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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**“I guess there’s just a meanness in this world”: Bruce
Springsteen’s *Nebraska* and the Abyss**

Treball de Fi de Grau / BA dissertation

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Abstract

Springsteen's 1982 album *Nebraska* presents the listener with a troupe of working-class characters who find themselves at the edge of, or in some cases perhaps already at the very bottom of, the abyss. Regarded as one of his bleakest and darkest albums, *Nebraska* deals with the topics of alienation, poverty, crime, and kinship.

Adopting the concept of 'the abyss' as the central theme of the album, I intend to analyze the lyrics of *Nebraska* in order to formulate an understanding of the concept of the abyss itself within the album. This interpretation includes, but is not limited to, an exploration of the nature of the abyss and its origins, its repercussions, and its "resolution" or lack thereof. Thus, adopting a sociopolitical lens, I intend to analyze the interconnectedness of poverty, kinship, alienation, loss of agency, and the abyss in *Nebraska*'s lyrics, and how the abyss can perhaps be traced back to the systems of oppression that subjugate Springsteen's characters.

In order to examine the abyss and its presence in *Nebraska*, an analysis of each song will be conducted, and parallels will be drawn across songs in the album. A single analytical argument seeking to unify the album and its themes as a whole by way of the concept of the abyss will be produced. With that in mind, a close reading of the lyrics and other studies of Springsteen's lyrics will be employed in order to better understand his treatment of storytelling, poverty, and alienation.

Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, *Nebraska*, abyss, alienation, poverty, kinship, loss of agency

0. Introduction

In a 2010 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Bruce Springsteen confides in writer Brian Hiatt that “the abyss is under my heels, and I always feel it back there”, later adding that “[y]ou can’t write those [referring to several of his songs] without having had at least a taste of the abyss”.¹ Springsteen’s 1982 album *Nebraska* presents the listener with a troupe of working-class characters who find themselves at the edge of, or in some cases perhaps already at the very bottom of, the abyss. Regarded as one of his bleakest and darkest albums, *Nebraska* deals with the topics of alienation, poverty, crime, and kinship. The social and political nature of Springsteen’s lyrics, I believe, should be examined, and read as works of literature beyond the limitations that reduce music to a “lower” art form that is only meant to be enjoyed rather than critically received.

Taking the concept of ‘the abyss’ as the central theme of *Nebraska*, I intend to analyze the lyrics of the album and develop an understanding of the concept of the abyss itself within the lyrics.² This interpretation will include, but shall not be limited to, an examination of the nature of the abyss and its origins—whether it is innately human, self-inflicted, inevitable, or caused by external forces—its repercussions—how it shapes the lives and actions of our characters, as well as their relationships—and its “resolution” or lack thereof—does an abyss cease to be, can one climb out of it, or is there a point of no-return? Thus, adopting a sociopolitical lens, I intend to analyze the intersection of poverty, kinship, alienation, loss of agency, and the abyss in *Nebraska*’s lyrics, and how these can all perhaps be traced back to the systems of oppression that subjugate Springsteen’s characters.

¹ Hiatt, Brian. "'Darkness' Revisited." *Rolling Stone*, no. 1118, Nov 25, 2010, pp. 60-65. Retrieved from <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-darkness-revisited-94429/>

² For clarity’s sake, I will be using the terms *line*, *stanza*, and *chorus* to avoid confusion.

In order to examine the abyss and its presence in *Nebraska*, I aim to first analyze each song of the album as its own narrative, and then find parallels and echoes across different lyrics in the album. Finally, I aim to produce a single analytical argument that seeks to unify the album and its themes as a whole by way the concept of the abyss. Despite *Nebraska* being one of Springsteen's most critically acclaimed works, there is still a distinct lack of literature on it in academia; therefore, my interpretation will be supported by non-academic texts on *Nebraska*, as well as primary sources such as interviews, and scholarly literature on Springsteen and his lyrics in general. With that in mind, I will employ close reading as well as turning to other studies of Springsteen's lyrics in order to better understand his treatment of storytelling, poverty, and alienation, and to incorporate these into this exploration of the abyss within *Nebraska*. Therefore, this paper's essence is substantially interpretative rather than thesis-proving.

0.1. Literature Review

In *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies and the Runaway American Dream*, Stonerook writes that "[o]n *Nebraska*, Springsteen surveys a world in which individuals are cut off from one another and lose track of the ties that bind them to society. The characters on *Nebraska* are lonely individuals who appear deluded and misled by their dreams" (220). Springsteen's response to post-industrial angst in the USA, isolation, and poverty has been studied in academic circles. The hollowness of the American Dream is perhaps the most commented upon theme of Springsteen's repertoire; when it comes to *Nebraska*, a broad variety of themes has been broached, ranging from mental health to its treatment of death. For example, in his chapter in *Bruce Springsteen and Philosophy*, Kaag analyzes the theme of death in *Nebraska*, more particularly in the songs "Nebraska" and "Atlantic City", and comments upon the blasé way in which the narrators in these two songs face

death—either theirs, or someone else’s at their own hands. In a later chapter, Ventimiglia surmises that *Nebraska* can be interpreted as a meditation on evil and redemption.

Another topic that is recurrently examined with regard to *Nebraska* is crime, and the portrayal of criminal characters, as is the case with Levine (2005), who explores the crime motif and creates a system which differentiates between three types, or portraits, of criminals within *Nebraska*: the Enigmatic Criminal—that of “Nebraska”—, the Sympathetic Criminal—those of “Atlantic City”, “Johnny 99”, and “State Trooper”—and the Criminal as Brother—which we find in “Highway Patrolman”. In a similar vein, Papke also focuses on these characters and how their psyche is presented as “less exhilarated than fragmented” (97), positing that in *Nebraska* we find “[p]ortrayals of disoriented criminals, of men who seem to have separated from themselves in the midst of their crimes” (97).

With regards to the album as a whole, in *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, Stonerook writes about the inherent isolation of the characters in *Nebraska*, citing an interview in which Springsteen touches upon the subject of characters whose community ultimately fails them and, thus, end up having to look out for themselves. In this same book, Gellman quotes Springsteen himself on the topic of community, expressing that “these songs contemplate what happens when someone becomes so thoroughly untethered as to feel no connections to community, to past, to code” (13). Additionally, in a chapter of *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music. Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture*, Stonerook also discusses the almost punishing nature of the narrator’s job in “Open All Night” as a result of his boss disliking him, as well as the psychological effects of this on its main character, offering a criticism of the collapsed American Dream, along with some commentary on the worrisome isolation and anxiety that only serves to exacerbate his manic-like state.

As mentioned previously, there is a certain darkness at the heart of Springsteen's narrative lyrics: a metaphorical abyss. This abyss manifests itself, as Springsteen himself puts it, in a sort of isolation: "Nebraska is about [...] what happens to people when they're alienated from their friends, their community, their government, their job. Because these are the things that keep you sane, that give meaning to life [...] and if they slip away, and you start to exist in some void [...] [a]nd anything can happen" (Hiatt, ch. 6). Miller's approach to *Nebraska*, which in her abstract she posits "explores the despair produced by the failure of hopeful agency and responds to that danger with a counterconception of agency" is similar to my own reading of the overarching themes of Springsteen's work. My interpretations of the lyrics of *Nebraska* largely align with those of Burke in chapter 9 of his book *Heart of Darkness. Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. Therefore, I will attempt to explore how the concept of the abyss is conveyed in the lyrics of *Nebraska*.

1. Analysis of Springsteen's Songs

1.1. "I guess there's just a meanness in this world": Nebraska

In *Nebraska*'s first song, we find a depiction of a murderer's testimony during his trial. Narrated in the first person, the protagonist has often been identified with the figure of Charles Starkweather who, along with his girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate, went on a killing spree in the late 1950s and later inspired the 1973 film *Badlands*. This song represents the metaphorical center of the album, depicting the nonchalant attitude with which the narrator addresses his engagement in murder, but also with which he faces his own death—it is a portrait of humanity at its crudest and most desolate.

One of the main issues that we encounter when interpreting the lyrics of "Nebraska" is that there does not seem to be a straightforward reason why the narrator and his girlfriend decide to go on a killing spree. Taking into consideration Springsteen's inspiration when writing this song, we could draw parallels from the real-life Charles Starkweather and deduce that the reason behind the killing spree may have stemmed from his status as an outcast in town—as a working class, bullied, and "troubled" young man. That being said, the narrator does seem to exhibit certain behaviour or attitudes that lean towards psychopathic tendencies, beyond a moral disregard for lives of others, such as distancing himself from his actions and dehumanizing his victims. First, he dissociates from the act of murder by stating that "ten innocent people died" (l. 2) and not outwardly assuming an active role in the act; furthermore, when he does seem to admit his active part in the murders—when assuming responsibility for them—he dehumanizes his victims by saying "I killed everything in my path" (l. 4).

In the final stanza, the narrator expresses that "they [the judges, or society at large] declared [him] unfit to live" (l. 11), subverting his role as a perpetrator and presenting himself as a victim, which, in a sense, he is. If we interpret his complete disconnect with

his surroundings, and the subsequent alienation he might have experienced from his peers, the narrator can be recognized as a victim of a society that did not wish to help or understand him, and of a system that ostracizes those who slightly deviate from the norm: neurotypical, middle class. Therefore, the dissociation and isolation that the narrator experiences may manifest in him with the sensations of a loss of agency and an overall “untetheredness” from reality.

Of course, this is all conjecture given the fact that there is not much background information on the narrator to begin with, but a total assertion of free will may be a plausible response to this “adrift” state of being. It is quite possible that, in order to regain some semblance of control over his life, the narrator chooses to enact violence upon others—if he cannot change the circumstances or powers that govern his life, he chooses to gain control over the lives of others. That being said, the most significant stanza in this song is, perhaps, the last one, in which we get a glimpse of the narrator’s psyche, and his attitude in the face of what he has done and his imminent death. Upon being asked, he is unable to give a reason as to why he and his girlfriend went on a killing spree; in an earlier stanza, he expresses he has no regrets over his actions because he and his girlfriend had some fun while it lasted (ll. 5-6), hinting at a possible disillusionment with life prior to the murders. Returning to the reason he provides for having committed those murders, the narrator simply expresses that “there’s just a meanness in this world” (l. 13), thus revealing that there is no substantial reason for them, even from the perpetrator’s point of view. The murders, as a result, are presented as somewhat senseless and trivial, the absurd but unfortunate result of one troubled person’s attempt to grapple with the cards they were dealt in life—collateral damage to his own tragic existence. Even his imminent death is approached with a cool façade, or a certain numbness; and perhaps this apathy, in the face of everything that has happened and what is to come, is the abyss made manifest in this

character. As Calef posits in his chapter in *Bruce Springsteen and Philosophy: Darkness on the Edge of Truth*, we get the sense that “his soul will enter the void, but the way Bruce represents Starkweather, we experience the numb void that is his soul” (ch. 17).

1.2. “So honey last night I met this guy and I’m gonna do a little favor for him”: Atlantic City

Although there is no actual event in “Atlantic City”, an imminent involvement in gang activity is implied in its lyrics. The world of organized crime is introduced in the first few lines with the mention of the murder of real-life mafia boss Philip Testa, also known as “The Chicken Man”, and the tension between gangs following his death. Atlantic City, a coastal resort city in New Jersey known for its casinos, is considered to be under the domain of the Philadelphia crime family, of which Testa was the boss. The lines “Everything dies baby, that’s a fact” seems to have been inspired by the following dialogue from the 1980 film *Atlantic City*: “I don’t mind that Dave’s dead. It just means he’ll be reincarnated sooner, that’s all... everything comes back”. In “Atlantic City”, the speaker is a first-person narrator, while the addressee is the speaker’s partner and is referred to as ‘baby’ throughout the song, as opposed to other songs in *Nebraska* in which the addressee is usually a figure of authority.

Poverty, or rather an aspiration of wealth, seems to be the overarching theme behind the narrator’s decision in “Atlantic City”. The first reference to the narrator’s poverty is found in the third stanza, in which he explains that he is unable to pay his debts despite having a job and saving money (ll. 9-10). From this, one can conjecture that the narrator’s decision to resort to crime derives from his circumstances, perhaps as a last resort in an act of desperation. However, this decision to get involved in crime can also be interpreted as a reclamation of agency from the narrator’s part; this is supported by his lament in line 19: “Well I’m tired of coming out on this losin’ end”, in which he expresses

a sense of impotence, perhaps in regard to the mutilating effect of poverty on people's agency. There are several references to wealth, such as line 14 where the narrator expresses that they are heading to Atlantic City, "where the sand's turnin' to gold"; furthermore, there is the apparent display of wealth inherent to the narrator's request to his girlfriend to dress up, put some make-up on, etc. Another reading of this, however, could suggest that this involvement in crime is the narrator's conscious choice to take matters into his own hands and actively contend with this lack of agency.

As mentioned previously, there are several references to organized crime, the mafia to be more precise, throughout the song. First, there is reference to the murder of a well-known mafia boss, "The Chicken Man" (l. 1) and of the ensuing mafia war within the Philadelphia crime family following his death (ll. 2-3, l. 4). The true reason behind the couples' move to Atlantic City is revealed to be the narrator's impending involvement with the mafia, and it is only explicitly disclosed in line 20: "So honey last night I met this guy and I'm gonna do a little favor for him". Furthermore, although it can only be inferred, it is quite possible that this "favor" (l. 20) which the narrator will perform may possibly end in murder or death, whether it is his or at his hand remains ambiguous. The inevitable conclusion of the story in death is framed by its permeating presence in the text, starting with the murder of "The Chicken Man" in the beginning of the song and slowly seeping into the narrative through the anticipatory repetition of "Everything dies" in the chorus as well as the stanzas. This repetition can be interpreted in several ways: perhaps the narrator is trying to distance himself emotionally from his possible victim and the act of murder—this interpretation could be supported by the fact that the narrator chooses to say "everything" and not "everyone", therefore dehumanizing his prospective victim—in order to cope with the situation, in what seems to be an act of self-reassurance or even delusion; another way to interpret this repetition is an already-existing coldness in the

face of crime, or perhaps a numbness to the notion of death, from the part of the narrator—in this case, the repetition is not interpreted as maniacal or delusional, but rather as nonchalant or defeated.

1.3. “Ever since I was a child I can remember/That mansion on the hill”: Mansion on the Hill

“Mansion on the Hill” is one of three semi-autobiographical songs in *Nebraska*, in which Springsteen touches on the subject of his childhood against the backdrop of industrial sprawl. In this song in particular, the first-person narrator recalls a number of memories linked to this mansion and his family—namely his father driving them to gaze up at the mansion at night, and his sister and himself hiding out close to the mansion to listen to the music played during parties there, supposedly. “Mansion on the Hill” can be interpreted as a representation of the corrupted American Dream, or even as a realistic portrayal of it—of its unattainable nature and the bitterness felt by those who live in its shadow.

Once again, poverty and the desire for wealth seems to be the central theme of the song. The mansion, as a symbol of wealth, is physically placed above all things that surround it—the fields, the factories (l. 2)—throughout most of the song; furthermore, it is also worth noting that it is presented as unattainable—there are “gates of hardened steel/[...] that completely surround [it]” (ll. 5-6)—and out of reach from our characters, who look up at it (l. 9) or hide out near it (l.11). In this song’s case, however, the narrator does not find himself in a situation of destitution or desperation, but rather he has learned to feel a sense of inadequacy regarding his poverty from his father. That is to say, that this aspiration of wealth the narrator possesses has seemingly been passed down from father to son and is deeply rooted in the narrator’s psyche from his early childhood—“ever since I was a child I can remember/That mansion on the hill” (l. 3). In this way, poverty or a

lack of excessive wealth and these feelings of inadequacy regarding wealth are linked to childhood, not only through the narrator's personal history and the generational passing on of these feelings, but also in the sense that poverty severely hinders one's agency, rendering people to a child-like state of impotence.

This childlike impotence is represented in the cycle in which the narrator finds himself, which is mirrored in the song "My Father's House". Unable to face this, the narrator turns to childhood memories, places, and feelings, and revisits the old mansion on the hill at night, performing his father's actions. This behavior, as mentioned, suggests that the narrator may feel stunted concerning matters of wealth—although we cannot know what his present situation is with regard to it. This impotence, or perhaps passivity—the narrator does not make any attempt to ameliorate his situation as opposed to the narrators in "Atlantic City" or "Johnny 99"—, is paired with a certain melancholy which manifests itself in the return to childhood memories and the repetition of his father's behaviour. Thus, there still seems to be an aspiration of wealth present in the narrator given that it is so deeply rooted in him, and it is revealed in his hopeless return to childhood and his inability to move forward. It is perhaps this sense of inadequacy instilled by his father that represents a certain unbridgeable abyss in the narrator.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said about the presence of the moon and its connotation in the last stanza. Having returned to the mansion on the hill, the narrator remarks that "there's a beautiful full moon rising above [it]" (l. 14), perhaps as a salient effort to acknowledge that, in the grand scheme of things, there is something more wholesome and plentiful to life than the hollowness of wealth. In spite of the fact that the narrator still returns to the mansion, perhaps there is hope for him.

1.4. “But it was more and all this that put that gun in my hand”: Johnny 99

In “Johnny 99”, the titular character—whose name is actually Ralph³—finds himself sentenced to lifetime prison following his armed robbery attempt, which goes awry and ends in the death of a night clerk. In the first four stanzas, the events leading up to Johnny 99’s trial are narrated in the third person, while the last two stanzas are narrated in the first person from Johnny’s point of view during the trial—in a similar manner to the first-person narrator of “Nebraska”. The topics of poverty, unemployment, and crime are present in this song once more, similarly to “Atlantic City”.

As previously mentioned, Johnny’s imminent destitution is the central reason that explains his loss of agency. The story starts with Johnny losing his employment due to the historical 1980 closing down of the Ford Motors automobile plant in Mahwah, New Jersey (l. 1); following this dismissal, he is unable to find new employment. Echoing “Atlantic City”, Johnny later explains to the judge during the trial that he has “debts no honest man could pay” (l. 17) and that he was on the verge of losing his house (l. 18). Despite not being a cardinal element in the song, it is suggested that Johnny has turned to alcohol (l. 3) following his unemployment, and that it is perhaps alcohol which ultimately triggers his resorting to crime—although it is not the overarching reason behind his actions. The similarities between “Atlantic City” and “Johnny 99” pose the question of whether turning to crime is unavoidable for these characters when the system which they are a part of ultimately fails them and ostracizes them, eventually threatening their livelihood.

Additionally, seeing as we follow this character from the moment he becomes unemployed to the trial, we also get a glimpse of how Johnny handles the psychological and moral implications of having murdered someone. A second abyss emerges, as Johnny

³ For the sake of clarity, he will be referred to as “Johnny” throughout the analysis. There is something to be said, though, about the erasure of his name—he is ultimately even deprived of his own identity.

now has to deal with becoming an outlier of society on a second degree—the first being his ostracism as an impoverished man, the second being his deviancy as a murderer.

As mentioned previously, there is a dual response—not simultaneous but rather consecutive—to the situation in “Johnny 99” given the fact that there are two states in which the titular character finds himself, as the story develops. First, we get the desperation that takes form in an armed robbery that ultimately goes wrong in response to a condition of looming indigence; secondly, we find the character’s reckoning with the consequences resulting from his actions that meant to “solve” that first state.

As is the case with “Atlantic City”, Johnny takes matters into his own hands and takes action: a sort of last attempt to regain a semblance of agency—or at least, of procuring monetary stability; although it seems to be prompted by alcohol consumption, rather than the premeditated intention of the narrator of “Atlantic City”, it constitutes an active response nonetheless. Furthermore, we are made aware of how Johnny feels after the fact. While “Atlantic City” could serve as a portrait of how these characters feel before the commission of their respective crimes, “Johnny 99” can represent the *after*. Because we accompany the narrator in “Atlantic City” only previously to his actual involvement, we are only privy to his pre-emptive attempts to soothe his anxiety regarding his future actions. In “Johnny 99”, while the events leading up to the trial are narrated, Johnny’s thoughts prior to or during the armed robbery attempt are not disclosed to us, and we are only left with the subsequent turmoil felt after the fact—expressed once narration is relayed to Johnny’s first-person point of view in the last two stanzas. The “second” abyss in Johnny manifests itself in his losing his will to live due to his inability to cope with his actions: having been condemned to a lifetime in prison, Johnny asks the Judge to reconsider his sentence, and petitions to be sentenced to death (ll. 21-24), in an ending that could mirror that of the narrator in “Nebraska”.

That being said, despite the actions of Johnny being presented as a last-ditch effort to solve his situation and regain a sense of control, Johnny himself acknowledges the system that oppresses and discards its people, prompting them to commit certain acts that they would not have resorted to under different circumstances. Thus, Johnny declares that, while he recognizes that he is not an innocent man, “it was more and all this that put that gun in my hand” (l. 20).

1.5. “I catch him when he’s strayin’ like any brother would”: Highway Patrolman

“Highway Patrolman” is a song that differs slightly from those analyzed thus far. First, the first-person narrator in this song, Joe, is not what we would consider an “outcast” in society—being a police officer, he represents quite the opposite actually. Second, it is another character in the song—his brother Franky—who represents deviance, seems to suffer several hardships, and is burdened by a sense of “adriftness”; thus, the presence of the abyss is exceptionally narrated from a third person perspective in “Highway Patrolman” instead of being narrated in the first person, as has been the case in preceding songs.

There are several reasons why Joe is not the character who is submerged in a metaphorical abyss: chiefly, his clear set of principles, his family, and the fact that he holds a stable—and “respectable”—job. While Franky may represent a troubling force in his life, Joe’s resolve and sense duty to his kin are strong; even when faced with a possible moral conflict—family or the law—Joe remains not only untroubled but also confident in his actions. Therefore, there are several elements that tether Joe to reality and society, whereas Franky remains adrift throughout his life, with only his brother and sister-in-law Maria tying him to society now—and even then, these two people and their relationship may represent a point of discomfort for Franky.

Franky's struggles are, thus, more pronounced than his brother's: he has always been viewed as the "troublemaker" of the two, we can infer that he is a Vietnam War veteran (ll. 13-15), and he potentially has always had feelings for Maria, but she ultimately married Joe (l. 10, and l. 13). Franky is somebody who has perhaps been made to be the "outsider"—or the "bad one"—his whole life; in a way, he lives in, and is, his brother's shadow. All of this could engender in Franky a sense of inadequacy, which would explain his behaviour; nevertheless, because the song is narrated from Joe's point of view, we cannot be sure about Franky's actual thoughts or feelings.

In a way, Franky has been responding to this sense of inadequateness throughout his life, as it is explicitly stated that he has been "in trouble" since he and Joe were young (ll. 5-6). The culminating manifestation of his outsider status is, of course, the implied murder of a young man (l. 22), which leads him to actually leave town and escape to Canada. That being said, Joe does disregard certain societal norms—or rather laws—in favor of honoring a different set of societal norms—those that advocate the protection of one's family over everything else. Joe has no qualms about letting his brother escape—and it is done with a certain dignity—because he puts family before duty; this does not result in an internal conflict for him, and it almost comes across as noble, because the action is backed by his morals and appears to be grounded in his nature.

An interesting reading of this song is to interpret it as a sort of Cain and Abel retelling, in which the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" takes on a double meaning. For Joe, looking out for Franky—despite being done out of a clear sense of family duty—can eventually evolve into a sort of abyss if the task were to become more burdensome in the long run and feelings of resentment were to develop. This poses the following question: has Joe let Franky escape out of brotherly protection or has he done so in order to ultimately be rid of him—Franky's constant transgressions are not only troublesome in a

personal sense for Joe, but his job and family are also threatened by them. Perhaps, at the end of the day, Joe's decision to let Franky is a reconciliation of both of these two theories: he must let him go in order to spare him from the law and in doing so, he can also unburden himself from being his keeper—Joe watches him drive away, ultimately not catching him this time as he strays—, simultaneously performing his duty as a brother and turning his back on him from this moment onwards.

1.6. “Deliver me from nowhere”: State Trooper

“State Trooper” constitutes another unusual song in *Nebraska*, chiefly because it exists very nearly apart from the rest of the songs—with the exception of some clear echoes between it and “Open All Night”. He is unnamed—which is not necessarily uncommon in *Nebraska*—, and he has no familial or romantic relationships—except for an offhand mention of “my baby” (l. 9) that is probably a result of the parallel writing of “State Trooper” and “Open All Night” and can be disregarded here; the only “real” elements we can link to him are the New Jersey Turnpike and a vague post-industrial backdrop. The narrator emerges from the void, and we follow him for a brief interlude in the New Jersey Turnpike until he disappears into the void once more. Furthermore, there is no explicit mention of any sort of criminal act prior to the song's narration, and although there is a certain threatening air about him, there is no evidence of a premeditated crime to be committed either.

Because this character's background is so vague, there is little we can glean from the lyrics in order to posit a substantial theory as to why he seems so adrift. From Springsteen's other work, we could conjecture that this aloofness may be a product of post-industrial angst, the inherent alienation of individuals in the USA, and perhaps mental illness. The overarching theme in “State Trooper”, though, is the narrator's loneliness; it is possible that this isolation is a product of his pushing away others, of

certain misanthropic tendencies—he urges the state trooper not to stop him throughout the song, and in line 11 he complains of the incessant and perhaps hollow “talk, talk, talk, talk” of the radio shows. The narrator truly has no one, as is made explicit in the following lines: “Maybe you [state trooper] got a kid, maybe you got a pretty wife the only thing that I got’s been both’rin’ me my whole life” (l. 6). This last line in particular, could be a reference to mental illness, which is a subject that Springsteen has touched upon later in his career.

Exhibiting a kind of disconnect from everyone around him, this character seems to share some characteristics with the narrator of “Nebraska”—perhaps even displaying some tendencies that lean towards the psychopathic. Having said that, the narrator in “Nebraska” responds to this abstraction from his surroundings by going on a killing spree, gaining some sense of control over his life through this assertion of free will. Similarly, in “State Trooper”, there is an underlying tension palpable throughout the lyrics of the song, and the narrator’s words can be read as vaguely threatening towards the state trooper—a figure of authority. That being said, while a sense of danger does permeate the song, it becomes quite apparent towards the end of the song that while the narrator may be a danger to others to a very mild degree—perhaps due to an episode of psychosis—, it is more than likely that he is a danger to himself. Towards the end of the song, it is suggested that the narrator’s ultimate act of free will—a regaining of his agency—is suicide, as opposed to the killing spree in “Nebraska”; this is conveyed in his request to “somebody out there, [to] listen to [his] last prayer” (l. 13), as well as his prayer to be delivered from nowhere (l. 14)—to be freed of this abyss, this void. Therefore, when he asks “Mister state trooper, please don’t stop me” repeatedly throughout the song, do we hear a threat or a final plea?

1.7. “I ain’t ever gonna ride in no used car again”: Used Cars

In “Used Cars”, Springsteen returns once more to the subject of poverty—and the feelings of inadequacy engendered by it—and family. Narrated in the first person from a child’s point of view, the song does not “return to the present” as is the case in “Mansion on the Hill”; because of this, the narration remains within the realms of memories and does not betray what the grown-up narrator has grown up to be like, and whether his childhood beliefs still remain or continue to shape him. In it, the narrator describes a childhood memory, recalling the time his family purchased a second-hand car.

The central theme of “Used Cars” is quite straightforward: similar to “Mansion on the Hill”, it is the shame one is made to feel when he—or his family—is not wealthy. The signifiers of poverty in this song are, chiefly, the purchase of a used car rather than a new one, as well as the family’s inability to actually pay for the car, resulting in the narrator’s mother pawning off—or exchanging—her wedding ring for it. Furthermore, there is an aspiration of wealth from the child narrator: a conviction that he will one day win the lottery (l. 8) and because of this, will not have to resort to second-hand cars ever again. Additionally, there is a sense in the lyrics that his parents’ sacrifices—his father works all day (l. 12), and his mother has given up her wedding ring (l. 4)—are still not enough for their situation: they remain poor, and the child-narrator still feels a certain shame with regard to their poverty, which can come across as a rejection of the working class and his surroundings.

That being said, it could be argued that this shame that the narrator feels does not emerge from within himself, but that it is something he has been made to feel by society. As opposed to “Mansion on the Hill”, there is no indication that suggests that this aspiration of wealth or shame is an inherited trait from his parents—both of whom, from a reader’s perspective, appear dignified; the narrator simply feels as if the neighborhood

will judge them for their used car, as suggested in lines 9-11. Additionally, because the story stays within the past and within the child's point of view, there is no way to know whether this shame and aversion to poverty is still present in the narrator once he has grown up. There is definitely a willingness, or at least the desire, in the child to obtain wealth in the future, but it remains a mystery since the narration does not extend to adulthood.

Nonetheless, we can take "Used Cars" and use it to enrich the analysis of "Mansion on the Hill": converging these two experiences as one, it can be conjectured that they share a common narrator who has always felt lesser than since childhood because of his economic status. In this case, we know that the desire for wealth expressed by the child-narrator in "Used Cars" has not been fulfilled in "Mansion on the Hill"; perhaps, the narrator has even evolved past these desires and seeks something more substantial.

1.8. "Lost souls calling long distance salvation": Open All Night

As mentioned in the analysis of "State Trooper", there are certain parallels between the aforementioned song and "Open All Night", mainly due to one particular stanza present in both songs that is almost identical save for a few changes. Other than that, this song follows a young man as he makes his way to work and then returns to his partner's home after his night shift, driving down the New Jersey Turnpike and contemplating his discontent regarding his work hours and the loneliness felt on the journey against an industrial backdrop. An initial reading of the lyrics conveys an optimism in this song that is quite unusual, given the bleak nature of *Nebraska* as a whole.

The opening negative elements inconveniencing the narrator of "Open All Night" seem to revolve around his deep dissatisfaction with his work schedule and location: he works the night shift because his boss does not like him (l. 8), and it takes him too long

to get back to his partner's house from work (l. 9). Despite there being no reference suggesting this, there is something to be said about the fact that the narrator decides to continue to work this job despite his discontent with it, perhaps not out of his own volition but rather out of necessity. Additionally, the character seems to be in a constant state of haste, almost as if he feels he is running out of time—this constant obsession with time and covering ground may be related to the fact that the narrator perhaps works in the taxi or truck industry, as can be inferred from the lyrics. As a foil to the “State Trooper” narrator, the character in “Open All Night” does have a partner, Wanda, and is quite eager to reunite with her—far from the desperately lonely narrator from “State Trooper”. That being said, there are several instances in which he speaks of loneliness (l. 6), as well as two stanzas (3 and 6) that mirror one of the stanzas in “State Trooper”, hinting perhaps at an underlying issue which the narrator does not address or is currently unaware of.

As mentioned previously, another reading of “Open All Night” suggests that the narrators from “State Trooper” and “Open All Night” are the same person, who simply exists and narrates from different points in his life—not necessarily in the chronological order suggested by the songs’ placements in the album. This reading could provide a background for the narrator in “State Trooper”—a deeply dissatisfied working man—and solve the mystery of who “baby” is in that song—Wanda, with whom he might not be together anymore. This interpretation is supported by the lines that appear unchanged in both songs, such as “won’t you hear my last prayer” and “deliver me from nowhere”, which, in “Open All Night”, could pre-emptively be interpreted positively, as he does have a destination—his girlfriend’s house; but if we take them to be the same narrator, we know that this will not always be true, or perhaps has not always been so, depending on the chronological order one attributes to the songs.

A third reading of these two songs, which will not be explored in depth, could be that this is a portrayal of shifting moods caused either by a lack of proper sleep, a psychotic episode, or as the result of the anxiety caused by his job—with “Open All Night” portraying a manic state, and “State Trooper” depicting a depressive one. This interpretation may be supported by Stonerook’s reading of the lyrics, in which he posits that “Springsteen hints the character’s work-life leaves him unsteady” (64). With regard to the anxiety and isolation conveyed in the lyrics—which can be mistakenly identified as ambition and earnestness—, Stonerook explains that the narrator’s state of mind may also stem from fear of economic insecurity in the face of possibly losing his job should he fail to fulfill his duties (64), adding that “his fear seems rooted in the nature of his work, which pulls him into an impersonal otherworld where he must fend for himself while simultaneously drawing him away from the company of his girlfriend and the comforts of home” (65). Additionally, this interpretation can consider both songs almost simultaneously, or as existing in a close period of time from each other—not as spaced out in time as could be suggested by our second reading—, caused by a shift in mood that could have fluctuated from one day to another.

1.9. “Where our sins lie unatoned”: My Father’s House

Returning to the theme of family, “My Father’s House” focuses on a father-son relationship that has suffered some sort of communication breakdown that is now unbridgeable. There are hints throughout the song that connote a certain emotional poverty in the household. The issues deeply embedded into this relationship—having probably originated during the narrator’s childhood—remain unresolved, evidenced by the impotence felt by the narrator and his cyclical return to the childhood home both in dreams and in real life.

From the lyrics, we get a sense that this unbridgeable distance, “the hard things that pulled us apart” (l. 9), between father and son stems from a lack of communication—or an inability to properly communicate—and perhaps a lack of mutual understanding as well. Within the dream, the narrator finds himself in a forest at dusk, attempting to return to his childhood home—standing hard and bright in the distance—and once he falls into his father’s arms, he wakes up. The fact that the narrator dreams that he is a child once more also suggests that the origins of this trauma or fractured relationship lie in childhood and the childhood home. Overall, the imagery used in the dream sequence—“the darkness” (l. 2), “ghostly voices” (l. 3), “that broken path” (l. 4)—heavily implies that the narrator’s childhood home was perhaps deprived of affection and quite empty. Additionally, there are also a couple of references to Catholic imagery, both appearing in quite a negative light—“the devil” in l. 5, and “sins [that] lie unatoned” in l. 17; this may further complicate the narrator’s childhood environment, since the narrator’s relationship with faith does not appear to be the healthiest and seems to be founded upon fear and absence rather than plenitude and comfort. That being said, one can confidently say that there is definitely something amiss with the narrator’s childhood, and this is further exemplified by his compulsive return to the childhood home once he awakens from his dream.

As previously mentioned, “My Father’s House” illustrates an inability to actually address certain issues that originated in childhood—as is the case with the narrators’ unhealthy relationship with wealth in “Mansion on the Hill” and “Used Cars”. Although we cannot be completely certain as for why the narrator and the father cannot ultimately solve their issues and bridge their distance—has the father passed away? Is their relationship far too strained and beyond repair?—what is portrayed in the lyrics is the narrator’s coping mechanisms in the face of this unresolved matter. Once more, the

narrator is rendered to a child-like state due to his impotence, as happens in “Mansion on the Hill”. A constant and compulsive return to the childhood home, both in dreams and reality—which is a behaviour that Springsteen himself actually partook in—represents this unfulfilled and unattainable desire to mend the past, similar to the narrator of “Mansion on the Hill” and the father’s return to the mansion representing a desire for wealth.

An unwillingness to talk about this trauma as well as the actual difficulty of revisiting the past and this complicated relationship is conveyed through the child narrator’s dream sequence in which “the branches and brambles [tear his] clothes and [scratch his] arms” (l. 7). Presented as an unmendable past, the narrator still desperately needs some sort of resolution at his very core, and thus, he compulsively returns to the physical site of his childhood in order to perhaps understand or unilaterally attempt to mend whatever transpired between himself and his father—a past that may now be beyond remedying.

1.10. “At the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe”:

Reason to Believe

In “Reason to Believe”, a first-person narrator observes several unfortunate scenes from a distance, and comments on people’s perseverance in the face of adversity. Adopting an extremely nihilistic—if not pessimistic—posture, the narrator ironically praises this persistence and ultimately seems to mock it, highlighting the thin line between hope and delusion. Once more, this song seems to stand apart from the rest of the songs in the album given its content, and it serves as the album’s bleak conclusion.

The song is structured in a series of vignettes, each narrated by the same first-person narrator who is not directly involved in any of them and stands merely as an onlooker. In each vignette, we are presented with one or two situations the circumstances

of which could clearly lead to someone's undoing. The first stanza depicts a man who has run over a dog and, not knowing how to proceed, stands over it as if expecting it to eventually get up and run. The second stanza, in a similar manner to the fourth one—in which a groom is abandoned by his bride on their wedding day—a woman named Mary Lou is abandoned by her partner Johnny. The third stanza depicts the fragile and fleeting nature of life, as well as its absurdity; furthermore, it almost seems to ridicule the innocuous yet banal rituals of the Church, which ultimately become meaningless in the face of death.

Of course, at first glance the lyrics can be read as a eulogy of humanity's persistence in the face of adversity, but the circumstances of the first vignette—which come across as satirical—seem to point at an ironic interpretation. As opposed to the people he observes, the narrator—of whom we know nothing—has adopted an outlook in life of absolute nihilism, or perhaps even pessimism. Thus, he finds that these people's hope is absurd, as expressed by the repeating lines “Struck me kinda funny [...] / How at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe”. Therefore, in the narrator's eyes, there is a thin line between hope and delusion, and he seems to believe that people simply delude themselves into finding false reasons to believe in so as to be able to carry on with their lives.

2. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I believe I have been able to highlight the presence of the abyss at the heart of Springsteen's 1982 album *Nebraska*. This has been attained through a close reading of the lyrics of the album, and an examination of the different forms the abyss can take, its origins, and its effects on an assortment of characters. Manifesting in different ways in each song, the abyss finds its birth in the systems and circumstances that lie beyond one's control. Said abyss results in the isolation, poverty, loss of agency, and the overall disillusionment with life these characters experience. Each one responds to their circumstances as well as they can, and Springsteen's masterfulness lies in his ability to imbue these characters with due humanity so that the reader will view them with the empathy and graciousness they inherently deserve as fellow human beings. Springsteen's treatment of his characters, thus, is commendable. In dealing with characters who could be, and actually are, often tossed away by society—because they already live on the outskirts, because they are seen and treated as *lesser* by the system—Springsteen makes a significant effort to give them a voice and portray them with the dignity they deserve. As Ventimiglia postulates in his chapter in *Bruce Springsteen and Philosophy: Darkness on the Edge of Truth*, “[w]hile none of these men is cast as an innocent or a victim or a hero, Bruce seems to suggest that anyone in a similar position could do the same as they have done. Yes, free will accounts for some evil, but freedom, in practice, is often compromised” (ch. 14).

As a dissection of the power structures in post-industrial America and their effects on its people, Springsteen characterizes the way in which the outliers in these systems resort to less than savory actions in some cases, or become stuck in self-destructive cycles in others. Nevertheless, Springsteen's refusal to reproach or reject these characters and

their actions in his depiction of them is what makes his work laudable; in the face of an unchangeable and often unforgiving system, one can choose to look kindly upon others, especially those abused by this system. Springsteen, thus, looks upon the abyss, undaunted, and seeks to understand it and its inhabitants, embracing them with grace and acceptance.

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Appendix

1. Nebraska

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

From the town of Lincoln Nebraska with a sawed off .410 on my lap
Through to 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

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

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

2. Atlantic City

Well they blew up the chicken man in Philly last night now they blew up his house too
Down on the boardwalk they're gettin' 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

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

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

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

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
Well I guess everything dies baby that's a fact
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back
Put your hair up nice and set up pretty
and meet me tonight in Atlantic City
Meet me tonight in Atlantic City
Meet me tonight in Atlantic City

3. Mansion on the Hill

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

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
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 full moon rising above the mansion on the hill

4. Johnny 99

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 when you hit a red light you don't stop
Johnny's wavin' 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

Well the city supplied a public defender but the judge was Mean John Brown
He came into the courtroom 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

Now judge judge I had debts no honest man could pay
The bank was holdin' my mortgage and 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

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

5. Highway Patrolman

My name is Joe Roberts I work for the state
I'm a sergeant out of Perrineville barracks number 8
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

Me and Franky laughin' and drinkin' nothin' feels better than blood on blood
Takin' turns dancin' 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

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 gettin' robbed
Franky came home in '68, and me, I took this job

Yea we're laughin' and drinkin' nothin' feels better than blood on blood
Takin' turns dancin' with Maria as the band played "Night of the Johnstown Flood"
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

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

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

Me and Franky laughin' and drinkin'
Nothin' feels better than blood on blood
Takin' turns dancin' 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

6. State Trooper

New Jersey Turnpike ridin' 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

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

In the wee wee hours your mind gets hazy, radio relay towers lead me to my baby
Radio's jammed up with talk show stations

It's just talk, talk, talk, talk, till you lose your patience
Mister state trooper, please don't stop me

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

7. Used Cars

My little sister's in the front seat with an ice cream cone
My ma's in the back seat sittin' 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 tellin' us all 'bout the break he'd give us if he could, but he just can't
Well if I could, I swear I know just what I'd do

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

Now, the neighbors 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 'em all they can kiss our asses goodbye

My dad, he sweats the same job from mornin' 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 blowin' that horn
The sounds echoin' all down Michigan Avenue

Now, mister, the day my numbers comes in I ain't ever gonna ride in no used car again

8. Open All Night

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

Early north Jersey industrial skyline I'm a 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

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

I met Wanda when she was employed behind the counter at route 60 Bob'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

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' on 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, woncha hear my last prayer hey, ho, rock'n'roll, deliver me from nowhere

9. My Father's House

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

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"

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

10. Reason to Believe

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

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 that
She waits down at the end of that dirt road for young Johnny to come back
Struck me kinda funny seemed kind of funny sir to me
How at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe

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

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