and Space in Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska" by Frank P. Fury (In Harde & Streight 2010). As for "Atlantic City", I will be referencing "Casino Gambling in Atlantic City: Issues of Development and Redevelopment" by Joseph Rubenstein (1984) and *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* by Bryant Simon (2004). Finally, I will present a discussion of my findings and a conclusion.

4. Concepts and Theory

In this chapter I will now present the theoretical material for my study.

4.1. Social Identity

In the preface for the book *Social Identity* (2011: vii), Wearing suggests, based on the studies on Frantz Fanon, that “we are all, as Fanon suggests, cast and fixed in time and place by our identities within the culture and the society in which we live”. This does not mean that we are permanently stagnated once we have found our identities, but that we are instead affected by “the moving flows and fluid relations of identity construction that come out of the social interactions, networks and institutions of our societies” (Ibid.). Social identity is thus shaped by the society in which we surround ourselves and that we too can shape our own societies with the help of identity by way of interactions and communications (Ibid.).

An important element in the construction of social identities is the concept of spatiality, meaning that “identities are understood to be generated in relation to specific places, both territorial and social” (Martin 2005: 98). Martin (Ibid.) presents two examples, national and regional identity, which involve “subjects’ perception of the importance of territorial location and history in the formation of elements that make up their common identity”. Martin asserts that these “[n]ational characteristics’ may also be specified [...] in terms of regional, cultural, and social ‘traditions’” just like Marxists specify class identities “in relation to place within a structure of production and property relations” (Ibid.).

In the Marxist school of thought, “the habits, assumptions, and customs of different classes are believed to derive to a great degree from an individual’s occupation within the division of labour” (Ibid.). As labour and production are spread out geographically, the result is that there are “variations in the patterns of belief, behaviour, and class consciousness within and across classes” (Ibid.). Along with being important in creating and forming identities via “shared experiences and customs”, spatial location is also important in creating what Martin calls a “‘position’ from which resistance can be made against power, inequality, and other forms of perceived oppression” (Ibid.). This means that localities built in relatively enclosed spaces give birth to new collective

identities as people experience both commonality and distance from the general customs and behaviours (Ibid.).

Even though Marx's theories were about the nineteenth-century industrial workers and their sense of alienation from labour, his thoughts are relevant in the settings for Springsteen's characters. As Marx says:

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

(Marx 1959: 29)

Not only is identity a temporally and spatially variable construction, it is also contradictory and sometimes plural, contrasting the notion that identity would be a stable figure contained within a human being which suffers no influence from external social factors (Martin 2005: 100). In the case of belonging, it means that claims of belonging somewhere, be it a homeland or community, are "efforts to invoke the mythical unity and stability of a closed identity rather than expressions of something that actually already exists" (Martin 2005: 99). Ernesto Laclau (1990: 18) argues that identities are not coherent but disjointed, meaning that they can only be formed through differentiation and limited to being dependent of something that it can be compared to. Continuing on the theme of dislocation in identity, Martin (2005: 100) thinks that "[d]islocation does not automatically involve crisis or total instability, yet in certain contexts – of great social and economic disruption for example, challenges to personal and collective identity can multiply dislocations to the degree that a reassertion of a full identity becomes imperative".

Laclau (1996: 44) argues that at such moments, individuals are susceptible to the influence of what he calls "empty signifiers", which are principles that promise to bring a stable order. They can be notions of "revolution", "order", or "unity for example and are called empty because they only function as what he calls the "horizon" for meaning instead of actually including any specific content (Laclau 1996: 58). These kinds of signifiers provide dislocated identities a sense that their dislocation is in fact caused by an interference by an external force, be it the state or immigrants, and once this illusory blockade should be removed, the identity can return to its natural state (Laclau 1996: 39).

One central point around which identities are constructed is work. Work, as Pappas (1989: 75) puts it, is “the major organizing principle around which the working class, and almost everyone else, structures life. When work is gone, so is much of the order in our lives”. Work is therefore important for the psychological well-being of humans, even essential to many. While work may sometimes be unpleasant, it still binds people to a sense of purpose in this world and the absence of it can cause much distress. With work comes status, and that itself gives the individual a role inside a human community. Now, this status may not be a preferred one, it might be a different status than the individual wishes altogether, but should the individual lose status in the human community, it can lead to isolation and a lost sense of meaning in life. Similar to the sense of status loss, one’s sense of personal identity can also be disturbed by unemployment since personal identity and how an individual experiences time are strongly experienced through occupation (Ibid.). Once the structures and foundations that have been built by the routine of work cease to exist, people might lose track of time and be left in distress. As Sigmund Freud says:

No other technique for the conduct of life binds the individual so firmly to reality as an emphasis on work, which at least gives him a secure place in one area of reality, the human community. The possibility of shifting a large number of libidinal components – narcissistic, aggressive, even erotic – towards professional work and the human relations connected with it lends it a value that is in no way inferior to the indispensable part it plays in asserting and justifying a person’s existence in society.

(Freud 2004: 112)

Along with Freud’s studies, several other studies have been made on the psychological suffering caused by unemployment, for example by Leventman (1981) and Rubin (1976). Unemployment takes away both the income and the psychological benefits that work brings which can disrupt the individual’s connection with “some of the most fundamental categories of human experience through which we come to know ourselves, others, and the world” (Pappas 1989: 76). In addition:

The sense of time, social status, personal identity, and participation in the collectivity are part of a cultural system that gives a certain shape to the experience of the unemployed. This cultural system, which could also be called a set of values, works as a structure in ways similar to the rules and opportunities of the labor market or governmental agencies, constraining and enabling people to go on with their lives.

(Ibid.)

Employment thus strengthens the personal identity with a sense of competence and stability while unemployment robs the individual's personal identity, leaving the unemployed worker without aspirations and any spirits of confidence in their own identity (Pappas 1989: 82).

According to Bauman (2000: 188), the ones who suffer most of the damage caused by uncertain labour markets and globalisation are the working-class communities as they are less flexible and willing to mobilise than their more supple counterparts. Unemployment is far worse for those who do not have an education than for professionals, as studies show that educated professionals are not dependent on their place of employment, they are rather mobile with their identities, but lower- or uneducated factory workers for example have an identity that is bound to a particular place, their place of employment, and should a factory close, so would their ability to feel connected to the world and themselves (Pappas 1989; Leventman 1981).

One of the most enduring images of American identity and part and parcel of the American Dream is the prosperous worker. This image was born from the unprecedented growth of wealth in the United States during the first two decades after the second World War which was a prosperous time for the working man (Bowles, Gordon & Weisskopf 2015: 11). This idea has for long been kept alive by the working class itself who have faithfully wanted to believe in it, despite studies that have doubted the image of the affluent worker (Pappas 1989: 13). The most prominent association with the image of the prosperous working-class is homeownership (Pappas 1989: 29). It was during the same period of economic growth that followed the second World War when homeownership became possible for the American working-class and it was even encouraged by the Federal Housing Administration and enforced by government policies (Ibid.). In 1980, many considered homeownership in America more as an entitlement than a dream, but the possibilities of homeownership had become increasingly difficult due the recession, high interest rates, debts, and risks of foreclosure (Dreier 1982: 190). Those who were already paying for their homes were faced with the financial burden of mortgages that were not possible to shorten in any way, and a house could become a "noose" for a family suffering from the unemployment caused by the recession as they did not have the same income anymore (Pappas 1989: 29). In the 1970's, it was thought that unemployment insurances had made it impossible for anybody to fall into poverty

should they lose their jobs, making it less dreaded than before, but despite the economic growth and the positive predictions, poverty still remained (Pappas 1989: 13).

The working-class identity is constructed by various components and is resistant to any singular representation offering instead, according to Frisch (2000: 214), “a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community [become] woven together with work and workplace in their own identities”. According to Halle (1984: 292-293), the working class is highly diverse but they all share the same values and beliefs when it comes to home, work, community, and individualism. They are all jeopardized once a worker loses their job as their identities are shaken. Another characteristic of the working-class American identity is the hopes and aspirations to provide a better future for their children, something which is used as a measurement of how successful one is in their lives (Pappas 1989: 85).

Springsteen shares the same point of view about providing a better future for the children. His work has often emphasized the importance of companionship and community, caring for the one’s around you and the importance of practicing these working-class values and passing them on:

What do parents try to provide their children? You’re supposed to be providing a hopeful presence, a decent presence, in your children’s lives and your neighbors’ lives. That’s what I would want my children to grow up with and then to provide when they become adults. It’s a big part of what you can do with song, and pictures and words. It’s real and its results are physical and tangible. And if you follow its implications, it leads you both inward and outward. Some days we climb inside, and some days maybe we run out. A good day is a balance of those sort of things. When rock music was working at its best, it was doing all of those things-looking inward and reaching out to others.

(Percy 1998)

He has expressed this in his lyrics and most prominently in his concerts which have a strong element of religious communion to them. Springsteen is known for engaging with his audience in a very friendly and close manner, accepting song requests from the audience, picking up members of the audience to join him onstage for a dance and even going out in the audience himself during songs. By doing this, the audience and the performers join together as one big family, a community, and share the experience. As Springsteen explains:

To get back to where we started, it can be difficult to build those kinds of connections, to build and sustain those kinds of communities, when you're picked up and thrown away so quickly - that cult of celebrity. At your best, your most honest, your least glitzy, you shared a common history, and you attempted both to ask questions and answer them in concert with your audience. In concert. The word "concert" - people working together - that's the idea. That's what I've tried to do as I go along with my work. I'm thankful that I have a dedicated, faithful audience that's followed along with me a good part of the way. It's one of my life's great blessings - having that companionship and being able to rely on that companionship. You know, "companionship" means breaking bread with your brothers and sisters, your fellow human beings - the most important thing in the world! It's sustained my family and me and my band throughout my life.

(Percy 1998)

Here we see then that social identity is composed of multiple factors but principally constructed by social interactions and spatiality. Common habits and customs between a group of people create a sense of comfort and belonging, a community where people have the same values and unity. It is not permanent however as social identity is susceptible to change, and the loss of it can be devastating to some. The working-class identity is structured around work and its social structures. The working-class communities have specific values and behaviours, such as the firm belief in the prosperous rewards of hard work and the promises of upward mobility and homeownership which the American Dream pledges by, that create a shared sense of comfort and belonging as each member of the society revere them. But once these certainties are shaken and jeopardised, many begin to question their own identities and beliefs. Some might find it hard to cope when something they believe to be definite suddenly alters and the alienation that follows can disrupt a person's identity completely. This ties in with the theme of *Nebraska* and my thesis as the characters on the record have in a sense lost their own identities and have a hard time figuring out where they fit in this world. One such thing might be if a faithful believer in American working-class values would suddenly become disillusioned by the American Dream: a topic which will be discussed next .

4.2. The American Dream

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "the American Dream" as: "a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful" (*Merriam-*

Webster, s.v. the American Dream). The pursuit for the American Dream is prominent in Springsteen's lyrics and his characters are often working hard to reach their personal socioeconomic dreams but have to overcome difficulties and struggles to do so. So much that Bliss (2010: 134) thinks that the pursuit of the American Dream is more important and interesting for Springsteen than achieving it. She adds that Springsteen's way of portraying the working-class characters is based on his own past (2010: 135), and indeed Springsteen's characters have been struggling people throughout his career which has given Springsteen the image of a working-class hero. Bliss (Ibid.) adds that there is also a complex relationship between individualism, masculinity, and work in Springsteen's lyrics, a relationship that his outsider characters feel excluded from and have a hard time understanding. The American Dream emphasizes hard work in relation to achieving one's goals, upward mobility, and a thing about Springsteen's lyrics has always been that no matter how much deprivation his characters suffer while struggling with financial despair in search of stability, there is always some sense of hope and opportunity.

As Girén (2009: 35) has come to find in her studies, "the origins of the American Dream are in the pre-colonial era". Columbus discovered America in 1492 and the discovery of the new continent, as Girén (Ibid.) puts it, "seemed miraculous to the Europeans of the time and thus many myths started to emerge about the land across the oceans" This effectively laid the foundations for the American Dream. The American landscapes came to symbolize endless possibilities, freedom, and prosperity to the early settlers who moved there to pursue their dreams, and soon the westward expansion enforced the myth of America (Girén 2009: 36). As Bernard DeVoto puts it:

Implicit in the westward surge, both a product and a condition of it, was the sentiment that has been called, none too accurately, the American Dream. It is a complex sentiment not too easily to be phrased. The plain evidence of the frontier movement, from the falls line on, indicated that there could be no limit but the sky to what the Americans might do. [...]Every decade of expansion, every new district that was opened, backed up the evidence till such an expectation was absolutely integral with the national progress. There was no limit but the sky: American ingenuity, American will power, American energy could be stopped by nothing whatever but would go on forever [...].

(DeVoto 2005: 47)

Girén (2009: 26) further thinks that "[e]ven today the West and its wide-open spaces and plains symbolize freedom" for many with the West being a "mythological place that

reflects both American history” and the principles behind the American Dream. Parks agrees on this and states that American Western movies have enforced this idea of American values:

[T]he Western depicts certain symbolic elements of American life – the self-made man, the Edenic dream, the clever Yankee, the ultimate success of the work ethic, the triumph of physical prowess and personal energy, independence, and freedom of movement.

(Parks 1982: 29)

Springsteen has written songs where his characters set out to find the Promised Land in America by mobilizing themselves. What they mean by the Promised Land is rooted in the American Dream, but it really depends on their own personal wants and needs. Some are looking for upward mobility while for others the idea of the Promised Land is simply any place where they can make a stand and feel comfortable in. The pursuit of economic prosperity and freedom is often on the road somewhere in his lyrics, seldom where the story begins. His characters also try hard to emulate the characteristics that Parks describes, believing in hard work and freedom. In *Nebraska* however, many of the characters would no doubt like to be able to live up to these idealistic American values that they so firmly believe in, but due to various circumstances that keep them down or lead them astray, they are not able to do so. It is not that they do not try, they just get defeated by circumstances beyond their control and wind up losing themselves, falling into despair, or accepting their failure and continue living in a state of stasis.

Duncan and Goddard (2003: 9) emphasize that “[i]nsisting that hard work is its own reward, the Puritan work ethic is essential to American individualism”. This means that the tradition stems from way back when America was young, when immigrants had to build the roads and the cities that became America, pushing westward to fulfil their dreams and in charge of their own destinies while doing so. Another aspect closely tied to the American Dream is equality, as Scheurer describes that the core principle was that “everyone could have a voice, everyone could have a share of the land, everyone could have a share of the power and the wealth” (Scheurer 1991: 49-50). This equality is about freedom and individuality, freedom from the government or any other force seen as oppressing as Duncan and Goddard state:

Americans are taught from childhood that anything or everything is possible. The American Dream is a decidedly bourgeois notion and it is formulated upon the belief that government will not limit individual ambitions, either by restrictive laws or by using transfer income to gain an equality of outcome for others. Americans have consistently and overwhelmingly resisted any equality other than the equality of opportunity to achieve merit, and, thereafter, the rewards that merit brings.

(Duncan and Goddard 2003: 4)

The myth of the Promised Land and its treasures which were attainable if you worked hard enough created the myth that anything is possible in America and has kept people's faith strong in the promises of work ever since. Idleness is therefore frowned upon and unemployment and poverty could be judged as a result of not working hard enough, that it is brought upon individuals by themselves.

These beliefs are however not agreed upon by everyone as Jim Cullen (2003: 7) states “[t]here is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams”. The American Dream holds various meanings to different people and can change over time depending on who you ask. There are several influences behind every individual's own idea of what the American Dream means to them such as class, race, origin, age, and religion. The American Dream could rather be described as beliefs and ideals associated with America than any single one, but nevertheless it is a strong part of the American identity which remains a fact for the many who believe in it.

Drawing from these views there are many ways to look at and understand the American Dream and what it means to people, but at its core, every individual should have the opportunity to reach it and America should be responsible to provide the conditions for people to do so. Springsteen expressed his thoughts on the American Dream, its values, and what it means to be American at one of Barack Obama's campaign rallies in 2008:

I've spent thirty-five years writing about America and its people. About what does it mean to be an American, what is our duty, our responsibility, what are our reasonable expectations when we live in a free society. I really never saw myself as partisan, but more as an advocate for a set of ideas: economic and social justice, America as a positive influence around the world, truth, transparency, and integrity in government, the right of every American to a job, a living wage, to be educated in a decent school, to have a life filled with the dignity of work, promise, and the sanctity of home. These are the things that make a life. These are the things that build and

define a society. And I think that these are the things we think of at the deepest level when we think about our freedom.

(Burger 2013: 333)

For many Americans, the values and beliefs of the American Dream are tightly knit to their own social identity as they live and breathe it. They feel at home in America because people share similar beliefs and values, they feel they belong in a big community where they all have the same common feeling of unity through their faith in the promise of America. The American identity can be thus said to be tied to place, America itself. This leads to the next discussion about what role place and belonging play in social identity.

4.3. Place and Belonging

In relation to identity, place has been the subject of wide scholarly discussion and there are many definitions of it across different academic disciplines but in the field of human geography, place has been given three concepts, “location, locale and sense of place” (Cadó and Abruzzese 2010: 97). Location is a “geographical coordinate shaped by historical, social, economic, and political processes”, locale is “a setting for daily social interactions”, and sense of place is “an emotional interpretation of place, which in turn shapes both individual and collective identities” (Ibid.). All of them relate to the ways in which space is turned into “places that are either physical locations or ideological or imagined constructions” and therefore spaces are turned into defined places through “particular geographical coordinates, political boundaries, cultural representations, subjective meanings, and collective memory” (Ibid.).

In Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974: 95), the author claims that space is bound to change over time and thus so do the symbolic associations with it. Foucault (1967: 23) thinks that the spaces where we seek belonging are not “a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things”. The opposite of belonging would be to be on the outside which would mean that there needs to be some relation of proximity, or as Foucault (1987: 12) explains, “a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbors, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all”. For an outsider to feel that they want to belong, there needs to be a desire to do so. According to Probyn (2016: 13),

desire is what makes us figure our relations of proximity to others, makes us want to connect, and “sets into motion different possibilities”. As Desforges et al (2005: 440) note: “Historically, citizenship was a mark of belonging and commitment to a specific space (a city-state or borough), and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were performed in this civic context”.

But while belonging can be thought as simply a geographical concept, studies suggest that belonging is not limited to one single thing. It is possible to feel a sense of belonging over different subjects and in many ways, for example, by one’s political opinions or interests such as taste of music (Alexander 2008; McNevin 2006).

The sense of place in relation to belonging means somewhere a person can feel at home and enjoy a feeling of stability and security (Probyn 2016: 8). A geographical location where a person feels their social identity is strongly attached to, maybe through their own past or social networks. These places are not static however, since places change just as people do, and many people tend to look back with nostalgia on places and yearn for something to be as it used to be.

Marya Morris (2007: 3) argues that Springsteen’s use of “placebased imagery” has been a characterizing ingredient in his song writing throughout his career. Springsteen often gives detailed descriptions of the surroundings where his characters and his stories are based, some being real places located somewhere in the United States while others are loosely based on reality or fictional but yet believable (Ibid.). In addition, according to Crane (2004:404), Springsteen also uses non-specific places such as “over the rise” or “at the edge of town” to describe the emotional states of his characters: “Springsteen links the voices of his characters to the landscapes where they stand, with metaphorical power and revelation”. Crane further adds that given the fact that Springsteen’s places aren’t always real geographical references, “Springsteen allows place to take shape as a character, and, at its best, as a force that influences the choices and decisions of his protagonists” (Ibid.).

Morris (2007: 4) argues that Springsteen’s use of stark realism and his close attention to places and the plight of the working-class played an important role in conveying a sense of community and shared experience with his audience from the beginning. Especially in New Jersey where his audience knew exactly where many of the places Springsteen sang about were located, such as the Boardwalk and Highway 9, and

felt a kinship with his characters who lived a similar life as they or someone they knew did (Ibid.). This working-class imagery became Springsteen's brand identity. As music historian Robert Santelli (1992: 167-68) notes: "Few American songwriters have been able to take such detailed images of the American Dream, as well as the tales of hardship and disappointment that accompany them and imbue them with the universality that Bruce has". Another providing factor was that his songs were partly autobiographical, which strengthened the emotional connection his songs gave to his fans (Morris 2007: 4). But his music also appealed over class-boundaries as they related to such common themes such as work, family, and living a satisfying life (Ibid.):

I would say, first and foremost, I'm a good storyteller [...] and people like stories, and they like stories that connect with their inner geography, your inner geography may or may not have to do with anything you've experienced or not experienced, it's simply the geography of your emotional life. And I believe I've done well at speaking to that, you know and our largest audience is in Europe, we have 2/3 of our audience exist in Europe now, much, much bigger than the United States. And so why is that? I think I'm a good storyteller, you know, and I think in Europe, people are very interested in America and American myth and what's going on over here. And those are stories I've told since I was a young man.

(Bruce Springsteen – Spiritual Songwriting & 'Letter to You' 2020)

In other words, even if many of Springsteen's listeners have never been to the places that Springsteen describes in his songs, or America at all, they can feel a connection to them because these places are adaptable in every individual's "inner geography". His use of placebased imagery, whether real or imagined, transcends cultures and borders, evoking a sense of familiarity. It's easy to imagine these places that are in his songs because there can be a similar place or space in someone's own life.

Hubbard (2005: 43) explains that "place is often equated with security and enclosure, whereas space is associated with freedom and mobility". This means that a place is connected to stability while space is not. This explanation of place and space fits Springsteen's description of the albums theme in his book *Songs* (1998: 138): "It is the thin line between stability and that moment when everything goes to black, when the things that connect you to your world – your job, your family, friends, your faith, the love and grace in your heart – fail you". Isolation and dislocation are thus a main theme on the album and its songs, the characters are seeking the security and sense of belonging that a

place can provide while being ousted into a space where they do not want to be. These places may not necessarily exist however, yet his characters are obsessed with pursuing them in often futile attempts. An interesting thing is that previously on his albums Springsteen had romanticised the possibilities that freedom and mobility bring while on *Nebraska* it seems more an unwelcome and scary thing. He is not as optimistic about freedom and mobility which the American Dream is supposed to provide, he looks more at it as a broken promise through the eyes of these working-class people who face social isolation and socio-economic troubles. Springsteen sums up the album's theme of loss of identity, isolation, place and space as: "When you lose that sense of community, there's some spiritual breakdown that occurs. And when that occurs, you just get shot off somewhere where nothing seems to matter" (Marsh 2004: 286). But the sense of belonging is not limited to geographical places and spaces, there are many things that bring people together to form a sense of community, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.4. Community

According to Katz (2009: 237), a social group that is marked as a society gives the presumption that they share a same sense of identification and belonging on a geographic scale and being a member of a particular society helps to construct one's identity. Identity shifts over time, but by seeking out specific societies by choice, people begin to build communities where they share the same interests, behavioural patterns and practices and construct their identities to become for example working class people (Ibid.). If people spend enough time in these societies, they may begin to understand a shared knowledge of their community's history, behave, speak, and even dress like others in the same societal group and thus adopt the shared identity (Ibid.). This means that once you've felt that you are a part of the society, others may start to recognize you as one too. As Katz (2009: 238) explains: "In other words, there is a mutually constructive relationship between the making of particular identities and the social groups that render them meaningful and set the norms and parameters of their production and reproduction".

This does not mean however that all the members of a society share the same space or have ever seen each other, little less get along or be able to identify with each other if they would meet (Katz 2009: 238). In *Imagined Communities* (Anderson

1983: 6), Anderson further iterates on this: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds they each lives the image of their communion”.

Anderson (Ibid.) follows up by suggesting that identifying as a part of a nation, you are actually identifying yourself with an imagined community. This is because even if the citizens share a seemingly deep sense of fellowship and mutual identity with each other, they are not the same as there may be differences and inequalities between their ways of thinking and personalities (Ibid.). Thus members of communities identify with each other and produce a sense of sameness but there are limitations and differences.

A lot of Springsteen’s lyrics deal with community and the individuals’ role in maintaining it. His lyrics also deal with the consequences of people becoming excluded and isolated from their communities, or rather misfits who do not feel that they belong in their communities. As Springsteen describes *Nebraska*: “*Nebraska* was about American isolation: what happens to people when they’re alienated from their friends and their community and their government and their job” (Garman 1996: 224). Garman (1996: 225) thinks that if this kind of collective struggling itself forms a sort of community for all people who feel the same way, where they all are struggling and living on the edges of society, trying hard to understand how they could turn their lives around and re-join their communities or find a way to belong somewhere. These outsiders are not then a part of any bigger community, a greater whole as Bliss (2010: 137) remarks. According to Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm (2006: 358-359), the concept of community which Springsteen portrays works to provide support for those who have it bad, as Springsteen’s songs hold both “the possibility of redemption” and images of “community, hope, and faith”. Bliss (2010: 138) adds that communality is essential for an individual to find their place within society and should the community fail them in their attempts to do so, then according to Springsteen: “It’s like he has nothing left to tie him into society anymore. He’s isolated from the government. Isolated from his family” (Cowie & Boehm 2006: 359).

Springsteen has often placed an emphasis on how important it is for individuals to collectively work together in order to form and maintain a community where they can live a sort of communal American Dream together. Bliss (2010: 138) finds

it ironic that Springsteen thinks that the community is so important when the American Dream is rooted in individual goals, as in Springsteen's songs the rebellious individual indeed often seeks to break out of his community in order to find another more suitable place where he can feel that he belongs which is essentially another community. It is indeed in Springsteen's songs that without a community, the individual is lost and unable to succeed, such as in *Nebraska*, where the characters all have in common that they unsuccessfully try to live a decent life in a capitalist world as they do not have the help of their community. Springsteen too acknowledges this as he has said that "I felt that what I was doing is rooted in a community - either real or imagined - and that my connection to that community was what made my writing and singing matter" (Wieder 1996: 215) and that "if my work was about anything, it was about the search for identity, for personal recognition, for acceptance, for communion" (Wieder 1996: 214).

According to Rose (1990: 425), the use of the word "community" has lost favor among academics as it is regarded as an imagined concept but yet it is used in historical studies for its "emotional legitimacy" and because:

Theoretical generalizations appeared impossible to draw from community studies because of their noncomparability, their lack of a casual context beyond the community in question and their often glamorized portraits of its social relations, and, ever since, studies of particular localities have been reluctant to use the concept.

(Ibid.)

Thus, the term community is a somewhat debated one, although it is often used in the context of the working-class. But as Rose (Ibid.) asserts: "[t]he chaos of its conceptualization and the warmth with which it is upheld as a social ideal are not seen as difficulties which render the concept useless for our attempts to understand society, but as the very reason for its interest". She adds by proclaiming "community" to be a keyword and that the struggles over its meaning reveal the "social, political, economic and cultural power relations of specific times and places" (Ibid.). It can be then said that even if communities are indeed imagined, they are nevertheless grounded on "specific political, social, cultural and economic conditions" (Rose 1990: 426), so, in other words, a "group of people bound together by some kind of belief, stemming from particular historical and geographical circumstances, in their own solidarity" (Ibid.).

Springsteen spoke on his thoughts about community and what it meant to him in an interview with Will Percy in 1998. He explained that music had a strong impact on his own feeling of belonging because he knew he was not alone with his passion, that there had to be other likeminded people out there with a shared interest in music, he just had to find them. Springsteen did not know where they were but he was certain that the community he imagined must exist somewhere. He expressed that he believed the power of a community in which one feel they belong nourishes the well-being of people as they can have a place where they feel at home and something in common with others, to feel included:

That's a lot of what music did for me-it provided me with a community, filled with people, and brothers and sisters who I didn't know, but who I knew were out there. We had this enormous thing in common, this "thing" that initially felt like a secret. Music always provided that home for me, a home where my spirit could wander. It performed the function that all art and film and good human relations performed-it provided me with the kind of "home" always described by those philosophers your uncle loved. There are very real communities that were built up around that notion-the very real community of your local club on Saturday night. The importance of bar bands all across America is that they nourish and inspire that community. So there are the very real communities of people and characters, whether it's in Asbury Park or a million different towns across the land. And then there is the community that it was enabling you to imagine, but that you haven't seen yet. You don't even know it exists, but you feel that, because of what you heard or experienced, it could exist.

(Percy 1998)

The idea of an imagined community which you have to go out and find worked as a driving factor for Springsteen in his life. Springsteen, like many others, had felt he was a misfit who did not belong anywhere but was certain that there was a place for him to call home too. He further expressed the positive traits of community as a way to learn about different group values and ideas and how they transcend cultures and geographical spaces and places, even helping to understand different stages in life and the changes they bring:

That was a very powerful idea because it drew you outward in search of that community - a community of ideas and values. I think as you get older and develop a political point of view, it expands out into those worlds, the worlds of others, all over America, and you realize it's just an extension of that thing that you felt in a bar on Saturday night in Asbury Park when it was a hundred and fifty people in the room

(Ibid.)

In Springsteen's mind, it is community that ties people together in this world and gives us a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. Studies support his thoughts, as people tend to feel joy when they are a part of something, unless they have decided to exclude themselves voluntarily. These communities may exist physically around an individual, or in some other form which is not geographically located in one single place, or even imagined as in that their existence is not completely confirmed but there is a firm belief and hope that there is one out there somewhere. They provide security and support for people, a sense of belonging and a place where their own social identities are accepted and common values and customs are created.

Nebraska however deals with loss of community, what happens to people when they suddenly find themselves excluded from their communities and are left to fend for themselves. There are several reasons that could lead to a feeling of detachment and eventual exclusion from a community along with various consequences and subjective ways of dealing with this change in life which will be discussed in the next chapter. One of the reasons for social exclusion from a community can be unemployment which could lead to an individual's or a whole family's loss of status within a community and eventual alienation from it whether voluntarily or involuntarily. These changes impact hard on people's perception of their own identities and many are left confused and struggling with themselves. In *Nebraska*, many of the character's stories revolve around unemployment and their consequent actions and decisions. Some lose their social identity and cannot find a way to regain it which drives them to completely abandon all their morals and values because nothing matters to them anymore, others suffer the consequences but try to make things better, often in futile attempts.

4.5. Social Exclusion and Unemployment

Anne Power (2000: 47) explains the concept of social exclusion as being "the inability of our society to keep all groups and individuals within reach of what we expect as a society to realize their full potential". She adds that "[i]t is about the tendency to push vulnerable and difficult individuals into the least popular places, furthest away from our common aspirations" (Ibid.). In other words, social exclusion is about people falling out of society or community either willingly or unwillingly (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999: 229).

In any community, there are social norms, and people who perceive that they are outside of these norms - don't quite fit in - can feel that they are excluded from the community (Ibid.). The reason for exclusion might not always be clear, it can be caused by policies from public authorities, social reasons, gender, illness, religion, or behaviour for example. Exclusion may even happen if the intention would be to include someone (Kitchin 1998: 347). This means that even if a person would want to belong, it may not be possible as they are blocked from accessing the group by either an external factor or by their own actions (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999: 229).

Exclusion can begin in as early as childhood even if an individual would be unaware of it. It can be something children experience themselves directly from others or inherit from their family's excluded status (Richardson and Le Grand 2002: 504). The ones who are excluded can vary depending on communities but the ones who have the highest risk of being excluded are those who are poor or have limited chances of gaining financial advancement, new people in the community, or those who do not fit in with the ideologies and moral codes of the community (Somerville 1998: 766). The time an individual or a family has spent in a community, how established they are, is an indicator of how well the community is likely to accept them and how more likely they will be included in social activities and how broad their social networks are (Sampson 1991: 46).

Social exclusion of individuals can also be caused by assumptions of different behaviour and can lead to a lower status in the community, an underclass (Byrne 2005: 24). These excluded underclasses can be the unemployed, the homeless, the less educated, people suffering from mental illnesses, single parents, and criminals (MacDonald 1997: 15). Leading up to social exclusion, those in danger may feel themselves unwelcome and rejected in the surrounding community which leads them to lessening their participation in communal gatherings and places (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999: 229).

Individuals might suffer from a disadvantage such as unemployment in a place where jobs are hard to find and that they are thus unable to attain any social security. The system may have failed to provide employment opportunities. Losing a job has many consequences for people, none more than the loss of a sense of purpose in their human community (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999: 232). Social networks and friendships are tied to work relations for many, and by losing their jobs their social

contacts and participation in social activities may reduce leaving the unemployed feeling useless and blaming themselves for their own exclusion (Ibid.).

As researched by Brenner (1973), unemployment and social exclusion can also lead to mental illness as it is studied that the rise in unemployment has a correlating increase with alcoholism, crime, psychiatric visits, and suicides. Pappas (1989: 77) also notes that work constructs the daily routines and the understanding of time and space for many and when it disappears it is psychologically distressing, leaving the unemployed void of any understanding or capability to keep track of it. It is however not the fault of the unemployed that they can't keep track of time according to Jahoda (1982: 23) as "it would amount to asking that they single-handedly overthrow the compelling social norms under which we all live and which provide a supportive framework which shapes our lives". In Pappas's book *The Magic City* (1989), he recounts an interview he conducted with an unemployed worker who fell into mental illness due to losing his job:

A year after I interviewed Curtis in his home, he spent three weeks in the psychiatric ward of an Akron hospital. Esther explained the circumstances that had led to his hospitalization. The Hills had been well established in a black neighborhood, had raised their children well, supported their church, and participated in the block club. In their social circles a good union job conferred high status. The loss of his job at Seiberling and his inability to find another had undermined Curtis's position in the community and in his own eyes. He began to think of himself as a "lazy nigger that lays around while a woman supports him". It hurt him deeply to become what racists allege black men to be; it was a stereotype he had devoted his life to refuting. His situation eventually led to a suicidal depression.

(Pappas 1989: 79)

Those who struggle on the fringes of losing their identity and becoming socially excluded depend on the welfare services provided by the state they live in. These state benefits are set to an amount that is meant to provide the recipient enough to survive while encouraging them to keep looking for a job (Pappas 1989: 14). The status of being a receiver of welfare benefits can be very humiliating to some and even cause their mental health to deteriorate, further falling down into social exclusion by losing their motivations and power (Pappas 1989: 18). Some are forced to sell what they own in order to deal with debts and to avoid bankruptcy and even change their ways of living altogether. Pappas conducted interviews with people who had lost their jobs at the Seiberling factory in 1980

about life after becoming unemployed. Many were facing a situation they had never experienced before and were in dire straits, such as the following:

After he lost his job, Jeff sold his car and bought a “junker”. He had managed to pay off some debts, but still it was difficult to pay the bills because so little money was coming in. He told me about the first time their utilities were cut off, and remorsefully recalled how he had once treated his sister when she was going through financial problems. He had laughed when her gas was turned off. He now wishes he had been more charitable. He himself has been utterly demoralized. The end of every month has become a nightmare as the bills fall due and the money runs short. “I just never know where the money’s gonna come from. The cash just ain’t there”. Hounded by bill collectors, Jeff is at the end of his rope and expects the worst. With only his wit still intact, he said, “Chapter Thirteen, here I come”.

(Pappas 1989: 21)

While some felt caught in despair and were ashamed of their situation, others kept their morals afloat:

Earl is a simple man who wants little more than a good factory job and a good family life. He reflected with some bitterness on his life. “My goal when I graduated from high school was to work at Seiberling. My friends all laughed at me. They had big ideas, but that’s all they ended up doing was working in factories. But then I couldn’t even get that. It was real bad. When I got this job, we called them downtown and told them to take us off the [welfare] list. It was the happiest day of my life. You ever been down there? It’s a zoo”. Joyce continued, “All we did was fight while we was getting it. But it kept us in the house and we ate. Otherwise I don’t know what would’ve happened”.

(Pappas 1989: 23)

There were also people who leaned back on humour and light-heartedness in order to get through the hard times even if they were facing poverty, such as the Baker family:

They remain lighthearted about their poverty. Orville had been in the middle of major renovations in the house when he lost his job at Seiberling. The project sat half-finished. Referring to the appearance of the unpainted drywall and unfinished basement bathroom, he told me, “We laugh about a lot of things. We have to!” May related a story to illustrate their good humor. “Joey needed a pair of tennis shoes for gym. He didn’t have a lock for his locker, and we didn’t want him to lose his shoes! We told him he’d have to wait a couple of weeks and carry the shoes home at night or we could buy the lock and wait for the shoes. I

cried when I told him, but he thought it was funny, a lock or the shoes, and we both laughed. We're lucky to have such great kids".

(Pappas 1989: 19)

Harris (1983: 79) points out that working-class marriages in American society have been built on the foundation of employed husbands. When the husband becomes unemployed, families have to reorganize their responsibilities and according to research done by Gore (1978), these negative impacts are lessened if there are sufficient safety-nets of support such as group participation and norms that obligate one to a routine. But as work provides the worker with both a sense of belonging in the world and relationships that come with it, family, friends and the larger community, unemployment radically shuts down these connections and cuts them out of their social status and identity which can be restored via reemployment, but the road there is hard (Pappas 1989: 79). Also, when a family member loses their job and their social status is at risk, marriages are likely to be disrupted too (Pappas 1989: 80). Pappas had interviewed a man who felt this struggle due to unemployment:

Soon after he had found a job working for the state Workman's Compensation Board for \$12,000 a year, Linda "ran off with another guy", as Bob put it, leaving their two sons behind. I vividly remember her complaints on an evening I spent with them. She hated hearing their old friends talking about "scrounging" and telling each other about where they could get a free bag of groceries or free medical care. Linda had been raised on welfare during the fifties and had bitter memories of her mother's struggles. She feared a slide down the social ladder and turned against her husband. When it was over he said, "She left me because I couldn't give her what she wanted anymore".

(Pappas 1989: 81)

A central theme in American culture is individualism and understanding your place in the world. As Pappas (1989: 185) explains, the form of individualism called utilitarianism which leans on the economic understanding of the individual that they alone are responsible for their own fortunes and if successful then the gains of society will be justly distributed. A utilitarian individual's response to unemployment leads, according to Pappas's studies, to a cynical view of the world, a more competitive attitude and a reduction in communal values, becoming far more "hyper individualistic" as their traditions and sense of understanding their place in the world and their community is

contested (Ibid.). Even if American values glorify individualism and its benefits to society, the extreme form of individualism that Pappas describes could cause damage to communities as well as society. A frustrated utilitarian individual devoid of support and connection from others might turn his anger towards society and cause harm to people around him, as exemplified in *Nebraska*. Stonerook offers a fine discussion of the state of society in America during the 1970's and early 80's combining his arguments with an analysis of Springsteen's comments on the crumbling state of community in his lyrics from that time:

[S]ociety, while claiming to support conceptions of the individual and the community similar to his own, had turned those notions into hollow sentiments. Springsteen argued through his music that American society, despite glorifying the individual's search for personal freedom, did not reward personal endeavor but instead shut down avenues of social mobility that the individual could use to improve his or her position in life. In addition, not only was taking a risk in the 1970s and 1980s ever more likely to end in failure, but simply getting by on a day-to-day basis became terribly daunting for many, particularly working-class, Americans. People grew isolated from each other and were left to fend for themselves. Consequently, Springsteen found that individual failure was no longer tied to individual risk, but to a failure of community. The community offered no support, whether at a large collective level (such as in government or business) or at the level of a personal relationship (such as marriage.) People quit looking out for each other and left their sense of reciprocity and obligation behind as they grew increasingly self-centered. Left alone with their struggles, people lost their sense of self-worth. Only individuals with no connection to one another remained, resulting in millions of individual tragedies that inevitably weakened communities, too.

(Stonerook 2012: 214)

The ideal situation according to Springsteen would have been a space where individualism and community could coexist and work together to create a mutually beneficial balance in society. In his mind, no individual could fully reach their potential and succeed without having a community to support them, and communities could not survive if people did not care about each other. If people stopped respecting and looking out for their family, neighbours and friends, then the consequences would be that society as a whole begins to suffer because there is nothing to connect people together. Judging by *Nebraska*, Springsteen had in 1982 began to lose faith in his belief as he laments the state of society in America, full of lost souls with nobody to turn to and no place to call home.

5. Approaching Nebraska

I will now present my analysis and the results. I will begin by summing up my thoughts on the record as a whole and then go on to analyse the songs one by one.

As a whole, each song on *Nebraska* tells the story of someone in a downcast position and hurt by economic struggles, emotional distress, or exclusion from their community. Springsteen's description that his characters are "isolated from their jobs, from their friends, from their family, from their father's, mothers, not being connected to anything that's going on" (Alterman 2010: 69) fits perfectly. The record portrays American life in a very bleak manner and the characters do not have much to say about their lives as they often address the listener as "sir" or "mister" and are at the mercy of others who seem to hold power over them. The songs take place in decaying urban neighbourhoods outside of the wealthy and thriving communities, factories, outskirts of town, highways and in courtrooms. Many, but not all, of the songs are told from the point of view of an adult and some are spoken from the perspective of a child.

5.1. Nebraska

Springsteen wrote the title song "Nebraska" after seeing the Terrence Malick film *Badlands* which tells the story of Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend Caril Fugate who in 1958 went on a murder spree killing eleven people between Nebraska and Wyoming in eight days (Fury 2010: 90). In the song, Springsteen takes the role of Charles Starkweather and narrates it from his first-person point of view, beginning as a confession which turns into a narrative. The narrator explains how his story went in a very conversational manner, straight to the point, starting from when he met his future accomplice Caril Fugate:

I saw her standin' on her front lawn
Just twirlin' her baton
Me and her went for a ride sir
And ten innocent people died

("Nebraska": 1-4)

From here on, the character details their roam through Nebraska and Wyoming, addressing the listener as "sir" with an indifferent attitude towards the crimes he and Caril committed. This is the first sign of the character's isolation, as he describes the incidents

as nothing more than unfortunate things that happened while they were out riding, implying an alienation from conventional human values. According to Marsh (2004: 252), Starkweather and Fugate gained immediate celebrity after their crimes and have been the subject of books and films. Marsh (2004: 253) further adds that even if the media built Starkweather's fame feeding off his James Deanesque looks, he did not plan on it as he was "all but illiterate and he killed as he did in part because he was superstitious as only a half-wit can be". Marsh also thinks that Starkweather "certainly never harbored hope of any judgment anywhere so neutral or mystical as the "great void". Nor was he that matter of fact about the murders. He claimed that he killed in self-defence, and he made sure he dragged his girlfriend down with him" (Ibid.):

From the town of Lincoln Nebraska
With a sawed off .410 on my lap
Through the Badlands of Wyoming
I killed everything in my path

I can't say that I'm sorry
For the things that we done
At least for a little while sir
Me and her we had us some fun

("Nebraska": 5-12)

Here the notion of place and space is specified as it tells where the journey began and where it ended. Starkweather's actions are explained simply as murder of anyone who was unlucky enough to stand in his way. Starkweather has no remorse for the things they did. He shrugs it all off as just a way of having fun and killing for thrills, giving insight to the evil in a man who has lost contact with humanity. He does not show any empathy towards the people he has killed and does not reflect on what damage his actions may have caused to his victim's families or communities either. These are the kind of things that can be caused by isolation as a person's mental health deteriorates and counts as a reaction caused by it. It reflects Springsteen's comments on the theme of being in a state of mind where nothing really matters. Starkweather's soul is as empty as the landscape around him, he seems completely alienated from the world around him except for his girlfriend.

The jury brought in a guilty verdict
And the judge he sentenced me to death
Midnight in a prison storeroom
With leather straps across my chest

Sheriff when the man pulls that switch sir
And snaps my poor head back
You make sure my pretty baby
Is sittin' right there on my lap

(Ibid: 13-20)

Starkweather describes his fate in a sombre, indifferent manner and wants to make sure Caril suffers the same fate as he, implying a faint sense of belonging and communal ties. This far Caril's involvement in the murders has not been explained but Starkweather notions that she too had participated in committing the murders and thereby warrants the same punishment as he will receive. Here Starkweather makes some acknowledgement of feelings towards someone else than himself, but it is not out of love, even if he calls Caril his baby, it's just to make sure she dies too. It is intriguing that Starkweather describes his head as "poor" as if mocking the authorities in a defiant way. The surroundings where his execution will take place is as dark and lonely as the overall mood of the song.

They declared me unfit to live
Said into that great void my soul'd be hurled
They wanted to know why I did what I did
Well sir I guess there's just a meanness in this world

(Ibid: 21-24)

The final verdict is that Starkweather is sentenced to death and be executed via electric chair. The judge thinks he is no longer fit to be amongst other people in any community or society, something he probably has not done in some time anyway. His account gives no further reason for the murders than an apathetic explanation about there being evil forces in the world that drive people to do these kinds of atrocities. There is no remorse or soul-searching in his story nor any use for him to even tell it as it wouldn't change his destiny, but he does it anyway. Springsteen offers no further reasoning for Starkweather's actions or any backstory to what drove him to his state of mind, the Starkweather character was just a man who no longer cared and nothing to lose. We do not get to know if he once had a loving family and felt he belonged somewhere or if some change in his life made him who he became, but the final line of there being a meanness in this world implies that he was not always like this. This is an extreme example of what could happen

to a person who experiences isolation, they take out their frustrations on others for seemingly no other reason than frustration and revenge.

5.2. Atlantic City

“Atlantic City” deals with criminality caused by poverty. It tells the story of a young man who has fallen down on his luck and has grown tired and desperate due to his circumstances. He needs money to pay his debts and wants to provide for a better life for himself and his girlfriend but has not been able to do so despite his efforts, so he decides to turn to crime in order to solve his economic problems. The song is set in the gambling town of Atlantic City in New Jersey and involves the gangster activity which operates there and in the surrounding areas such as Philadelphia.

Well they blew up the chicken man in Philly last night
 Now they blew up his house too
 Down on the boardwalk they're getting' ready for a fight
 Gonna see what them racket boys can do

Now there's trouble busin' in from outta state
 And the D.A. can't get no relief
 Gonna be a rumble out on the promenade
 and the gamblin' commission's hangin' on by the skin of its teeth

(“Atlantic City”: 1-8)

According to Rubenstein (1984: 61), Atlantic City used to be a popular seaside resort before the Great Depression with famous sceneries such as its boardwalk and several beaches. Later the city's popularity began to decline but in 1976, the city decided to legalize gambling and expand the entertainment industry in it in order to turn Atlantic City into a popular tourist resort again (Ibid.). The first casinos and entertainment complexes opened in 1976, at the same time Atlantic City rose high on the federal agency's list of various criminalities such as murder and robberies (Simon 2004: 16). Although Atlantic City became a popular gambling resort again and was the most visited city in the United States both 1981 and 1982, the city's economy did not regenerate as the money went outside Atlantic City, mostly to pay for the gambling complexes expenses such as food supplies (Rubenstein 1984: 69).

As it seems in the song, the criminality in Atlantic City centres around gangster activity that is causing a stir in Atlantic City as there has been an apparent mob

hit over in Philadelphia which has caused a retaliation from the associates of a gangster called “the Chicken Man”. The Philadelphia mob are coming to Atlantic City to take revenge on whomever caused the murder and the federal agency are having a hard time dealing with it, causing the gambling commission to worry as well. The narrator of the song has observed this and sees an opportunity for himself to make some money and he invites his girlfriend to join him on his venture:

Well now everything dies baby that’s a fact
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back
Put your make up on fix your hair up pretty
And meet me tonight in Atlantic City

(Ibid: 9-12)

The first line above is the narrator describing his own desperate existence as he feels that the road he has wandered has come to a dead end and that his luck has died. Yet in the second line he expresses hope of redemption and naively thinks that maybe he can still turn it around and reach some platform of happiness and economic stability. He needs to believe that he has a chance, otherwise he doesn’t have anything left to keep him feeling connected to the world around him. In a striking resemblance, the narrators hope of bringing something back from the dead resembles Atlantic City’s hope for renewal to its former glories:

Well I got a job and tried to put my money away
But I got debts that no honest man can pay
So I drew what I had from the Central Trust
And I bought us two tickets on that Coast City bus

(Ibid: 13-16)

Even if the narrator has found himself a job and has tried to save some money from his wages, he still isn’t able to pay off his debts which he may have gained due to him being unemployed. The reality of losing one’s income can drive people to act carelessly and make bad decisions. This desperation is the central frame of the whole album and he does not see that his actions could possibly cripple his life even further. These sorts of struggle are part of the burden of the working poor as trust in hard work fades when abiding the law does not lead to any prosperity. He decides to withdraw his life savings from the Central Trust in an effort to make things right and get him out of his bad situation, to pay off his debts, to save his relationship, and to get him back on his feet again. He is left

feeling alone in his situation with no-one or nothing else to turn to than crime, essentially isolated from all the help which he could need, so he buys two tickets to Atlantic City hoping that his girlfriend would accompany him so he wouldn't be all on his own.

Now our luck may have died and our love may be cold but
With you forever I'll stay
We're goin' out where the sand's turnin' to gold so
Put on your stockin's baby 'cause the night's getting cold
And everything dies baby that's a fact
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back

(Ibid: 17-22)

The narrator is willing to do anything to keep his life from collapsing and to redeem both his love and his luck, even if it means going into a proverbial darkness to try and find the means to do so without knowing what to expect. He hopes that by reaching Atlantic City they could find better fortunes than in their current surroundings as the city's myth makes him believe that even sand turns to gold there, just like a miniature America in the American Dream. He is committed to his girlfriend even if their relationship has grown cold as it appears to be his only lifeline keeping him away from complete isolation and alienation from everything he knows and keeps him grounded and sane.

Now I been lookin' for a job but it's hard to find
Down here it's just winners and losers and don't get caught
On the wrong side of that line
Well I'm tired of comin' out on the losin' end
So honey last night I met this guy
And I'm gonna do a little favor for him

(Ibid: 23-28)

The narrator fails to find himself a better job in Atlantic City, probably understanding then that the image of Atlantic City that he had as a prospering newly rebuilt city of hopes and dreams in reality centres around the casinos and entertainment industry rather than the city as a whole. Frustrated by his false beliefs that things would be better in Atlantic City and by seeing that he is surrounded by others who have come to find their luck only to wind up failing, he accepts a contract as a hired killer. Before doing so, the narrator contemplates his and his fellow people's plight, instead of feeling any form of communality with them, he just states how the situation is. The song ends with the

narrator again pleading with his girlfriend, who at this point might even become his accomplice, to join him in Atlantic City.

5.3. Mansion on the Hill

“Mansion on the Hill” has a theme of class-relations experienced from the eyes of a young child. The story is told by a man who has been aware since he was a child about the boundaries between the lower- and upper-class in his hometown of Linden. Springsteen has not confirmed this, but it is plausible that the town in question is Linden; New Jersey since he is from the state and often uses New Jersey as a setting for his stories. Springsteen’s character knows that the upper-class live in a gated community on the outskirts of town and often travels with his sister to observe the mansion and all its glory as if it were Disneyland. The mansion is located on top of a hill overlooking the working-class areas. The owners of the mansion frequently host parties as Springsteen’s character marvels at the lights and the music coming from the mansion but he does not suggest any envy or longing to be a part of that social class, he just spends time gazing at it from childhood to adulthood.

There’s a place out on the edge of town sir
 Risin’ above the factories and the fields
 Now ever since I was a child I can remember
 That mansion on the hill

(“Mansion on the Hill”: 1-4)

In this song, the mansion metaphorically represents how different social classes divide themselves geographically. The upper-class have isolated themselves on an elevated platform above everyone else giving a clear message of separation between them and the lower, working-class community. The narrator uses the word “sir” while telling the story, just as in “Nebraska”, but instead of the indifferent way the narrator uses it in “Nebraska”, here it indicates the narrator’s assertion of his own status as a lower-class citizen. While he is enchanted by the beauty of the mansion and the social space it represents, he is aware that he is excluded from those social circles due to his own social status.

In the day you can see the children playing
 On the road that leads to those gates of hardened steel
 Steel gates that completely surround sir
 The mansion on the hill

At night my daddy'd take me and we'd ride through
The streets of a town so silent and still
Park on a back road along the highway side
Look up at that mansion on the hill

(Ibid: 5-12)

The materials for the steel gates that Springsteen's character describes have likely been produced in the factories in town, meaning that the upper-class has used the working-class to construct the fences that separate the two communities. And if the physical exclusion that the character observes was not enough, he also has a distant relationship to his father. The narrator's father has failed to construct a healthy, communicative relationship with his son, maybe a reflection of Bruce's own relationship with his defeated father, further emphasizing his feeling of isolation. They fail to communicate as they drive through the silent town and his father passively instructs his son to look up at the mansion on the hill, as if that would be the only thing he is able to pass on to his child, the mentality and realisation that they would never belong there. The socioeconomic inequities have marginalized them physically, and Springsteen's character's cold relationship with his father has isolated him emotionally.

In the summer all the lights would shine
There'd be music playin' people laughin' all the time
Me and my sister we'd hide out in the tall corn fields
Sit and listen to the mansion on the hill

Tonight down here in Linden Town
I watch the cars rushin' by home from the mill
There's a beautiful moon rising above
The mansion on the hill

(Ibid: 13-20)

While the narrator and his sister hide in the cornfields listening to the sounds of joy coming from the mansion area and watch the lights glow, the lack of access becomes ever more evident to both of them, they are not invited to the party. The narrator's father's inherent passivity and alienation has persisted into his adulthood as he still spends time gazing at the mansion with romantic visions as the full moon rising shines on above it. Now however he is no more a child but the passive mentality and self-awareness has caused him to feel alienated from both the working-class community and the upper-class which he has envied and marvelled at all his life. The narrator seems to have come to

terms with his life as an outsider and stands watching the mansion just as he has done before, as if he was paralyzed. He does not seem to be a part of the group of people who are going home from work either. He is neither a part of the community that built the gates or the ones living in the mansion, he does not belong anywhere.

5.4. Johnny 99

Similar to “Atlantic City”, “Johnny 99” is another story of an unemployed man who has gone out looking for a job but couldn’t find any and has now been left with debts he cannot pay. Ralph had been employed at a factory in Mahwah which closed in 1982. Mahwah being a small factory town, the probabilities of finding a new job for the unemployed were pretty thin. In a drunken state of desperation Ralph then ends up shooting a night clerk during a botched robbery and winds up in trouble.

Well they closed down the auto plant in Mahwah late that month
Ralph went out lookin’ for a job, but he couldn’t find none
He came home too drunk from mixin’ Tanqueray and wine
He got a gun shot a night clerk now they call’m Johnny 99

Down in the part of town where you hit a red light you don’t stop
Johnny’s waving his gun around and threatenin’ to blow his top
When an off duty cop snuck up on him from behind
Out in front of the club Tip Top they slapped the cuffs on Johnny 99

(“Johnny 99”: 1-8)

The combination of frustration, alcohol, and a gun has led many people to make bad choices. Ralph is understandably exhausted and confused because the world seems against him and is in a wicked state of mind which causes him to do things he later will regret. If Ralph had gone home to bed after getting drunk instead of going out on the town he would still have had to suffer a difficult life, but he would not be in this situation. And would he have shot himself instead of someone else it would still have been a tragedy, but no innocent person would have gotten hurt due to his actions.

Well the city supplied a public defender but the judge was Mean John
Brown
He came into the court room and stared young Johnny down
Well the evidence is clear gonna let the sentence son fit the crime
Prison for 98 and a year and we’ll call it even Johnny 99

A fistfight broke out in the courtroom they had to drag Johnny’s girl away
His mama stood up and shouted “Judge don’t take my boy this way”

Well son you got a statement you'd like to make
Before the bailiff comes to forever take you away

(Ibid: 9-16)

Ralph does not have enough money to afford a lawyer and is instead given a public defender, signalling his poor economic status. The judge turns out to be someone who has a reputation for being very strict authority, hence the nickname “mean” John Brown. Ralph does not stand a chance without a good lawyer and thus the judge sentences Ralph to prison for 99 years without anybody having much to say about the decision as John Brown thinks the punishment fits the crime. For taking someone else’s life, Ralph has to pay by giving the rest of his life away. Despite Ralph’s feelings of being abandoned and alone with his problems, both his girlfriend and his mother are present at the court hearing. This means that even if Ralph feels like he does not belong anywhere and is isolated outside of his former community, he still has people around him who worry and care for him. So much that his girlfriend even had to be dragged out by the court staff because she caused a fight to break out over the verdict and his mother crying and begging the judge for mercy upon her son. The authoritative judge however does give Ralph the chance to make a final statement, not that it would somehow make a difference but still out of courtesy:

Now judge judge I had debts no honest man could pay
The bank was holding my mortgage they was takin’ my house away
Now I ain’t sayin’ that makes me an innocent man
But it was more ‘n all this that put that gun in my hand

(Ibid: 17-20)

Ralph’s recent unemployment and the imminent danger of losing his home are the direct causes for Ralph’s actions and he is well aware of them. The last line however proposes the question of how much indirect responsibility the auto company, the bank and other authority figures have for Ralph’s unravelling since he feels they took everything away from him and did not supply him with the opportunities to live a normal life such as the American Dream promises. He feels he has been wronged by external forces that have let him down and left him with nothing but his debts, the community failed to help him and left him stranded instead. Yet he does not ask for forgiveness, these facts do not make him innocent, but he asks for some recognition and understanding of the reasons that led

him to commit his crime. He humanely tries to portray how tragically declining the livelihood is of an unemployed worker, when someone loses all connection to what's going on. Even if it was just a factory job, it provided for him and he could make ends meet and gave him an identity, a place in his community and some respect.

Well your honor I do believe I'd be better off dead
And if you can take a man's life for the thoughts that's in his head
Then won't you sit back in that chair and think it over judge one more
time
And let 'em shave off my hair and put me on that execution line

(Ibid: 21-24)

The song ends with Ralph begging to be given the death sentence instead of being put to jail. He does not ask for pity and does not complain about the sorry circumstances that preceded his crimes, he takes responsibility and accounts for himself and thinks it would be better for him to just be put out of his misery than to let his torture continue. Prison takes more than just years from a person, it takes a person's dignity as well, pretty much the only thing Ralph has left which he doesn't want to lose. He feels that there is no reason for him to live anymore because he only causes disappointment to himself and his family.

5.5. Highway Patrolman

"Highway Patrolman" tells the story of officer Joe Roberts and his wayward brother Franky. The main character of the song, Joe Roberts, is a policeman in Perrineville who tries hard to be an honest, law-abiding officer but comes to face a moral dilemma when his brother Franky commits murder and Joe is assigned to pursue and arrest him. Joe has to choose between doing his duty and protecting his family.

My name is Joe Roberts, I work for the state
I'm a sergeant out of Perrineville barracks number eight
I always done an honest job as honest as I could
I got a brother named Franky and Franky ain't no good

Now ever since we was young kids it's been the same come down
I get a call over the radio Franky's in trouble downtown
Well if it was any other man, I'd put him straight away
But when it's your brother sometimes you look the other way

("Highway Patrolman": 1-8)

While Joe has maintained a proper lifestyle, his brother has been prone to do bad things since they were children. Even if Joe works as a police officer whose objective is to uphold the law, he sometimes chooses to cover up for his brother or help him evade any criminal punishments for his wrongdoings because he feels a moral obligation to look out for his family. The differences between Joe's and Franky's social identities, class, and status are polar opposites, yet Joe tries to help Franky redeem himself.

Me and Franky laughin' and drinkin', nothin feels better than blood on
blood
Takin' turns dancing with Maria, as the band played 'Night of the
Johnstown Flood'
I catch him when he's strayin like any brother would
Man turns his back on his family, well he just ain't no good

(Ibid: 9-12)

Joe often reminisces about the good times he and Franky had when they were younger when he is faced with the task of arresting him. The brotherly ties cause him to struggle with his morals between love and work because to Joe, there is nothing more important than family and keeping together through thick and thin. Those who don't respect this sacred bond of blood are not good people in Joe's eyes.

Well Franky went in the army back in 1965 I got a farm deferment
Settled down, took Maria for my wife
But them wheat prices kept on droppin' till it was like we were getting'
robbed
Franky came home in '68, and me, I took this job
I catch him when he's strayin', teach him how to walk that line
Man turns his back on his family he ain't no friend of mine

(Ibid: 13-18)

Franky's alienation from his community seemingly began when he returned from Vietnam. During the three years he was gone, Joe and Maria had gotten married and sold his farm, becoming an officer instead. While hard on Joe, he managed to make the change without losing sight of himself. Franky on the other hand seemingly lost his mind when he returned and found that things had changed and that there was nothing left for him in his old hometown community to anchor him down and started drifting over the line. After Franky had returned, he had felt alienated from everything he used to know and excluded from his community and former identity while Joe had kept himself stable and attached

to his social identity even though the family farm had gone under. As he transitioned into his new profession, he managed to maintain his connection and place within the space of his own community and keep his family morals strong, forming an identity of a peacekeeper. Joe had frequently been forced to keep an eye out for his brother and correct him when he had been straying, looking the other way, and protecting him from harm. Frankie meanwhile has seemingly not been able to find any steadiness in his life, be it a job or a place where he feels he belongs and has instead fallen, or chosen, to lead a life of reckless abandon and crime due to his feeling of detachment and social exclusion from what he once felt was his home and his community.

Well the night was like any other, I got a call 'bout quarter to nine
There was trouble in a roadhouse out on the Michigan line
There was a kid lyin' on the floor lookin' bad bleedin' hard from his head
There was a girl cryin' at a table and it was Frank, they said
Well I went out and I jumped in my car and I hit the lights
Well I must of done one hundred and ten through Michigan county that
night

(Ibid: 19-24)

Joe gets the call to pursue and arrest Franky after he seemingly killed another man at a roadhouse. Joe knows that the situation is bad and should Franky be tried, he would go to jail for a long time as this cannot be ignored. Joe chases Franky in high speed through the streets hoping to find him before anybody else does.

It was out at the crossroads, down round Willow bank
Seen a Buick with Ohio plates behind the wheel was Frank
Well I chased him through them county roads till a sign said Canadian
border five miles from here
I pulled over the side of the highway and watched his taillights disappear

(Ibid: 25-28)

As he catches up with his brother, he struggles to decide what to do as he knows if he confronts and arrests Franky, then Franky will most likely face prison for life. Then again if he lets Franky go, he has betrayed his badge and let a criminal go unpunished. But in the end, family-ties are more important to Joe than honouring your badge, and that's it, so he lets Franky escape. There isn't much happiness in Joe after he made his decision, but at least he knows that his brother is still out there somewhere even though he won't be around to cover up for Franky.

“Highway Patrolman” has an interesting touch in regard to place and space since Springsteen has created an imagined geography for the song. There is no Perrineville in Michigan, however there is one in New Jersey but the song cannot take place there, and neither is there a Michigan County in Michigan (Fury 2010: 90). Franky’s car is registered in Ohio, but the Canadian border is not reachable via car from there, although this could be that Franky has stolen the car from Ohio which does border Michigan yet, as Fury notes, these facts could be oversights by Springsteen, however it is more likely that they are intentional (Fury 2010: 89). The lack of a real geographical place creates the individual space for the characters and the listener and the Canadian border, while fictitiously reachable from the described location, instead works as a moral dividing line for Joe and Franky, meaning that this form of “placelessness [...] deepen[s] the moral malaise [Joe] Roberts tries so desperately to avoid” (Fury 2010: 90).

5.6. State Trooper

“State Trooper” follows a man driving in a car alone at night on a highway near the Turnpike in New Jersey trying to escape from something, either the hauntings of his inner demons or a crime he has committed. His conscience and worries are driving him mad, made worse by the loneliness he is experiencing in the night, silently begging that a state trooper wouldn’t stop him. Why he fears that an officer would stop him is not made clear, although he mentions that he doesn’t have a license on him, he might not have one at all, but the notion that he doesn’t have any registration either could mean that he is driving a stolen car.

New Jersey Turnpike riding on a wet night
 ‘Neath the refinery’s glow out where the great black rivers flow
 License, registration, I ain’t got none
 But I got a clear conscience ‘bout the things that I done
 Mister State Trooper, please don’t stop me
 Please don’t stop me, please don’t stop me

(“State Trooper”: 1-6)

The man’s internal struggles are ever present and the tension keeps building throughout the song but Springsteen never reveals what kind of dilemma the narrator is dealing with. Neither does a state trooper ever appear. The narrator’s feeling of isolation increase as his thoughts drag him closer to insanity while driving through the night, making him

paranoid. The question still is, is the man guilty of some crime or is he losing his mind over something else?

Maybe you got a kid, maybe you got a pretty wife
The only thing that I got's been bothering me my whole life
Mister state trooper, please don't stop me
Please don't stop me, please don't stop me

(Ibid: 7-10)

The narrator seems bothered by the thought that what would happen if he were to be stopped as if he really wouldn't want any officer to stop him because he would then act violently and maybe kill him. The narrator ponders with a sinister tone about the possibility that an innocent officer might have a family and should think twice about stopping him since he has got nothing to lose. This reveals that the narrator does not have any ties that bind in his life, he is on his own, excluded from any form of communal connection and cut off from any meaning in his life.

In the song, movement through place and space does not reveal itself as the answer to the narrator's problems. He just drives on through the desolate landscapes of New Jersey trying to ease his mind. All he knows is that he feels dislocated from any connection to a place, community, or family, just asking for someone to help him without ever saying it out loud.

In the wee wee hours your mind gets hazy
Radio relay towers gonna lead me to my baby
The radio's jammed up with talk show stations
It's just talk, talk, talk, till you lose your patience
Mister state trooper, please don't stop me

(Ibid: 11-15)

The narrator imagines that somewhere there is a place for him, a girl to call his own. he yearns to find that place as it would save his life, but there is nothing to show him the way, he is lost. The talk shows on the radio make him lose his patience and slip back into his frustrations as they fail to lead him home. In the final verse of the song, the narrator belts out a cry for help to anyone listening.

Hey, somebody out there, listen to my last prayer
Hiho silver-o, deliver me from nowhere

(Ibid: 16-17)

The line “deliver me from nowhere” explains the theme of the album quite well, desperate people in desperate times. The narrator feels helpless and on the verge of breaking down into insanity as he feels he is in the middle of nowhere emotionally, spiritually, and also physically. The reasons why are never given but it seems like the narrator feels the same as the character in “Nebraska” that there is just a meanness in this world causing all of this without explanation.

5.7. Used Cars

“Used Cars” is another song written from a child’s perspective that probably draws inspiration from Springsteen’s own experiences of growing up in a poor, working-class family. The narrator in “Used Cars” is a young boy who has gone along with his family to buy a car but do not have that much money to spend. The boy is accompanied by both of his parents and his little sister but unlike her, he is old enough to understand class-differences, status and social identity and feels ashamed.

My little sister’s in the front seat with an ice cream cone
My ma’s in the back seat sitting all alone
As my pa steers her slow out of the lot
For a test drive down Michigan Avenue

Now my ma she fingers her wedding band
And watches the salesman stare at my old man’s hands
He’s telling us all about the break he’d give us if he could
But he just can’t

(“Used Cars”: 1-8)

The father test drives a model which he would like to buy and it seems to be a brand new model, something they really want, but due to their weak economy and despite the young boy’s father’s efforts to negotiate a deal, they cannot afford it. The salesman recognizes the father’s workingman’s hands and probably decides to not take a risk due to the volatile employment situation in the country during the early 1980’s. The family then have to face that they are not in a such economic situation that they could afford to buy anything

resembling of the American middle-class status as a new car, something which along with homeownership is somewhat of a cornerstone in the American Dream. They instead have to settle for a used model, signalling their drop to a lower class in their society.

Now mister, the day that the lottery I win
I ain't ever gonna ride in no used car again

Now the neighbours come from near and far
As we pull up in our brand new used car
I wish he'd just hit the gas and let out a cry
And tell them all they can kiss our asses goodbye

(Ibid: 9-14)

Here the boy's feeling of shame becomes apparent, he vows in a sad manner that he will someday make things better. He feels awkward about the attention their newly bought car is getting in their neighbourhood because it reveals their economic situation. The community they are in is perhaps of a certain social status which they have also belonged to previously but due to circumstances, unemployment for example, do not do anymore. Their surroundings do not feel as comforting to him anymore, in fact he feels that they are being laughed at and certainly to be marked for their situation. These kinds of economic downfall can cause a community to exclude members as they do not meet the social requirements anymore, leaving members feeling alienated and isolated. The young boy is aware of his father's failures but does not seem to be angry at him, but instead at their community for being judgemental. Maybe he fears that he too will be marked by their social status even if it is not his fault and would want them to leave and find another place where they could settle and restart their lives. He is helpless to change the situation.

Often in Springsteen's songs, the car has symbolized freedom and mobility but here it serves as a mark of shame, although the boy does see it as an opportunity to escape as well. His father is a working man but still he cannot provide enough for their family to stay out of poverty, which perhaps disheartens the boy to believe that hard work does not bring prosperity after all, instead putting his hopes of achieving economic prosperity through winning a lottery. The young boy is left hopeless in fear of living in the shadow of his father's status and legacy of never escaping the trap of a dead-end job in a dead-end town with no chance of upward mobility, out of reach of the American Dream.

My dad sweats the same job from morning to morn
Me I walk home on the same dirty streets where I was born
Up the block I can hear my little sister in the front seat blowing that horn
The sounds echoing all down Michigan Avenue

(Ibid: 15-18)

How Springsteen uses the car as a symbol for entrapment and failure in “Used Cars” is interesting because previously they portrayed bringers of hope and redemption in his songs. The car often offers salvation and deliverance in his songs before *Nebraska*, something which could lead his characters from their current place to a more desired one yet in “Used Cars” it gives the narrator bad feelings of exclusion and isolation from people around him. He wishes that he could win the lottery in order to afford to rise above the prisonlike state of poverty he feels his family are trapped in and avoid humiliation because he sees that working an honest job like his father does not suffice.

Considering Springsteen’s blue-collar background and his upbringing in a family where his mother and father worked low-paying labour jobs, it is not surprising that Springsteen could understand and relate to the problems that people living in poverty were facing, far out of reach of the American Dream. Springsteen’s father expressed anger and helplessness from working long hours at his diverse short stretch jobs and not being able to raise his family’s economic status to the middle-class lifestyle that others enjoyed during the 50’s and the 60’s. Springsteen knew what it felt like to be poor.

5.8. Open All Night

“Open All Night” is set in the same kind of surroundings as “State Trooper”, New Jersey at night, but doesn’t have the similar sense of something evil lurking in the dark just waiting to happen as “State Trooper” does. In the song, the narrator preps his car for a long ride from his workplace to his girlfriend’s house after a night shift. What he sees around him is a place most resemblant of a wasteland, a nowhere, and he is in a hurry to get out of there. His car will transport him away from these unfamiliar and uncomfortable surroundings to where he feels at home. The landscapes are empty, dark, and spooky for him and he is headed for an undisclosed geographic location.

Well, I had the carburetor, baby, cleaned and checked
With her line blown out she’s hummin’ like a turbojet
Propped her up in the backyard on concrete blocks

For a new clutch plate and a new set of shocks
Took her down to the carwash, check the plugs and points
Well, I'm goin' out tonight I'm gonna rock that joint

(“Open All Night”: 1-6)

The narrator takes good care of his car as it is very important to him. He probably uses it to drive to work and back home every day so it has a very practical importance to him, but he also seems to have a general interest in cars and their maintenance. The narrator knows how to fix vehicles as if it were his hobby and he also treats it as a necessity if you want to go out and have a good time.

Early north Jersey industrial skyline
I'm all-set cobra jet creepin' through the nighttime
Gotta find a gas station gotta find a payphone
This turnpike sure is spooky at night when you're all alone
Gotta hit the gas baby I'm running late
This New Jersey in the mornin' like a lunar landscape

(Ibid: 7-12)

The narrator is driving home past the industrial area in New Jersey and just as in “State Trooper”, he is all alone on the road and finds his surroundings a bit disturbing, like he was the solitary man on the moon. He does not seem to be in any way familiar with New Jersey or with the road he is driving as he is looking for a gas station and some place with a payphone while not recognising the New Jersey turnpike. The turnpike is something Springsteen has addressed in a familiar manner in his previous characters who have located themselves in New Jersey, it is thereby probable that the character is not from around there and is now in a hurry to get somewhere else.

Now the boss don't dig me so he put me on the nightshift
It's an all night run to get back to where my baby lives
In the wee wee hours your mind gets hazy
Radio relay towers won't you lead me to my baby?
Underneath the overpass trooper hits his party light switch
Goodnight good luck one two power shift

(Ibid: 13-18)

The narrator works the nightshift because he and his boss do not get along and he moans about it because he then has to drive all night to get back home where he feels he belongs,

in the arms of his girlfriend. The radio keeps him safe and sane in this unpredictable and unhinged environment guiding him home. He's going to get to his baby even if it means that he has to outrun the policeman who has just gotten on his tail because he is driving past the speed limit. "Open All Night" is the only song with this kind of hope and romance on *Nebraska* and seems a bit out of place on the whole of the record but Springsteen probably wanted to provide some ounce of positivity in *Nebraska* as well. The character does not seem to be in any stable state of mind, however.

I met Wanda when she was employed behind
The counter at route 60's Big Boy fried
Chicken on the front seat she's sittin' in my lap
We're wipin' our fingers on a Texaco roadmap
I remember Wanda up on scrap metal hill
With them big brown eyes that make your heart stand still

(Ibid: 19-24)

Both he and his girlfriend come from working-class backgrounds, she worked at a fast-food restaurant while the narrator worked at a scrap yard. Maybe they met during his lunch break. They apparently set out together to find some place where they could settle down and belong when they were young, out to explore the world, and shared a romantic moment on top of a scrap hill where the narrator most likely worked and probably even created while he made someone else wealthy.

Well at five a.m. oil pressure's sinkin' fast
I make a pit stop wipe the windshield check the gas
Gotta call my baby on the telephone
Let her know that her daddy's comin' home
Sit tight little mama I'm comin' round
I got three more hours but I'm coverin' ground

Your eyes get itchy in the wee wee hours sun's
Just a red ball risin' over them refinery towers
Radio's jammed up with gospel stations
Lost souls callin' long distance salvation
Hey mister deejay wontcha hear my last prayer
Hey, ho, rock n' roll, deliver me from nowhere

(Ibid: 25- 36)

The narrator's hurried pace is interesting, is he under the influence of some substance or is he just excited to see his girl after a long night of work? And why does he call his girlfriend in the middle of the night, isn't she asleep? Whatever the case, he needs to tell

her that he is coming. The radio channel he listens to is a religious one where people are calling in to receive some spiritual guidance and comfort, which he does not seem to need or acknowledge as his faith. He pokes fun at the concept by humorously asking the radio deejay to safely deliver him from this state of nowhere to where he wants to go by playing some rock n' roll music. The narrator's sense of urgency to reunite with his girlfriend, someone who he feels he can build a future with somewhere else than where he is now, is what drives him to recklessly make his way out of New Jersey where he works a job he does not feel fits his identity or that he belongs there. He wants to pursue the American dream of upward mobility with her.

5.9. My Father's House

“My Father's House” is a song which hints at a connection with Springsteen's own life and his unresolved past problems with his father. It is built in two parts, one half in a dream where the narrator imagines himself running home in the dark as a child and the other in reality where he wakes up as an adult. There is something bothering him about his childhood that has followed him into adulthood but not completely explained. When the narrator wakes up from his dream, he decides to drive to his father's house in order to come to terms with the ghosts of his past and resolve their problems. When he arrives he is greeted by an old lady who is sorry to tell him that his father does not live there anymore, leaving him in the same state of paralysed anguish as before.

Last night I dreamed that I was a child
Out where the pines grow wild and tall
I was trying to make it home through the forest
Before the darkness falls

I heard the wind rustling through the trees
And ghostly voices rose from the fields
I ran with my heart pounding down that broken path
With the devil snappin' at my heels

I broke through the trees, and there in the night
My father's house stood shining hard and
bright the branches and brambles tore my clothes and scratched my arms
But I ran till I fell, shaking in his arms

(“My Father's House”: 1-12)

The narrator has found himself in a scary and hostile environment from which he is trying to run away. His home resembles a safe sanctuary for him in this dream where his father waits to take him in his arms and defend against all evil in the world. The landscape is somewhat reminiscent of the animated Disney worlds that are meant to be a bit scary, for example the forest where Bambi is lost. There are ghostly and sinister voices, like spirits of the dead, surrounding him and following wherever he goes. Are they symbolic of some sins of his past or other miseries is unknown but they strike terror in him and he even has Satan pursuing him. He then reaches the sanctuary of his father's house with torn clothes and scratches on his arms as if he just broke out of purgatory.

I awoke and I imagined the hard things that pulled us apart
Will never again, sir, tear us from each other's hearts
I got dressed, and to that house I did ride from out on the road
I could see its windows shining in light

I walked up the steps and stood on the porch
A woman I didn't recognize came and spoke to me through a chained door
I told her my story and who I'd come for
She said 'I'm sorry, son, but no one by that name lives here anymore'

(Ibid: 13-20)

The narrator and his father have an estranged relationship and the narrator needs to make peace with him. The dream convinced him that he needs to tell his father that he loves him and that they have to reconcile their differences now once and for all. So he heads off to his father's last known whereabouts but upon arrival he is greeted by a stranger at the door who is sorry to tell him that his father has moved away a long time ago. The chained door keeps him locked out of his sanctuary like the gates of hardened steel in "Mansion on the Hill". It symbolizes his feeling of isolation, that he is not allowed in. He is cast out like so many others on *Nebraska*.

My father's house shines hard and bright
it stands like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling so cold and alone
Shining 'cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned

(Ibid: 21-24)

As in "Mansion on the Hill" and "Used Cars", the narrator is not a criminal and he doesn't have to be one in order to feel like he is on the wrong side of the society, socially isolated. He feels like an outsider due to his bad relationship with his father. We do not know what

caused his demons, they might have had a similarly distant relationship as the narrator in “Mansion on the Hill” has with his father, but they haunt him. The character is hopeful to the very end that he could fix their relationship with one more try and that things could be different. Yet he is left lonely without redemption because his father has moved away or died without anybody telling the narrator. Sometimes parents have a close, yet emotionally distant relationship with their children, something resembling a barren landscape like the records cover. The house is left reminding him of something he will never have, like the mansion in “Mansion on the Hill”, a life he dreams of. By the end of the song, the narrator is left in a similar state of paralysing sadness that the narrator in “Mansion on the Hill” also feels. He is not only separated by a dark highway, like the gates of steel, but metaphysical forces as well which he can no longer repair. The narrator cannot fully comprehend and accept that this is true, that his father isn’t there. Like the idea of a God in heaven, he wants to believe that his father is still out there somewhere and that they can repair their relationship because otherwise he can’t come to peace with his demons and has to carry them with him the rest of his life.

5.10. Reason to Believe

“Reason to Believe” closes *Nebraska* on a lighter note, differing from the overall bleak atmosphere of the rest of the record. Here Springsteen acts as the narrator who observes and details several different scenarios which are thematically similar to the rest of the songs on the record, bleak portrayals of human destinies, but with some humour and consolidation. Each of these scenarios conclude in disappointment or misery and at the end of them, Springsteen is puzzled and ponders how people still manage to overcome their difficulties and find a reason to cling on the hope better days are coming. These people refuse to let go of their dreams and let their misfortunes bring them down and instead keep on going about their lives in quiet desperation.

Seen a man standin’ over a dead dog lyin’ by the highway in a ditch
 He’s lookin’ down kinda puzzled pokin’ that dog with a stick
 Got his car door flung open he’s standin’ out on highway 31
 Like if he stood there long enough that dog’d get up and run

Struck me kinda funny seem kinda funny sir to me
 Still at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to
 believe

(“Reason to Believe”: 1-6)

The first scenario is a man standing by the side of a road observing a dead dog and wondering what happened to it. It is unclear he was the owner of the dog, but there he stands alone waiting to see if he could resurrect it by poking at it. It reminds of the man in “Atlantic City” who tries to revive what he knows is dead by doing something about it, albeit here the chances of any revival happening are non-existent which leaves the man looking severely confused.

Now Mary Lou loved Johnny with a love mean and true
She said ‘Baby I’ll work for you every day and bring my money home to
you’
One day he up and left her and ever since of that
She waits down at the end of that dirt road for young Johnny to come back

Struck me kinda funny seemed kinda funny sir to me
How at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to
believe

(Ibid: 7-12)

The second scenario is about a girl named Mary Lou who gets dumped by her boyfriend Johnny by surprise despite Mary Lou devoting her life to their relationship and being madly in love with him. It is interesting that in this song it is Mary Lou who is the provider for the pair as she promises to give him every penny of her hard-earned salary every day, something traditionally done by the man in the working-class environment. Everything had seemingly been calm prior to Johnny’s change of heart, or he just had not shared his feelings with Mary Lou and did not love her the same way and just enjoyed her money. Because Mary Lou had believed in the rewards which hard work is supposed to bring in the American society it confuses her that she has been left disappointed. She does not grasp what has happened and refuses to accept it, so despite Johnny’s sudden disappearance, she finds herself faithfully waiting for him to return by the end of the dirt road which Johnny had travelled when he walked out on her. Mary Lou doesn’t have an answer to why Johnny ran away, did she make some mistake? Does Johnny love someone else? Mary Lou just stands alone, as the man in the previous verse, and waits for something instead of moving on with her life.

Take a baby to the river Kyle William they called him
Wash the baby in the water take away little Kyle’s sin

In a whitewash shotgun shack an old man passes away
Take his body to the graveyard and over him they pray

Lord won't you tell us tell us what does it mean
Still at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to
believe

(Ibid: 13-18)

The third scenario takes place around a local county church where a child is baptized and a funeral is held for an old man. This scenario has themes of community along with religious mysteries, sin, and the afterlife. Kyle is baptised in religious ceremony where he gets purified from his sins and welcomed to the world while another, seemingly poor, man passes away in his ramshackle house and is buried in a religious tradition as well. It is unclear if the old man has been forgiven for his sins prior to his death so the group of people gathered at his funeral pray over his soul. In both cases the community gathers for a sense of unity, something Springsteen feels through the record has disintegrated from society. Here Springsteen wonders about the meaning of life and religion, turns to God and asks is there any meaning to all this and how can people keep their faith in these times of turmoil?

Congregation gathers down by the riverside
Preacher stands with his Bible groom stands waitin' for his bride
Congregation gone and the sun sets behind a weepin' willow tree
Groom stands alone and watches the river rush on so effortlessly

Wonderin' where can his baby be
Still at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to
believe

(Ibid: 19-24)

The fourth and last scenario details a wedding by a river where the groom is left at the altar. The groom doesn't know why his bride does not arrive but keeps standing there believing that she is on her way, even after the congregation has left. He just watches the river flowing on, alone and hurt. The groom, just as the previous characters, does not show any emotions after being dumped at the altar, instead he just stands alone staring into the void like he was paralyzed. It is as if they all suffer from some mysterious condition not caused by any wrongdoings from their part, something that leaves them in a standstill state while they try to fathom what is going on.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyse the lyrics to the songs on the record *Nebraska* to find how Springsteen's characters experience isolation, the consequences of it, and the reasons for their circumstances. I have focused on the key themes of social identity, the American Dream, place, belonging, community, social exclusion, and unemployment and how they contribute to the characters experience of isolation. They are relevant themes because they are present in Springsteen's comments regarding the record. In *Nebraska*, Springsteen has sketched ten scenarios of American life on the outskirts of society, far out of reach of the American Dream. A vivid reminder that not everyone achieves their hopes and dreams, feels that they belong somewhere, find a place or a community for themselves to call home, or manage to go through life without losing their social identity and fall into despair. Each of these characters on the record are looking for deliverance or a solution to their problems, but they do not seem to find the answers. Some keep on trying, others give up on everything.

The characters in the songs are situated in different places and spaces struggling to find some permanence. Some find that they have been misled by their dreams and the promises of the American Dream while others observe family members who have suffered that fate. They have lost track of themselves and exist on the edges of society feeling isolated and excluded. Some are trying to find their way back but do not know how while others turn to violence and crime as a result of their circumstances. Springsteen channels his concerns about the plight of people detached from their familiar surroundings and left stranded in a state of nowhere both in a spiritual and geographic sense. This state of placelessness and disarray which many of the characters feel is terrifying to them, and as a consequence, they are driven to do irrational things, become paralyzed in a state of stasis, or attempt to mobilise themselves with ill-fated results. For many their way back to a place where they feel they belong is obstructed by a power beyond their own control.

The album title *Nebraska* fits the album well due to both it being a real geographical location, a place, and at the same time a vast indistinct space full of desolate landscapes, providing a perfect background for these stories of human depravity. There are some references to actual geographical places such as Lincoln, Nebraska; Wyoming, along with cities and landmarks in New Jersey, but there is much space for imagination as well. These songs could take place anywhere, there's an open space for multiple

allocations where these disturbing situations could occur. The situations in the songs do not depend on their geographical contexts, it is the mental image that they give of the environment and how the characters act in them which matters. The desolation gives more emotional effect to the character's stories as they roam through their united state of nowhere. The characters are trying to find somewhere to call home where they feel they belong and have some stability, to regain their social identities.

The Starkweather character in "Nebraska" has lost connection to everything in the world, so much that he does not think anything matters anymore. He shows no remorse for the murder spree and his only concern for his girlfriend Caril is that she suffers the same fate as he does. He is in complete isolation and devoid of any feeling of belonging, morals, faith, anything. It is hard to find any form of social identity in him other than being a murderer since there is no information regarding his background but it is clear that he has lost all his ties that bind and is indifferent to his fate. Something must have happened to him since he claims that the world is full of evil, implying that said evil has affected him as well. In "Highway Patrolman", Franky resembles the Starkweather character with his careless ways but the reasons for his state of isolation is explained. Joe tries his best to help his wayward brother redeem himself but in the end he is not able to do, yet he chooses to protect him to the very end by letting Franky escape across the border. Franky is no doubt experiencing isolation because he failed to connect with his previous community and identity that he had before he left for Vietnam, causing him to drift aimlessly and lose all sight of what's right and wrong in the world with no faith in anything.

In "Atlantic City", the character has suffered distress caused by his life falling apart around him to such a degree that he decides to give crime a chance to see if it would rescue his relationship and relieve him from his economic struggles. The character is so afraid of the impending isolation that would come if he let his life crash that he is willing to do anything to make things right, even if it would mean to break the law and Atlantic City seems like the right place to go. The main instigator for his isolation here is unemployment and his loss of income. Even though he succeeded in finding another job, the hard work he did hasn't made him prosperous. His unemployment and subsequent loss of identity and faith in the promise of the American Dream turned this working-class man into a criminal. Desperation causes people to think and act irrationally. It is the same situation in "Johnny 99", albeit Ralph suffers a different fate. Both men

have lost their jobs and lose their minds, causing them to act irrationally. While in “Atlantic City” the main character willingly seeks a life of crime to pay for his debts and to save his relationship, Ralph gets blindly drunk due to his frustrations and commits murder. Though Ralph feels that he has lost himself and everything he had to live for, his girlfriend and mother try to show him that he is still loved and cared for. This does not help him however since he feels that there is nothing left for him in this world so he might as well be executed to end his misery.

The characters in “Used Cars” and “Mansion on the Hill” suffer from knowing about their own isolation already at such a young age. While in “Used Cars” the child feels ashamed for his family’s economic status and knows that their community will judge them for being poor, the character in “Mansion on the Hill” does not seem to feel anything. He just stares in awe at the bright lights up on the hill behind the steel gates that divide them, from childhood to adulthood. In “Used Cars”, the father’s failure to prove to his son that hard work brings prosperity makes him lose his faith in the working-class traditions as he thinks winning the lottery is his only way out. He also resents the people around them for being so judgemental. He wants to break out of the community they are in and start all over again somewhere else where he and his family would be accepted for who they are. In “Mansion on the Hill”, the character’s father’s inability to properly communicate and form a healthy relationship with his son just enforces the character’s numbness to everything. It is as if he fatalistically just accepts that he does not belong anywhere, neither with the working-class nor with the upper-class. He just quietly exists in this void of isolation.

The characters in “Open all Night” and “State Trooper” are both begging to be delivered from nowhere. The character in “Open All Night” is not happy with his existence as he is forced to work the midnight shift at a place he does not enjoy being in. He feels like the last man on earth as he drives through distressing landscapes back home to his girl. The character in “State Trooper” is also driving along similarly agonising surroundings but he is not in a healthy state of mind and is probably driving a stolen car. He has no intention of doing anything evil unless provoked but is obviously frustrated by something. While the character in “Open All Night” expresses hope and joy in driving home to where he belongs in a hurry, the character in “State Trooper” is seemingly dealing with some distress but we never get to know what or why. Both are experiencing isolation alone in their car but for different reasons. The one thing they have in common

is that they are desperate to be somewhere else than where they are now, geographically and emotionally.

In “My Father’s House” the character is dealing with emotional isolation from his father. He is haunted by their lack of communication and wants to try and make things right by reaching out to his father, but he does not know where his father is. The house where his father used to live in is now occupied by someone else and the fact leaves him bothered. The house stands as a monument for his isolation, reminding him of his troubles for all eternity. In “Reason to Believe” Springsteen takes a look at four scenarios of human life and observes the situations all the while pondering how life goes on despite the troubles people face. In this song, three scenarios depict characters who suffer some form of malaise yet continue on with their lives albeit in a very paralyzed manner. The man in the first scenario stands beside the dead dog wondering about how things turned out this way while Mary Lou from the second scenario and the groom from the fourth just stand still staring into eternity after they have been deceived. In the third scenario, Springsteen ponders the meaning of life after witnessing a baptism and a funeral. There is loneliness and isolation in each scenario, a sort of void left behind by a tragic incident.

Following *Nebraska*, Springsteen commenced writing what would become *Born in the U.S.A.*, his most commercially successful album. Some songs on that album were conceived during *Nebraska*, such as the title song, but Springsteen decided they were best kept for a record with The E-Street Band. *Born in the U.S.A.* elevated Springsteen’s status, yet he did not abandon his working-class roots. The songs on the album had the same oeuvre as *Nebraska* did with topics concerning the working-man’s plight and calls for unity, but they were sonically different, upbeat and suited for the then-current musical taste of the mainstream public.

Unexpectedly, the record also made him a political influencer, something he is still identified as today, as Ronald Reagan used the title track as his campaign song due to its joyful and triumphant sound and its seemingly patriotic message. This upset Springsteen as he did not support Reagan, if anything the then president’s economic rearrangements were the cause of the working-class struggles he had chronicled in *Nebraska*. But Springsteen did not let stardom and confusions to disillusion him, he continues on to address the struggles of everyday Americans as he had begun on *Nebraska*. A bleak, yet honest portrayal of the distance between the American Dream and the American Reality.

Swedish Summary – Svensk sammanfattning

From American Dream to American Reality

En analys av arbetarklassens isolering i Bruce Springsteens *Nebraska*

Inledning

Bruce Springsteen är känd som en amerikansk kulturikon, en röst för arbetarklassen och en av de mest kommersiellt framgångsrikaste och kritiskt rosade musikartisterna i världen. Både tillsammans med the E-Street Band och som soloartist har han bandat musik och turnerat i över 50 år, sålt över 120 miljoner skivor, vunnit flera Grammys, en Oscar och var dessutom mottagare av Kennedy Center Honors år 2009 och the Presidential Medal of Freedom år 2016 (Sony Music 2021). År 1982 släppte Springsteen sitt sjätte album *Nebraska* vars lyrik speglade den tidens socioekonomiska atmosfär i USA. Även om han redan var etablerad artist 1982, var det hans skiva *Born in the U.S.A.* från 1984 som gjorde honom till en världsomspännande superstjärna och cementerade honom en plats i musikhistorien.

Under det tidiga 1980-talet besvärades USA av en ekonomisk recession som fick arbetslösheten och fattigdomsnivåerna att nå höjder som inte setts sedan den stora depressionen. Många arbetarklassmedborgare led av lågkonjunkturen på grund av att fabriker och företag stängde runt om i USA utan att några ersättare dök upp. Löftet om den amerikanska drömmen, rörlighet uppåt och välstånd för hårt arbetande människor verkade försvinna i fjärran för de som utsattes för detta missöde och människor hade svårt att överleva dag till dag. Den sociala oredan, isoleringen och besvikelsen över USA som många kände inspirerade Springsteen att uttrycka sin oro genom att ägna ett albums värde av låtar till arbetarklassens kamp. Även om det inte var hans mest kommersiellt framgångsrika skiva, var det hans första steg in i sociala kommentarer i hans musik, en riktning som skulle känneteckna honom i framtiden. Den visade en ny sida av Springsteens låtskrivande när han tog på sig en berättande roll som såg honom stiga in i andra karaktärers skor och presentera världen genom deras synvinkel.

Springsteens texter har studerats brett vetenskapligt ur olika perspektiv inom olika områden såsom politik (Mackey-Kallis & McDermott 1992), nostalgi och

identitet (Seymour 2012), immigration (Chouana 2019), social förändring (Murphy 2012), image och autenticitet (Frith 2004), exil (Sheehan 2019) och klassförhållanden (Smith 2022) bland andra ämnen. Även om sångtexter har studerats akademiskt i decennier, har föreställningen att de är likvärdiga med poesi inom litteraturområdet varit en omdebatterad fråga i den akademiska världen (Sisario, Alter & Chan 2016). Denna tvist har till viss del lagts ner sedan Bob Dylan fick nobelpriset i litteratur 2016 (Ibid.). Nobelkommittén tilldelade Dylan priset ”för att ha skapat nya poetiska uttryck inom den stora amerikanska sångtraditionen” (Nobelpriset i litteratur 2016) och jag hävdar att Springsteen förtjänar samma typ av akademiskt erkännande för sitt lyriska bidrag till samma tradition. I denna avhandling analyserar jag texterna till låtarna på skivan Nebraska för att ta reda på hur Springsteens karaktärer upplever isolering, konsekvenserna av det och orsakerna till sina omständigheter. Eftersom det finns många bidragande faktorer till isolering som måste tas i beaktande för att fullt ut förstå karaktärens känslor och handlingar, har jag valt fem nyckelteman som jag kommer att fokusera på när det gäller dess manifestation: social identitet, den amerikanska drömmen, plats och tillhörighet, gemenskap, social uteslutning och arbetslöshet.

Dessa faktorer ska alla beaktas när man diskuterar isolering eftersom de bidrar till möjligheten att bli isolerad. Karaktärerna i Nebraska är alla arbetarklassmänniskor som hanterar dessa teman på olika sätt, och genom att analysera låtarna på Nebraska hoppas jag kunna undersöka och diskutera hur Springsteen behandlar isolering i skivans texter. Jag motiverar min studie med att konstatera att trots att det finns en omfattande litterär och akademisk bibliografi över Springsteen och hans texter, så verkar det inte finnas några studier som enbart koncentrerar sig på isolering i Nebraska, vilket gör mitt ämne till ett relevant tillägg till Springsteenstudierna. Jag erkänner att det finns flera sätt att tolka texterna och att se dem från olika vinklar; därför är min analys inte en bestämd redogörelse utan snarare min tolkning och förståelse av dem. Jag förbinder mig bara att utforska de teman jag har valt eftersom detta begränsar min omfattning och gör ämnet lämpligt för en masteruppsats.

Springsteen

Bruce Springsteen föddes den 23 september 1949 i en fattig arbetarklassfamilj i Freehold, New Jersey, en förfallande industristad. Springsteen hade ett dysfunktionellt förhållande till sin pappa Douglas vilket han har reflekterat mycket över i sin låtskrivning. Douglas var en orolig och avskräckt arbetarklassman som inte kunde hålla ett fast jobb under Springsteens hela barndom (Marsh 2004: 245). Douglas kunde aldrig hitta något meningsfullt arbete då han hela tiden kände att allt han gjorde tog mycket mer ifrån honom än vad han fick tillbaka (Ibid.). Nöden som orsakades av hans misslyckanden gjorde att han kände sig deprimerad och besegrad, och Douglas tog ofta ut sin frustration på sin familj. Familjen Springsteen stannade i Freehold trots att det fanns bättre möjligheter till arbete på annat håll eftersom Douglas hade tappat humöret och även för att de var tvungna att ta hand om Douglas föräldrar som ibland var tvungna att flytta in hos dem (Marsh 2004: 244). Medan Springsteens far saknade fast sysselsättning, kompenserade hans mamma för Douglas brister genom att troget gå till jobbet varje morgon för att försörja sin familj och ge dem en känsla av trygghet (Marsh 2004: 245).

Bruce kände sig nära sin mamma men avlägsen sin pappa. Bruce och Douglas hade inte en sund relation med varandra eftersom Douglas inte var kommunikativ och inte visade mycket faderliga känslor mot honom, vilket gjorde att Bruce kände förbittring mot sin far (Marsh 2004: 246). De bråkade ofta och Bruce var till och med rädd för honom ibland (Marsh 2004: 17). Denna typ av uteslutande beteende som hans far var benägen att visa var något Bruce föraktade, ändå verkade det som att denna typ av social utestängning var en vanlig sak i familjen Springsteen, en tradition till och med (Marsh 2004: 245). Douglas hade varit en outsider hela sitt liv, precis som hans föräldrar var, och Bruce var rädd som ung pojke för att han skulle ärva detta generationsbeteende av social isolering (Ibid.). Han var rädd för att han aldrig skulle kunna lära sig att passa in någonstans.

Dessa aspekter hjälper till att förstå innehållet i Springsteens låtskrivande då han ofta skriver låtar baserade på sina egna erfarenheter och tankar, och lägger dem i delvis självbiografiska berättelser ledda av karaktärer som skildrar dem i en livlig värld av fantasi blandad med verkligheten. Detta är utbrett genom hans tidiga skivor, från *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* till *The River*, där hans karaktärer och berättelser alla återspeglade hans egna känslor och teman som var aktuella för honom i hans dåvarande

sinnestillstånd. När Springsteen blev äldre förändrades ämnena. I *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.*, kretsar hans berättelser kring unga människor som letar efter romantik och äventyr på natten, ett tema som också fanns på hans andra skiva *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* och som kulminerade på *Born to Run*. I *Darkness on the Edge of Town* började han sjunga om mindre optimistiska teman om misslyckande och trasiga drömmar istället för den hoppfulla tonårsromantiken och ambitionen som fanns i hans tidigare skivor. Successivt, vid tiden kring *The River*, hade Springsteen fyllt trettio och skrev om ämnen som han upplevde och kände var aktuella i hans ålder. Vid tiden kring *Nebraska* bestämde sig Springsteen för att skriva berättelser med andra karaktärer än de han skrivit om tidigare eftersom han hade blivit mer socialt och politiskt medveten och den här gången ur en narrativ synvinkel. Men han släppte aldrig sitt förflutna och sina erfarenheter, de finns alltid närvarande i hans låtskrivande.

Nebraska

Bruce Springsteen släppte sitt sjätte studioalbum *Nebraska* 1982. Musiken på *Nebraska* är minimal med bara Springsteens röst, en akustisk gitarr och munspel tillsammans med några andra instrument som ackompanjerar honom och ligger mer i stil med traditionell folkmusik än vad som Springsteens publik var van vid. Springsteen har sagt att det inte tog lång tid att skriva skivan på grund av de liknande egenskaperna och temana i låtarna, och att han var influerad av författaren Flannery O'Connors verk samt filmen *Badlands* av Terrence Malick under den tiden (Springsteen 1998: 136). Den första låten han skrev för *Nebraska* var "Mansion on the Hill" och "My Father's House" var den sista (Ibid.). Alla utom två låtar på albumet, "Reason to Believe" och "Johnny 99", berättas ur ett narrativt perspektiv eftersom Springsteen ville låta lyssnaren komma in i karaktärernas huvuden och låta lyssnaren höra deras tankar (1998: 138).

Sommaren 1982 nådde konkurser och utmätningar nivåer som inte setts sedan den stora depressionen eftersom den nationella arbetslösheten i USA hade nått 10,8 procent medan fattigdomsgraden låg på 14 procent, den högsta den hade varit på 40 år (Camardella 2006: 33). Många städer led av lågkonjunkturen när företag och fabriker stängde eller flyttade någon annanstans, vilket gjorde att många arbetarklassmän blev arbetslösa och oförmögna att hitta arbete, vilket gjorde att de var beroende av välfärden (Ibid.). Många lämnades med skulder som de inte hade råd att betala längre och tvingades

sälja sina tillhörigheter för att försörja sig. Skivan sattes därmed i det socioekonomiska landskap som var USA i början av 1980-talet där arbetslösheten steg och arbetarklassen led. Men den handlar inte bara om isolering orsakad av ekonomiska omständigheter, utan också om isolering orsakad av avbrutna mänskliga relationer och förlust av tro. Det förekommer mördare som inte har något att förlora, ärliga medborgare som inte har tur, skadade faderliga relationer och val mellan plikt och familj. Dessa berättelser är varierande, och de presenterar alla denna alienation på olika sätt, men den gemensamma nämnaren är att varje karaktär i var och en av berättelserna kämpar med isolering i någon form.

Metoder och teori

Det primära materialet för denna studie var sångerna på Nebraska. Jag analyserar den isolering som Springsteens karaktärer upplever och hur social identitet, den amerikanska drömmen, plats och tillhörighet, gemenskap, arbetslöshet och socialt utanförskap spelar roll i deras respektive situation. Analysen genomfördes genom nära läsning och jag uppmärksammar detaljer som förklarar karaktärernas känslor och omständigheter som är relevanta för studien och hur de bildar varje låts berättelse.

Social identitet är viktigt eftersom arbetarklassen har en stark identitetskänsla gentemot sin sociala klass. Förlusten av denna identitet är framträdande i texterna till Nebraska och orsaken till mycket oordning i karaktärernas liv. Förlusten av social identitet är inte lätt att återvinna och är nära knuten till isolering. Den amerikanska drömmen är också viktig eftersom den amerikanska arbetarklassens värderingar och övertygelser om hårt arbete som ger välstånd baserar sig på denna princip, en föreställning som USA kan sägas vara byggd på. Arbetarklassen tror troget på löftet om den amerikanska drömmen och dess värderingar, och en förlust av tro på den är knuten till förlust av identitet och därmed också kopplad till isolering. Plats och tillhörighet, det vill säga hur plats och rum samt känslan av att höra någonstans, eller avsaknaden av den, har jag valt eftersom de framtvingar känslor av både inkludering och isolering. Teorin om platser och rum med avseende på geografiska sammanhang spelar en stor roll i Springsteens texter då han ofta placerar sina berättelser i distinkta omgivningar som är viktiga för hans berättelser överlag. Platser och utrymmen skapar känslor av utanförskap och tillhörighet, och båda är avgörande för isolering. Gemenskap betonar vikten av platser

och utrymmen där människor känner att de hör hemma, eftersom gemenskap ger trygghet och inhägnad. När en gemenskap bryts upp, eller någon befinner sig utanför en gemenskap, inträder isolering. Arbetarklassen förknippas ofta med en egen gemenskap som består av känslan av värderingar och seder. Social utestängning och arbetslöshet är bundna till varandra eftersom att förlora ett jobb kan störa en individs sociala identitet, tro på löftet om den amerikanska drömmen, få hen att känna sig alienerad från sin omgivning, orsaka förlust av status i en gemenskap och eventuell social utestängning som leder till tillbakadragande och isolering. I ett arbetarsamhälle kan det få allvarliga konsekvenser för hens mentala hälsa och ekonomi om någon förlorar sitt jobb. Man kan falla ur sina vanliga rutiner och se sig utestängd från sitt gamla samhälle då de inte passar in längre, kanske tappar de till och med sin ekonomi och gör orimliga och ödesdigra misstag.

Analys och slutsats

Syftet med denna avhandling har varit att analysera texterna till låtarna på skivan Nebraska för att ta reda på hur Springsteens karaktärer upplever isolering, konsekvenserna av det och orsakerna till deras omständigheter. Nyckelteman har varit social identitet, den amerikanska drömmen, plats, tillhörighet, gemenskap, socialt utanförskap, arbetslöshet och hur de bidrar till karaktärernas upplevelse av isolering. I Nebraska har Springsteen skisserat tio scenarier av det amerikanska livet i samhällets utkanter, långt utom räckhåll för den amerikanska drömmen. Det är en levande påminnelse om att inte alla uppnår sina förhoppningar och drömmar, känner att de hör hemma någonstans, hittar en plats eller en gemenskap för sig själva att kalla hem, eller lyckas gå igenom livet utan att förlora sin sociala identitet och falla i förtvivlan. Var och en av dessa karaktärer på skivan letar efter befrielse eller en lösning på sina problem, men de verkar inte hitta svaren. Vissa fortsätter att försöka, andra ger upp allt.

Som helhet berättar varje låt på Nebraska historien om någon i en nedslagen position och skadad av ekonomiska strider, känslomässigt lidande eller utestängning från sitt samhälle. Skivan skildrar det amerikanska livet på ett mycket dystert sätt och karaktärerna har inte så mycket att säga om sina liv och är utlämnade till andra som verkar ha makten över dem. Låtarna utspelar sig i nergångna kvarter utanför de rika och blomstrande samhällena, fabriker, i utkanten av staden, motorvägar och i rättssalar.

Många, men inte alla, av sångerna berättas ur en vuxens synvinkel men en del talas ur ett barns perspektiv.

Karaktärerna i sångerna befinner sig på olika platser och utrymmen och kämpar för att hitta någon beständighet. Vissa tycker att de har blivit vilseledda av sina drömmar och löften om den amerikanska drömmen, medan andra observerar familjemedlemmar som har drabbats av det ödet. De har tappat koll på sig själva och finns på utkanten av samhället och känner sig isolerade och utestängda. Vissa försöker hitta tillbaka men vet inte hur, medan andra tar till våld och brottslighet till följd av sina omständigheter. Springsteen kanaliserar sin oro över situationen för människor som är fjärrade från sina bekanta omgivningar och lämnade strandsatta i ett tillstånd av ingenstans, både i andlig och geografisk bemärkelse. Detta tillstånd av platslöshet och oordning som många av karaktärerna känner är skrämmande för dem, och som en konsekvens av detta drivs de att göra irrationella saker, blir förlamade i ett tillstånd av stas eller försöker mobilisera sig själva med olyckliga resultat. För många hindras vägen tillbaka till en plats där de känner att de hör hemma av en kraft utanför deras egen kontroll.

Albumtiteln Nebraska passar albumet bra på grund av att det både är en verklig geografisk plats och samtidigt ett stort otydligt utrymme fullt av ödsliga landskap, vilket ger en perfekt bakgrund för dessa berättelser om mänskligt fördärv. Det finns några referenser till äkta geografiska platser som Lincoln, Nebraska och Wyoming tillsammans med städer och landmärken i New Jersey. Men det finns mycket utrymme för fantasi också. Dessa låtar kan utspela sig var som helst, det finns ett öppet utrymme för flera tilldelningar där dessa störande situationer kan uppstå. Situationerna i sångerna är inte beroende av deras geografiska sammanhang, det är den mentala bilden de ger av miljön och hur karaktärerna agerar i dem som spelar roll. Ödsligheten ger mer känslomässig effekt åt karaktärens berättelser när de strövar genom sitt förenade tillstånd av ingenstans. Karaktärerna försöker hitta någonstans där de känner att de hör hemma och har lite stabilitet, för att återfå sina sociala identiteter.

Karaktären i "Nebraska" har tappat kopplingen till allt i världen, så mycket att han inte tycker att något spelar någon roll längre. Han visar ingen ånger för mordfesten och hans enda oro för sin flickvän Caril är att se till att hon drabbas av samma öde som han. Han är helt isolerad och saknar all känsla av tillhörighet, moral, tro, vad som helst. Det är svårt att hitta någon form av social identitet hos honom förutom att vara en mördare

eftersom det inte finns någon information om hans bakgrund men det är tydligt att han har tappat alla de band som binder och är likgiltig inför sitt öde. Något måste ha hänt honom eftersom han hävdar att världen är full av ondska, vilket antyder att nämnda ondska också har påverkat honom. I ”Highway Patrolman” liknar Franky Starkweather-karakteren med sina slarviga sätt men orsakerna till hans isolering förklaras. Joe gör sitt bästa för att hjälpa sin egensinniga bror att lösa sig själv men till slut kan han inte göra det, ändå väljer han att skydda honom ända till slutet genom att låta Franky fly över kommungränsen. Franky upplever utan tvekan isolering eftersom han misslyckades med att ansluta till sin tidigare gemenskap och identitet som han hade innan han reste till Vietnam, vilket fick honom att driva planlöst och förlora all syn på vad som är rätt och fel i världen utan tro på någonting.

I ”Atlantic City” har karaktären lidit nöd som orsakats av att hans liv faller samman runt honom i en sådan grad att han bestämmer sig för att ge brott en chans för att se om det skulle rädda hans förhållande och befria honom från hans ekonomiska kamp. Karaktären är så rädd för den förestående isoleringen som skulle komma om han lät sitt liv krascha att han är villig att göra vad som helst för att göra saker rätt, även om det skulle innebära att bryta mot lagen. Och Atlantic City verkar vara rätt plats att gå till. Den främsta anstiftaren för hans isolering här är arbetslöshet och hans inkomstbortfall. Hans arbetslöshet och efterföljande förlust av identitet och tro på löftet om den amerikanska drömmen gjorde denna arbetarklassman till en brottsling. Desperation får människor att tänka och handla irrationellt. Det är samma situation i ”Johnny 99”, även om Ralph drabbas av ett annat öde. Båda männen har förlorat sina jobb och tappat förståndet, vilket får dem att agera irrationellt. Medan huvudpersonen i ”Atlantic City” villigt söker ett liv i brott för att betala för sina skulder och för att rädda sitt förhållande, blir Ralph blint berusad på grund av sina frustrationer och begår mord. Även om Ralph känner att han har förlorat sig själv och allt han hade att leva för, försöker hans flickvän och mamma visa honom att han fortfarande är älskad och omhändertagen. Detta hjälper honom dock inte eftersom han känner att det inte finns något kvar för honom i denna värld så han kan lika gärna avrättas för att få slut på sitt elände.

Karaktärerna i ”Used Cars” och ”Mansion on the Hill” lider av att känna till sin egen isolering redan i så ung ålder. Medan barnet i ”Used Cars” skäms för sin familjs ekonomiska status och vet att deras samhälle kommer att döma dem för att vara fattiga, verkar karaktären i ”Mansion on the Hill” inte känna någonting alls. Han bara stirrar

vördnadsfullt på de starka ljusen uppe på kullen bakom stålportarna som skiljer dem åt, från barndom till vuxen ålder. I "Used Cars" får faderns misslyckande med att bevisa för sin son att hårt arbete ger välstånd honom att förlora tron på arbetarklassens traditioner. Han avskyr också människorna omkring dem för att de är så dömande. Han vill bryta sig ur samhället de är i och börja om på nytt någon annanstans där han och hans familj skulle accepteras för dem de är. I "Mansion on the Hill" ökar den oförmågan att kommunicera och bilda en sund relation till sin son som pappan visar karaktärens domningar till allt. Det är som om han fatalistiskt bara accepterar att han inte hör hemma någonstans, varken med arbetarklassen eller överklassen. Han existerar bara tyst i detta tomrum av isolering.

Karaktärerna i "Open All Night" och "State Trooper" ber båda om att bli befriade från ingenstans. Karaktären i "Open All Night" är inte nöjd med sin tillvaro då han tvingas jobba midnattsskiftet på en plats han inte trivs på. Han känner sig som den siste människan på jorden när han kör genom plågsamma landskap hem till hans flickvän. Karaktären i "State Trooper" kör också i liknande plågsamma omgivningar, men han är inte i ett sunt sinnestillstånd och kör förmodligen en stulen bil. Han har ingen avsikt att göra något ont om han inte blir provocerad men är uppenbarligen frustrerad över något. Medan karaktären i "Open All Night" uttrycker hopp och glädje över att köra hem dit han hör hemma i all hast, verkar karaktären i "State Trooper" ha att göra med en viss nöd men vi får aldrig veta vad eller varför. Båda upplever isolering ensamma i sin bil men av olika anledningar. Det enda de har gemensamt är att de är desperata efter att vara någon annanstans än där de är nu, både geografiskt och känslomässigt.

I "My Father's House" hanterar karaktären känslomässig isolering från sin far. Han förföljs av deras brist på kommunikation och vill försöka göra saker rätt genom att nå ut till sin far, men han vet inte var hans far är. Huset där hans far tidigare bodde i är nu upptaget av någon annan och det gör honom besvårad. Huset står som ett monument för hans isolering och påminner honom om hans bekymmer för all evighet. I "Reason to Believe" tar Springsteen en titt på fyra scenarier av mänskligt liv och observerar situationerna samtidigt som han funderar över hur livet fortsätter trots de problem som människor möter. I den här låten skildrar tre scenarier karaktärer som lider av någon form av olycka men som ändå fortsätter med sina liv om än på ett mycket förlamat sätt. Mannen i det första scenariot står bredvid den döda hunden och undrar över hur det blev så här medan Mary Lou från det andra scenariot och brudgummen från det fjärde bara står stilla och stirrar in i evigheten efter att de blivit lurade. I det tredje scenariot funderar

Springsteen över meningen med livet efter att ha sett ett dop och en begravning. Det finns ensamhet och isolering i varje scenario, ett slags tomrum som lämnats efter av en tragisk händelse.

Efter Nebraska släppte Springsteen skivan *Born in the U.S.A.*, hans mest kommersiellt framgångsrika skiva. Vissa sånger på *Born in the U.S.A.* var redan skrivna under Nebraska som titelspåret, men Springsteen beslöt sig för att spara dem till följande skivan som skulle bandas in med *The E-Street band*. *Born in the U.S.A.* gjorde Springsteen till en världsomfattande superstjärna, men han glömde aldrig bort sina arbetarklassrötter. *Born in the U.S.A.* gjorde också Springsteen oförväntat till en politisk påverkare, något som han fortfarande ses som idag, eftersom Ronald Reagan använde skivans titelspår som sin kampanjsång. Reagan hade misstolkat sångens mening på grund av dess triumferande och glädjefyllda melodi och till synes patriotiska meddelande. Detta frustrerade Springsteen eftersom han inte stödde Reagans politik, utan ansåg att det var Reagan som hade orsakat den amerikanska arbetarklassens lidande vilket han hade upptecknat på Nebraska. Men Springsteen lät inte sig bli desillusionerad, utan fortsätter att skriva om de svåra situationerna som vardagliga amerikaner möter så som han hade börjat med på Nebraska. En mörk, men ärlig skildring av avståndet mellan den amerikanska drömmen och amerikanska verkligheten.

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