**On the Distance Between the American Dream and American Reality**

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**A BA Thesis on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*,**

**A Bruce Springsteen Album**

**Written by Niels Tacoma**

**3686531**

**Supervisor:**

**Roselinde Supheert**

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“When the truth is spoken,

And it makes no difference,

Something in your heart goes cold”

(“The Promise”, Bruce Springsteen)

(Almost made the album)

“I write carefully, precisely, and I believe clearly, and then you put it out there. People hear it, and then it is up to them. If you are missing it you are not thinking hard enough, you got to take a second look”

(*Wreaking Ball*, 00:22)

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# Preface

Even though it is not quite decorum to start a thesis with a confession I would like to do so: I love the work of Bruce Springsteen. It might not come as a surprise to the reader, as indeed this is a thesis with a Springsteen album as its main focus, namely *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (henceforward to be abbreviated to *Darkness*). To me he is in the list of heroes, together with John Donne and Rudyard Kipling. These cannonised writers need to be pondered and reread as often as possible because they add beauty to the English language through their characteristic use of that language.

As I am being honest now, I set out to investigate the theme of Escapism on *Darkness*. Boy was I wrong. Nobody seems to get away in this album; there is no character that does not have to face the facts. As Max Weinberg, the E-Street drummer states on the contrast between *Born to Run* and *Darkness*: “on *Born to Run* you had these characters saying ‘Baby we are born to run; we are going to get out.’ But in the ensuing three years between *Born to Run* and *Darkness* it was made painfully clear that you can’t just run away” (*The Promise*, 00:22). When I really started listening well, when I started reading the, it became clear that Weinberg was right.

This thesis has been a neat challenge, and a wonderful finish to my BA. It has challenged the way I write as well as my skills of procrastination. There really is a good argument to for control over one’s productivity. This thesis has allowed me to target an unusual set of texts for literary analysis. I have thought about songs that are almost overfamiliar, and discovered new nuances and connections. It is also good to dedicate this thesis to family, for which I am very thankful. This has been very enjoyable process – it has been interesting to take the path less travelled by.

Niels Tacoma

Utrecht, 18-6-2014

# Introduction

This thesis concerns itself with reading and analysing *Darkness on the Edge of Town,* the Rock ‘n Roll album by Bruce Springsteen from 1978. As an album *Darkness* has been an undisputed classic and marks a noteworthy transition in Springsteen’s work. Dave Marsh, in the original review for *Rolling Stone* Magazine simply states: “*Darkness on the Edge of Town*, is nothing less than a breakthrough” (61), to which the magazine added in 1987: “for Bruce Springsteen, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, was a pivotal album: on it he put aside both the multi-layered sound and mythical cityscapes of its predecessor, *Born to Run* [1975], and shortened his songs and toughened his outlook” (277).

Since then Springsteen has been well established as a Rock ‘n Roll standard, selling 120,000,000 albums. He has won twenty Grammy awards, sports a pair of Golden Globes and won an Academy Award.[[1]](#footnote-1) He himself, his band, and a number of his songs are included in the Rock ‘n Roll Hall of Fame, inductees of which are introduced by their peers.

Despite these successes Springsteen has never really shed the image of the blue-collar, fully American son of the nation, who happened to stumble on a talent for writing and music, and consequently exercises that talent between long hours of hard labour in a factory or on the land. This image is one of the reason Springsteen enjoys widespread popularity among Americans. Springsteen combines charisma with a sharp pen, and is compared by critics, such as Greg Smith and Jessica Duckworth, with Whitman and Steinbeck. His characters, in turn, may remind the reader of the characters seen in paintings of Edward Hopper. Springsteen’s popular image may be understood as an American Robin Hood, a man of the people who shares his success through charity and draws attention to social injustice in his writing, and consequently he is held in high regard.

There are a fair number of scholars who have considered Springsteen’s work, using it to support research in a number of fields. Thom Zimmy created a documentary called *The Promise, Making of Darkness on the Edge of Town*. In this documentary Zimmy focuses specifically on the production process, with some attention to its history, and combines this with interviews, commenting on the character of the album and particular songs. Eric Alterman’s book *It Ain’t No Sin To Be Glad You’re Alive*, focuses on the relation between Springsteen’s work and his personal development. Symunkuwicz, with *The Gospel According To Bruce Springsteen,* and Coles’ *Bruce Springsteen’s America* try to uncover the direct connection between Springsteen’s work and his cultural heritage. Then there is the book from *Rolling Stone*, in which the magazine’s editors have collected their articles on Springsteen, and of course there is Dave Marsh’s *Glory Days,* the Springsteen textbook. Marsh’s work combines biographical information and surveys of Springsteen’s stage performance, songs, recording methods and reception.

All these critics agree that *Darkness* is a pivotal album and they offer a moderate range of opinions on the lyrics. What they have not done, however, is to focus their attention on the lyrics. *Darkness* as an album is characterised in most of these works as being dark and pessimistic, it seems, though, that this stigma is fuelled most prominently by the album’s stark contrast to Springsteen’s much more upbeat preceding albums. This stigmatisation may serve a purpose in the larger picture of a biography or in an overview of Springsteen’s discography, but a more detailed look has rarely been given to the album, simply for the album’s sake. *Born to Run* consists of eight songs. Out of the nine songs written for it only one was omitted from the final selection. For the *Darkness* album seventy songs were written, recorded and perfected, of which only ten made the album. After discussing Springsteen’s rigorous writing and selection process, Steve van Zandt, Springsteen’s lead guitarist, explained: “the album was made up out of songs that had an emotional thread, not a collection of what the artist would think was going to play well on the radio” (*The Promise*, 00:39). In other words: there are two certainties: the first is that what is on the album has been placed there consciously and the second is that the songs presented are a whole as they have something in common. Too little attention has been given in scholarly pieces to the effect of the choices Springsteen makes when it concerns his formation process.

Keeping this hiatus in mind this paper will investigate the following: how does Springsteen fit into the larger picture of American writing and art, and in what manner does Springsteen shape *Darkness on the Edge of* *Town’*s thematic landscape? The correlation between these two questions is significant as Springsteen’s place in the American Literary Canon is closely related not only to his skill and American identity, but also closely linked to his subject matter. This thesis should create to an understanding of what Springsteen’s words signify and how that significance is rooted in a larger American tradition of similar thematical explorations. To be more precise, Springsteen should be taken seriously as heir to an American tradition of defining the relation between the American Dream and the American people.

In chapter one, insight is given into Springsteen’s personal background, focussing on the three year interval between *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* to explain such a strong shift in Springsteen’s writing. The second half of chapter observes Springsteen’s relation with the American literary tradition of defining and probing the American Dream, specifically by aligning him with writer John Steinbeck, poet Walt Whitman and painter Edward Hopper as examples of that tradition. The second chapter is divided in three sub-chapters, close reading and interpreting Springsteen’s lyrics, divided thematically.

This thesis is about dissecting *Darkness* as if it were a concise volume of poetry. Springsteen stated: “I stripped the album back to its barest and most austere form- I decided I wanted something like a tone poem, I did not want any distraction from the narrative that I was telling (*The Promise*, 1:11). I intend to take that one step further, and look at the texts of the songs without the music to accompany it.

# 1. Americana

Springsteen’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* album, and his writing of it, may become more clear with a basic understanding of his personal background. Therefore a short discussion will follow of three core influences on both Springsteen’s private life and the theme’s on this album. There is no underlying assumption that there is a direct autobiographical system at work here, but there are a number of broader themes present on the album which happen to be present in Springsteen’s own experience, and may have influenced him while writing.

## 1.1 American Problems

Bruce Frederick Joseph Springsteen was born on September 23, 1949 in Longbranch New Jersey. His father, Doug, had Irish and Dutch ancestry and his mother came from an Italian line. Raised as a Catholic, Springsteen attended a Catholic school supervised by nuns, which was a source of conflict in his early life. The strict order and hierarchy found within primary and high schools at the time, the fifties and sixties, did not agree with the young Springsteen very well. At the age of seven Springsteen saw Elvis on the Ed Sullivan show in 1956, and at age of thirteen his mother, Adele, bought him an eighteen dollar guitar (Marsh 36). Later Springsteen would write the song “No Surrender” for the album *Born in the USA* (1984), in which the narrator states: “we learned more from a three minute record than we ever learned in school” (2). Which leads to the inevitable conundrum: was it a very good song, or a very bad school? At the age of eighteen Springsteen received his draft notice, but failed the medical examination, avoiding military service during the Vietnam War. Springsteen played in a number of (garage) bands, which eventually led to him being noticed and signed at Columbia Records in 1972. Six years and three albums later, aged twenty eight Springsteen would write *Darkness on the Edge of Town.*

One strong influence of Springsteen’s character and writing was the relationship with his struggling father, Doug. During Springsteen’s concerts in the late Seventies, Doug Springsteen is a common figure in the stories Springsteen would tell between songs. Doug had been the less productive parent. Both of Springsteen’s parents worked, his mother as a legal secretary, but his father had trouble holding on to jobs (Marsh 86). Marsh, one of Springsteen’s key biographers states: “there was little room for luxury, especially since Doug’s work was often unsteady” (86). The Springsteen family, having a fair bit of struggle for economic stability, missed out on the main spurt of economic growth which was widely enjoyed in the post war years. Springsteen said of his father during an interview: “my father worked a lot of jobs that take everything from you and give nothing back . . . some people get a chance to change the world, and other people, they get the chance to make sure the world don’t fall apart” (Marsh 87). Doug Springsteen had great difficulty to find work – Springsteen recalled; “my father struggled to find work, I saw that that was deeply painful; it created a crisis of masculinity . . . lack of work creates a loss of self ” (*Wrecking Ball*, 00:01). Doug Springsteen’s ability to establish a sense self-actualisation trough his labour was well below par during Springsteen’s adolescence, which had its effect on the family’s atmosphere. It certainly seems to be reflected in the lyrics. Doug Springsteen’s inability to find employment was part of a larger problem. Marsh states:

*Darkness on the Edge of Town* is the first album in which he [Springsteen] began to assess the living shambles around him . . . as the seventies wore on more and more men of bright hopes and good intentions were discarded or destroyed, it became obvious that the tragedy of lives such as Doug Springsteen’s were not the result if individual failure at all (8)

The portrayal of the errors in society, as well as his personal experience with an unsuccessful father had their effect on Springsteen’s writing. Springsteen stated in a later interview: “my father sat there every night for, I guess, eighteen years, and I never once asked him what he was thinking about, what was on his mind. I always felt that he was cutting me short, and I guess in a lot of ways I was cutting him short; ‘cause I thought he didn’t dream no more, and I was real wrong about that” (Marsh 88). This statement shows Bruce Springsteen understands of the importance of dreams. By working for his dreams he realised artistic and economic success leading to upward mobility, in other words Bruce Springsteen realised his American Dream. However, he also understood the devastating effect of having dreams but not being in a position to pursue those dreams.

Next to the long term influence of Springsteen senior on Springsteen junior, there were two events which had a more direct effect: “there were two clouds that hung over the writing and the recording of the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* Album – one was just the success that we had had . . . and the other was just the lawsuit that I ended up in with Mike” (*The Promise*, 00:09). The lawsuit between Mike Appel and Burce Springsteen had a severe impact when it came to Springsteen’s trust in people:

On July 27, 1976, Springsteen fired Appel and sued him in federal court in Manhattan for fraud and undue influence. Two days later Appel countersued in New York State Supreme Court . . . Springsteen was barred from making his next record with his chosen producer. Rather than let Appel dictate the terms, he decided not to record until the lawsuit was settled. (Alterman 85, 86)

The core argument is familiar in rock and pop history: the strong wish of an inexperienced artist to get signed at a recording label, produce work and start a career in music in juxtaposition with the omnipotent record company. Springsteen “had no idea, for example, what publishing rights were when he gave them to Appel” (Alterman 87). After the release of a successful album, *Born to Run* (1975), Springsteen was introduced to people who were less focused on financial gain, and prepared to allow him more artistic freedom. Springsteen later stated in an interview: “The lawsuit was not about money, it was about control: who was going to be in control of my work and my work life. Early on I decided that that was going to be me” (*The Promise*, 00:13). Appel was much less selective in venues than Springsteen; he tried to book Springsteen in circus tents and strip clubs. Springsteen was asked in court why “he had not been more cooperative to Appel’s money making schemes, a line of questioning that did not appeal to the artist: ‘I can make twenty bucks for dropping my pants on Broadway, too, but I don’t do it’” (Alterman 87). This epitomises the classical strife between the artist concerned with artistic pursuit and the agent concerned with converting that pursuit into money. The influence of Appel on Springsteen’s early career was large, returning in almost all areas of Springsteen’s work. The understanding that this Appel then became limiting to Springsteen’s development, and could not be parted from without legal interference had a severe impact on the artist. On top of the came the claim of ownership regarding his songs, the fruit of early years of song writing and the inability to record in freedom. The impact of that disappointment in Appel on an inexperienced songwriter at the start of his career was serious. The change of manager allowed for a novel approach on Springsteen’s following album: *Darkness on the Edge of Town*.

Paradoxically, another shadow over *Darkness’* genesis was the incredible success that Springsteen encountered with his previous album *Born to Run* and the accompanying tour:

The success we had with Born to Run made me ask – what is that all about, what does that mean for me? The success brought me an audience, it also separated me from all the things that I had been trying to hold on too . . . it frightened me to move away from those things, my roots, to freedom as pure licence to go about my life as I desire, without connection, that’s where a lot of the people I admired drifted away from the essential things that made them great. And more than rich, and more than famous, and more than happy I wanted to be great. (*The Promise*, 00:07)

These words may well hold a key to Springsteen’s popular image. For his writing Springsteen depends on the themes and experiences of common, everyday American life. Even though he recognises the opportunities that success brings, he also realises that it enlarges the distance between himself and normal life, his main subject matter. Springsteen’s fame was significant, to the point where he was on the covers of *TIME* and *Newsweek*, for the same week in October 1975. There was a regular Springsteen Mania, which was fed by the record company and Appel for the sake of further advancement. Jon Landau, one of the key editors for *Rolling Stone* at the time, wrote after a show: “I saw my rock and roll past flash before my eyes. And I saw something else: I saw rock and roll future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen” (Marsh 89). This particular statement was part of a two thousand word article, written by Landau after returning from a Springsteen concert, meant as a compliment to good performance. The music business, however, was not pleased with it, and (possibly feeling threatened or insulted) started a discussion which was strangely disconnected from Springsteen’s actual music. It would lead to a process of identifying his roots and learning to work in the isolation that popularity brings. Springsteen had doubts about the logic of continuation as the course of his success was different than he had planned. Springsteen had no objections to riches and fame, but he believed that artistic greatness would ultimately lead to happiness, yet his newfound success created a gap between himself and his subject matter: ordinary American life and the people living it. Springsteen was also under threat of staying the one-hit-wonder he was initially perceived to be, which meant that there was a lot of pressure on the album after *Born to Run*, which would have to prove that it was not an accidental hit. The relation between the pressures of this new, large audience was the other shadow over the *Darkness* Album. It did, however, bring him the opportunity to be heard.

## 1.2 Roots in American Writing and Edward Hopper

In his late twenties Springsteen started to develop a broad interest which ranged into the folk tradition, classic American films, (American) literature and art. With his rise to success came an expanding horizon, and a novel ability to interact with the canonised names of American (popular) culture in a culturally significant manner. Mirroring Springsteen’s eye for American culture, critics, as the observers of that culture, have started to survey the influence of American literature and art on Springsteen. Out of the numerous connections that they have found three stand out: John Steinbeck, the novelist, Walt Whitman, the poet, and, relatively new in the discussion, the painter Edward Hopper.

### 1.2.1 Steinbeck

Springsteen’s connection with Steinbeck lies in at least two areas: in the actual form of writing and in the strong sense of social awareness that is reflected in their subject matter. Springsteen’s connection with John Steinbeck dates back to around the time when Springsteen was introduced to John Landau, his post-Appel manager, in the period that produced *Darkness*: “Landau taught Springsteen the basics of the recording industry, but more importantly became his intellectual mentor, encouraging him to read Steinbeck and Flannery O’Connor” (Garman 74). Gutterman indirectly quotes Springsteen stating: “since *Darkness on the edge of Town*, whose ‘Adam Raided a Cain’ bore a resemblance to Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, he was attracted to Steinbeck’s characters and stories” (204). Steinbeck’s strong interest and concern for the underprivileged and less accomplished of society leads the echoes of their voices to reverberate widely in his work. Similarly in Springsteen there is ample room for the voice of less accomplished and underprivileged America. Springsteen, like Steinbeck, often prefers to use narratives linked to real life experience in which he detected something to be wrong, in a manner related to the protest song. Contrary to the genre though Springsteen is much less direct, bringing to light what he perceives to be injustice but preferring that his audience form its own opinion on the matter. In this manner he shows scenes from American communities to larger audiences, breaching boundaries of class and economic states and ethnicity trough his fame, lyrics and music. One of the way in which he does that, following Steinbeck’s example is trough language. Steinbeck is not afraid to bring unpolished language into literature, and neither is Springsteen, even though it comes more natural to his genre. In *Darkness* Springsteen incorporated the vernacular use of American English, at times at the expense of correct grammar, leading to a smaller gap between reality and the written word. Steinbeck and Springsteen are not unique in this practice, but they do have it in common. More important though, it may be interpreted as an effort to stay close to the common, working-class people who form their inspiration.

Consequently from both writers may be accredited as lookouts for social injustice: “like Steinbeck, Springsteen is a writer with a social conscience, and like Steinbeck’s Tom Joad, Springsteen’s down-and-out characters evolve from being self-reflective and self-absorbed to being socially conscious” (159 Cologne-Brookes). A clear example is found in the song “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, an invocation of one of the main characters from Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Springsteen allows his version of Joad to correspond with his original appearance in Steinbeck – and with the John Ford version[[2]](#footnote-2): “Wherever somebody's struggling to be free / Look in their eyes, Ma, and you'll see me” (*Ghost of Tom Joad*, 1995). This sentence is the heart of the development of Joad in *Grapes of Wrath*, who, after being released from prison at the start of the story goes through a series of events which lead him to develop a sense of moral right and wrong. At the end of the plot Joad actively pursues social reform. Less explicitly than in “The Ghost of Tom Joad” the lyrics on *Darkness* evoke characters who struggle with that same process of growth, but seem to be much less successful in their approach. The awareness of social injustice can be found, for instance, in “Factory” in which the struggle between the drive to survive and the physical price of earning a source of sustenance is central. It’s a key song in which Springsteen grapples with the concepts of labour, personal development and a hopeless future, very much in line with Steinbeck.

It is this form of political awareness, the search for what is somehow right that drives Springsteen in his performance and his writing. Just as the sense of right, there is also the sense of freedom on the choice of labour that is also perceived to be quintessentially American value.

### 1.2.2 Whitman

There is a case to be made also for a parallel between Walt Whitman and Bruce Springsteen. In the first place, they were both from New Jersey, and both came from a difficult background, but they are also driven by a similar objective. Both Whitman and Springsteen are concerned with being a poet rooted in American reality, of all American people without exception.

Whitman, in his poem *Native Moments*, states in lines 11 and 12: “O you shunn’d persons [Sic], I at least do not shun you, / I come forthwith in your midst—I will be your poet”. In other words, Whitman pledges his efforts as a poet to the fate of the American outcast, the one to whom the American dream will not adhere. He has an eye for the people that are usually avoided. Equally so, “Springsteen is … the working-class poet supreme laying out in uncompromising terms and detail the shattered lives and broken countenances that make up the dark side of American existence as it is experienced by working people for whom the American Dream is a taunting, cruel, and ungraspable attraction” (Smith 303). Reality in Springsteen’s texts may also be interpreted as less harsh than Smith argues – but Springsteen, as the people’s poet himself, functions as a watchman figure, pledging himself, to a sense of (social) justice which is also found in the words (and works) of Whitman. As Smith states: “it is the familiar notion of the American Dream (so much like Whitman’s future visions) with its promise of prosperity, equality, and mobility for all, which haunts the working people who populate Springsteen’s music” (306). They are two realistic writers, both trying to make a difference by addressing problems. As Springsteen states: “my work has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream; how far is that at any given moment?” (*The Wrecking Ball*, 00:04). Whitman makes a similar declaration, but adds a theme that is strongly present in *Darkness*:

**I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States.  But woe to the age and land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas.  As fuel to flame, and flame to the heavens, so must wealth, science, materialism – even this democracy of which we make so much – unerringly feed the highest mind, the soul** (Whitman 418)

In other words, there is such a thing as a tangible democratic American ideal or dream, which even in Whitman’s times was under threat by an expanding emphasis on materialism. Whitman warns for a nation that is materialistically rich but idealistically poor. What Whitman argues is that the most precious asset of a nation is not found in materialistic wealth but in people. He goes a step further, stating that any system’s interests (even the ideal of democracy) should always submit to the human soul. In Whitman’s context this can be read in the context of the Civil War in which the American people, Northerners and Southerners alike, paid a high price for the privilege of exercising unrestricted democratic freedom. Even though Whitman might not have stated it, his theory seems to indicate that he found the damage to the (bodies and) souls of the Americans a high price for the merit it brought. Whitman should not be judged on his approving or disapproving the Civil War, what should be noted instead is the manner in which he understood and was concerned with the impact the war had on American people. In *Darkness* Springsteen continues this line of approach: he is primarily focused on the narrator’s as individuals. He shows them grappling repeatedly with the restriction or complete loss of freedom in the service of others, systems and relationships: “whether knowingly or not, [Springsteen] has effectively continued the conversation on class politics and democracy that Walt Whitman begun; his songs explore the same themes of freedom and equality for everyone, the nobility of labour and the importance of brotherhood” (Duckworth).

### 1.2.3. Hopper

A third icon, but much less noted for his artistic relation of Springsteen, is Edward Hopper. As a painter Hopper is known for doing what Springsteen is doing in his lyrics: capturing the simple American images that are regarded as trivial until they are frozen; he engages them, and makes them haunting. As Jessica Murphy, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art states: “Hopper sought and explored his chosen themes: the tensions between individuals (particularly men and women), the conflict between tradition and progress in both rural and urban settings, and the moods evoked by various times of day” (Web). Hopper had a way of creating suspense in seemingly banal situations – scenes where nothing seemed to happen are paused in his depiction to show that even the ordinary was worth a closer look. He was able to show American images in which a tension was captured that would have gone unnoticed otherwise. In a similar manner Springsteen, on *Darkness* explores seemingly ordinary people, factory workers, sons and daughters who are all but anonymous and unremarkable until Springsteen sheds light on their story. Robert Coles notes that:

Hopper knew a fulfilment of his desire to portray America’s not so apparent daily life, its many stories and possibilities as they come to play in our houses, restaurants, stores, streets scenes would require a look far and wide . . . to tell the underlying and social and psychological real … just so the Springsteen songs that hold up a buoyant America won’t let go of the “*Darkness on the Edge of Town*,” where some of Hopper’s folks lie asleep or sit facing one another in an eating place (40)

In other words, Hopper does not shun the recognition of the domestic and socially uncomfortable: he breaks taboos. As a painter he captures situations in which people may not at all be comfortable with observers, but by doing that he shares scenes that the key to his culture. With this understanding in mind one may understand why the characters in *Darkness* and the characters in Hopper seem at times to be one and the same. The characters are disillusioned, worn and at times even beaten. They sit staring into the distance as if they know that there is something more. In a sense it is the visual proof that the primarily materialistic American dream for which Whitman warns is now present, in which the individual is always wondering if there is more to aspire to and thus lacks peace and contentment. An example of this may be observed in Hopper’s *Office in a Small Town, 1953* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). In the picture a solitary man sits facing an empty desk and a large window; he is the only living being in the painting. He himself is observed by the artist through another large window from the side. The man is in his workplace, but not working, instead he is staring out of the window. Even though this employee has literally encountered upward mobility it, now being on a high level in the building, he seems detached. There are no pictures, or personal items present on the desk to indicate any identity other than the desk itself. In spite of the broad vista in front of the man, and the large (seemingly) glassless windows, the image may give a sensation of entrapment because of the very pronounced presence of the walls. His blank face may easily be interpreted, and at that point Coles’s argument comes to life. Hopper and Springsteen both encounter the numbness of the daily routine, and they go to work with the tension that it brings.



In a sense Hopper’s proneness to disillusionment is balanced by Whitman’s taste for hope, the two critical approaches to the American Dream for Springsteen in the lyrics of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. What binds these four American artists is an understanding of right and wrong, or as Springsteen puts it: “I'm motivated circumstantially by the events of the day: that's unfair, that's theft, that is against what we believe in, that's not what America is about” (*The Wrecking Ball*, 00:10). To these four, Whitman, Steinbeck, Hopper and Springsteen, it seems a basic human need to survey the tension between the ideal in the form of the American Dream, which sets a standard for living which at times turns out to be nothing more than a dream. The American nation is built, among other things, on the promises of the Declaration of Independence, which opens stating: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that [all men are created equal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_men_are_created_equal), that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” What Whitman, Steinbeck, Hopper and Springsteen have in common is their devotion to a constant testing of this statement, assessing how these fundamental words function in American everyday life.

# 2. Compromising one’s (American) Dream

*Darkness on the Edge of Town* displays a range of different explorations on the topic of compromise, namely between the American dream of upward mobility, freedom and a comfortable life and the American reality of bills, choices and responsibility. What is clear is that there is no trace left of the escapism encountered on *Born to Run*. Another part of that equation is the maintenance of identity whilst facing adversity, in other words: to what extent may one submit to the powers in life, the employer, relations, etcetera, to maintain a life without losing track of the self.

The first set of songs contains characters that are unable to remain in control, and either give in to the forces at play, as is the case in “Factory,” or try to get away and are not able to escape which is the case in “Something in the Night.” “Streets of Fire” also belongs in this category. These are examples of vicious circles, in which the narrators are unable to be productive. Then there is the in-between scenario in “Racing in the Streets,” where a street racer assumes himself to be superior to the people who are not able to control their own lives. In the second half of the song, however, it becomes clear that he has a relation with a woman to whom life is a disappointment. The third category comprises of characters that have maintained their fighting spirit, in spite of past adversity. Such is the case in the song “Darkness on the Edge of Town” which may be read as a sequel to “Racing in the Streets.” “Badlands,” is also found in this category.

## 2.1 Controlled by the Inability to Control Life

The song “Factory” revolves around simple labour as a necessary evil for maintaining a living and the tensions it brings. The first stanza shows an image set “early in the morning” (1) when the “factory whistle blows” (1). That whistle dictates the rhythm of the man’s life, even functioning as an alarm, and calling the workers to labour. The second stanza reveals the narrator: “I see my daddy walking through the gates in the rain” (6), a child observing. “Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him life” (7) on the other hand, is much less childlike in its subject matter. Here the omnipotence of the factory is emphasised, mirroring the words from Job: “the Lord gave, and the Lord gave away, blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21 b New International Version). In a similar way the factory worker and his child have to accept what the factory ordains; if the factory demands the father’s hearing in exchange for sustenance, he has very little choice. In the third stanza the extent of sacrifice is clarified: “men walk through these gates with death in their eyes” (10). In other words, the factory worker has abandoned his freedom as an individual for the sake of survival. The burden is carried by the community, as Springsteen hints at (domestic) violence: “boy, somebody is gonna get hurt tonight” (11). A reading of “Factory” adds two key themes to the album. There is the father’s fate, of monotony in a dead-end-job, resulting in frustration and violence. Yet there is also the perspective of the narrating child, which may be victim of the system, but in defining its mechanics (dependence on a job for survival, leading to an uneven power balance between boss and employee) may just be one step closer to negotiating a better system for one’s self. In this song Springsteen captures both the unfortunate fate of many, as well as the seed of the upward mobility also known as the American Dream, demonstrating how easily the tension between those two may form a rift between father and child.

“Streets of Fire,” introduces a narrator who is unable to present a coherent story, but sheds light on the pressure to exist and excel. McGuire states: “it does not offer narrative development, but only images of feelings. There is no story of ‘she done me wrong’ or ‘the whole world is falling apart,’ but only one voice located in no particular time, place, or plot crying out” (web). “The night’s quiet and you don’t care anymore” (1) leads to “you realize you want to let go” (3) because “the weak lies and the cold walls you embrace / eat at your insides” (4-5). The will to maintain life has fled with hope, the narrator is suffering. In the second stanza he is on the move, but also gives insight into his motivation: “I’m wandering, a loser down these tracks” (7). The narrator believes himself to be a loser, a social outcast that cannot adhere to conformity – certainly not the sort of conformity that is found in “factory.” On the other hand “you realise how they tricked you this time / and it’s all lies” (10-11) leads to the belief that there are one or more direct interactions that have led to the narrator’s current state of abandonment and hopelessness. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact motivation of the narrator. McGuire does not call for a reading of a plot structure, and he is right as the song is open to a number of interpretations. What these possible interpretations have in common thematically are fear, mistrust and lack of control. Where the narrator in “Factory” attempts to understand the system in which the father is trapped, the narrator in “Streets of Fire” makes no attempt, and consequently is swept off in the stream of events that produced an incoherent existence. These words could have come from any of the socially and economically desolate that have fallen through the cracks of American society, the drug addict, the unemployed, the homeless. It is certain that by the end of the song nonconformity has led to the strict inability to belong to a community of any sort: “I live now, only with strangers / I talk now only to strangers / I walk with angels that have no name” (13-15). The narrator is crippled – unable to fulfil the dream and responsibility of upward mobility that is the American Dream, and by showing this, Springsteen draws attention to the downward mobility in a free market society. Some succeed in moving upward because of the relative freedom one has to manoeuvre within society; “Streets of Fire” is an echo of mobility in the other direction with which society is unconcerned.

In “Something in the Night” there is an unnamed narrator who is driving, planning to go and have a drink: “turn the radio up loud / so I don’t have to think” (3-4). The narrator has something in his past that he wishes to avoid, and using his[[3]](#footnote-3) mobility to circumvent it as he does not want to think about: “I got stuff running round my head that I just can’t live down” (19-20). That same mobility is highlighted in the lines 5/6: “I take her to the floor / looking for a moment when the world seems right.” For a moment indeed these lines seem to hint at escape, yet surprisingly Springsteen aims to find a moment, not a place. The journey undertaken in the car is linked to a journey through time, or rather: a journey through recollection. The second stanza has less of a practical implementation, but serves as a vehicle for the narrator’s understanding of life:

You’re born with nothing

And better off that way

Soon as you’ve got something,

They send someone to try and take it away

You can ride that road ‘till dawn

Without another human being in sight

Just kids wasted on

Something in the night. (9-16)

The first lines of this stanza seem to indicate material possession. The narrator speaks of the way he perceives it to be impossible to build a life of any kind without encountering unsurmountable adversity of an undefined nature. This may be read as an assault on the nature of capitalism, which for the narrator seems to be inadequate. Just as in the factory the audience encounters a member of the group of citizens who are unlucky – who are not able (not necessarily through their own fault) to build something of their own, be it savings, a house, or something that can be roughly defined as upward mobility. This narrator struggles to remain at the level currently occupied, and not move down on the social ladder. In the second part of the second stanza the narrator notes that the road that he is currently driving on is empty, that one may wander without encountering any human beings – however, the narrator makes the sharp distinction between human beings and “kids wasted on / something in the night” (15-16). This distinction stings; these are kids who are wasted even before they reach adulthood and their full potential. “Human being” then becomes synonymous to the ones that are not wasted, that have potential, and somehow cultivation of that potential would actually qualify one as human. In a sense that is familiar to the reader, after all the need to develop intelligence and skills is what is popularly understood to be the fuel to advancement. However, to balance a contrast or a conflict between humans and wasted kids on their inability to conform to that norm of growth, something which normal kids would adhere too in order to be a human beings, is novel. It calls to mind, though, the memory of the Lost Generation[[4]](#footnote-4) movement that had to deal with the First World War instead of Vietnam which was just over at the time of the writing and release of *Darkness*. In these two wars the crux for a comparison may lie, as during the Vietnam years adolescents had to deal with what was widely regarded as a pointless war demanding high casualties, very similar to the Great War. Bot the Great War and the Vietnam War were based on complicated political alliances, by young men and women who often did not understand the reasons which led to their country’s involvement. Most painfully, yet often unrecognised on behalf of their many casualties, neither brought much improvement to the parties involved. It is clear that the narrator seems familiar with last impressions: “nothing is forgotten or forgiven / when it’s your last time around” (17-18). A haunting claim, especially in the setting of wasted kids.

The fourth stanza the singular turns to the plural and the present tense shifts to the past: “we found the things we loved/ they were crushed and dying in the dirt” (21-22). Undefined objects are found, and not people, yet these objects are dying. This may be interpreted as a pathetic fallacy, in which case it may be connected to the earlier comment on capitalism, or Springsteen specifically describes the wasted kids as objects. This last interpretation may indicate a comment on perceived utilitarianism. People have been objectified or objects have been animated, both are frightening thoughts. The narrator closes with an attempted escape:

but they caught us at the state line

and burned our cars in one last fight

and left us running burned and blind

chasing something in the night (24-27)

Again an unidentified “they,” this time chasing the “us,” which is probably the group of wasted kids from line 15, from whom they take the primal source of freedom and mobility: their cars. Instead of remaining and giving in, though, the kids continue on foot, disorientated by loss of sight and pure angst: “chasing something in the night.”

The problem with the interpretation of this text is that there is no definite understanding of what this “something” consists off, but maybe that suits this group of children. They are able to drive, so they are older than 16 and younger than 21 or they would not be called “kids”. One of the main quests during adolescence is the establishment of identity. This seems to tie in well, even though it is hypothetical, with the man in “Factory”, who would qualify here as a human being, as he adheres to the set standards of society and the narrator from “Streets of Fire” who might be one of these wasted kids because of his inability to become part of society. What these kids may look for, at great cost, is their own unique identity rather than the blue collar uniformity of their fathers.

## 2.2 The In-between Scenario

*Darkess* contains songs that illustrate the lives of the characters that cannot deal with reality as it comes and challenges the individual, and the songs that harbour a sense of hope, “Racing in the Street” is a unique song in which an character for each aspect is found. “Racing in the Street” is a song about a male street racer who built a car with his own hands together with his friend Sonny: “We build her straight out of scratch.” There is a sense of accomplishment in that they have built themselves a vehicle to freedom, which is emphasised: “we only run for the money, got no strings attached” (5-7). In other words it is about the thrill of earning (or potentially losing) a bit of livelihood, but when they lose control over the situation, they are free to walk away any time. The racer believes that he understands life, with all the excitement and freedom he can wish for to lead a fulfilling one. He has an identity outside his job, namely a street racer: “I wanna blow ‘em off in my first heat / Summer’s here and the time is right” the heart of the chorus reads. These are among the most positive lines to be found on the album. What is also important to note are the four lines which explain why he is so happy with himself:

Some guys just give up living

And start dying little by little piece by piece

Some guys come home from work and wash up

Then go racing in the street (17-20)

There are two categories of men according to the racer: the ones that are able to live outside their work, and the ones who do not succeed in savouring life, to which each breath is a step towards certain death. It is a rather arrogant stand towards other people, but may apply to the other songs too. The racer is very happy to include himself in the first category. He does not mind working, even though the first stanza suggests that he works at a seven-eleven store, as long as he can come home, rinse himself off the day’s challenges and frustrations in order to pursue racing. The racer cannot imagine a person who would not want to race. He can only imagine that not racing would mean dying a slow death. In spite of having it all in order, he has found what makes him happy and what gives him identity. It must be noted that racing has become an addiction as he cannot deal with daily life without the escape through street racing.

“I met her on the strip three years ago / in a Camero with this dude from L.A” (25-26) the racer reveals, and boasts how he defeated his opponent and took the girl. She was the figurative trophy of his racing success, but in fact this is where the volta lies hidden. The song skips to the present and reveals that only three years into their relation “there’s wrinkles around my baby’s eyes / and she cries herself to sleep each night” (19-30). Now the racer drops the façade of success and shows that he cannot stop the racing, because, ironically, that’s what keeps him from dying. Racing is an interest she does not share with him: “when I come home the house is dark / she sighs baby did you make it alright” (31-32). She does not join him anymore, she does not even wait up, she sighs with half interest. At this point it may be of interest to note that this scene bears a resemblance to, and may be illustrated by, Hopper’s painting *Excursion into Philosophy, 1959* (Private Collection)*.* Hopper catches a similar tension that seems to exist in the scene in the song: the tension between the two parts of a relationship that are unable to communicate. A sense of disinterest, combined with a desolate stare focused not on the wide vista of the world outside beyond the open window, but on a patch of light coming through that window. Outside the sky is blue and there is a hint of fertile green, but inside there is a dark colour scheme at play. A book lies open, divided between light and shadow; it may be a symbol for the choice between a positive or a negative interpretation of either the philosophy from Hopper’s title, or the situation encountered in the image. The couple in the song faces the same choice. He wants to race, but she wants more than that and becomes depressed: “She stares off alone into the night / with the eyes of one who hates for just being born” (35-36). Her reward for a passive attitude towards life is radical deception. The racer tells this story, and finishes in the present: “tonight my baby and me we’re gonna ride to the sea / and wash these sins of our hands” (39-40). The image of baptism, of rinsing off sins, is a Christian image to show the intent of the washer as well as the plea to a higher entity to grant a cleansing that is beyond one’s ability. The image of washing has been seen before, namely to wash off the bad day and then go racing. It is a show of good intent, but a depression may prove hard to wash away. The final line of the song is a single repetition of the chorus: “we’re going racing in the street” (44), indicating that he is free of life through his addiction, but with those words all hope for their relation seems to fade away.

[](http://www.google.nl/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&docid=DJTNK31-jdgwGM&tbnid=T0-WQUvbbQb-0M:&ved=0CAUQjRw&url=http://signa.tumblr.com/page/5&ei=vwy0U-vJGoqxyASAtoD4CA&bvm=bv.70138588,d.bGQ&psig=AFQjCNH91UtCcp4PQoUaagCRaLfeu8iWJw&ust=1404395053889565)

“Racing in the Streets” starts off with a very positive attitude in which the racer seems to have found an answer to the numbing routine of life. He has captured a sense of freedom and is able to wash himself of the pangs of labour in pursuit of personal achievement. Even though this is not achieved in a traditional manner, namely through a career, he does achieve a sense of accomplishment, freedom and financial advancement which suits the American ideal of upward mobility. By introducing the woman who loses interest in racing, Springsteen shows that the monotony of life has led the racer to an addiction of racing which ironically means that what the racer defines as his sources of freedom actually has a grip on him. Between themes of mobility, freedom, identity and self-actualisation, the racer is poised before a choice. Where should he put his priority? Halfway through the record, at the end of side A, Springsteen chooses juxtaposes relationship and upward mobility.

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## 2. 3 Asking the Right Questions

When it comes to the songs that actually show hopeful scenes it is not because the characters in those songs have ‘made’ it; they still struggle but they show character in being resilient. They have mastered something that resembles compromise.

“Badlands” is such a narrative of compromise and character, or rather it is a Rock ‘n Roll soliloquy. The opening lines signal darkness indeed: “Lights out tonight trouble in the heartland . . . I’m caught in a crossfire that I don’t understand” (1,3). “Heartland” may be read as the land of the heart, the home of feeling and emotion, the geographically central part of a region, or the economic centre of a region vital to the functioning of the whole. Whichever meaning Springsteen refers to here, if at all mutually exclusive, this is a crisis set in an undesirable place. Moreover, there is an exchange of a harmful nature in which the narrator is caught, but in which understanding is absent. Being placed at the start of the album, the song might function as a warning that the listener may encounter questions to which neither the narrator nor the author have an answer. They are however important questions, concerning identity, coming of age and the value of life. The parallel with life’s inconveniently hard, and at times, simply unsolvable question may be drawn here. Instead of entering the same vicious circle that a number of other characters cannot escape, this speaker, merely three lines in, chooses a contrasting course:

But there's one thing I know for sure, girl

I don't give a damn for the same old played out scenes

I don't give a damn for just the in-betweens

Honey, I want the heart, I want the soul

I want control right now (4-7)

Instead of entering the darkness, a path is chosen that is based on a personal choice, rather than external pressure: this is a demand for identity, a demand for control. What makes this stronger is the admitted presence of darkness earlier, the familiar lower class repetition: sons turning into their fathers, daughters into their mothers without a chance of novel experience or unique development. In other words, what encapsulates the complete opposite of the American dream of creating a better life than that of one’s parents. Moreover, here is an understanding of adversity which only intensifies and galvanizes the demand. The speaker admits that he would: “wake up in the night / with a fear so real” (8-9), but instead of waiting for a safe or opportune moment, he demands that the waiting is ended and action is undertaken to establish the dream as stated in the chorus. That chorus starts with: “let the broken hearts stand / as the price you’ve gotta pay”. The narrator understands the possible price that comes with the loss of ones dreams as they prove unattainable, then chooses to pursue them– with a “‘tis better to have loved and lost” sort of demeanour. These undefined dreams are, after all, the foundation to a unique identity. To abandon those dreams means a relapse into the monotonous drone of lower class American daily life. The narrator has an understanding with proverbial badlands. He does not deny that they are bad, most likely because they are his starting point. Whatever the situation, society or relations these badlands may signify, the narrator also understands that: “We’ll keep pushing till it is understood / and these badlands start treating us good” (15-16). This is the classic American attitude which functions as the steppingstone to the American Dream: persistence in the face of adversity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Next to the metaphoric meaning of badlands, the narrator also links them to physical labour: agriculture and industry “Workin' in the fields till you get your back burned / Workin' 'neath the wheel till you get your facts learned” (17-18). The narrator calls on an understanding that whatever one’s disposition at the present time may be, the situation may be improved with the addition of ample amounts of well applied effort.

It leads to a juxtaposition between two significant statements:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Poor man wanna be rich, rich man wanna be king  And a king ain't satisfied, till he rules everything (21-22) | I believe in the love that you gave me  I believe in the faith that can save me  I believe in the hope and I pray  That someday it may raise me  Above these badlands (24-27) |

On the one hand there is the statement from lines 21 and 22, which signifies society as known by many in America today: a nation which adopted capitalism as its philosophy. A capitalist system renders a platform for upward mobility, namely economic aspiration as the American Dream. What sets this song’s narrator apart from the songs that will follow, is that instead of choosing the path of aspiration the narrator is clear in the choice for the second statement. Love, faith and hope, a set taken from 1 Corinthians 13:13: “and now these three remain: faith, hope and love” (New International Version) The speaker believes that an upward mobility is subject to certain qualities of life, a relatively unique statement to this album and possibly a key to his ability to compromise and excel. Even before the first song is finished the narrator indicates what will stand, what will remain, when all else becomes repetitive agony. In a sense he spoils the plot before he is past the introduction, on the other hand, he seems to explore the plot with this introduction in mind. After all, this song may also be read as a warning that unanswerable questions will follow. The narrator states just before the end: “it ain’t no sin to be glad you’re alive” (29); trying to synchronise this belief with the reality that is explored in the rest of the album creates a tension that is probably unsolvable, but also creates curiosity.

“Darkness on the Edge of Town,” apex and title-song of the album can be read as the sequel to “Racing in the Streets,” with a narrator who has given up the traditionally American white picket fence ideal to pursue his own dream. Its first lines read: “They’re still racing out at the Trestles, but that blood it never burned in her veins” (1-2). Again, here is a man who loves racing with its potentials of adrenalin, ambition and freedom, and again his passion is contrasted with a woman who does not share that burning passion. That is the status quo with which “Racing in the Streets” ended, be it slightly intensified. This storyline is picked up again in “Darkness on the Edge of Town” which reads: “she’s got a house up in Fairview / in a style she’s trying to maintain” (3-4). She now lives in a place that may be read as a proper place name or that represents the better quarter of the town, where a pleasing view is to be seen. She may have encountered upward mobility, the narrator understands her aspiring to a style that does not become her well and implies that she attempts it without success. The racer’s message to her, if she wishes to re-establish contact, is that he can be found underneath Abram’s Bridge, a place that sounds real, but cannot be found on the map of the New York or New Jersey.[[6]](#footnote-6) The juxtaposition between Fairview and Abram’s Bridge is at its most powerful when read as a metaphor – the good and easy place which in about appearance, which is in stark contrast with the bridge resting on two great Abrahams: the Biblical one and the former president Lincoln. These two men were not about outward appearances. They had faith and dreams, which led the fathering of the Jewish People, and the ending of the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery respectively. These accomplishments made Lincoln a patriarch to America, leading Whitman to devote a chapter to him in his *Leaves of Grass*, portraying him as a captain and a father in “O Captain, my Captain!” (262), in a way that may be interpreted both in a national and a personal manner. The contrast between Fairview and Abram’s Bridge seems to be a figurative contrast between two interpretations of the American Dream – the economic form of upward mobility and freedom in equality, respectively.

In the second stanza Sonny[[7]](#footnote-7) is again encountered, the friend of the racer in “Racing in the Street,” and turns out to be the messenger between the narrator and the “she” that now lives in Fairview.

Well, everybody's got a secret, Sonny

Something that they just can't face

Some folks spend their whole lives trying to keep it

They carry it with them every step that they take

Till some day they just cut it loose

Cut it loose or let it drag 'em down (9-14)

The second stanza is an argument formulated by the narrator, addressed to Sonny, revolving about an unexplained secret. This leads to the notion that the secret may be explained more figuratively. The narrator formulates it as a basic formula of life: either you let yourself be weighed down by what cannot stand the light of day, till death follows, or you release yourself of its burden and shame. The burden may be is explained as the proverbial x in the racer´s formula. The racer’s burden is left ambivalent, which may have been done to accommodate the experience of a reader into the story. This theory may call to mind a very similar theory encountered in “Racing in the Streets,”[[8]](#footnote-8) where the racer makes the distinction between the people that are unable to exercise control over their lives, and the men who come home and have the ability to leave the (working) day behind them to pursue what they love (racing for example). This repetition may be interpreted as adding extra weight to the argument the racer is making. However, it may also lead to the understanding that these two theories belong to the same racer. This allows for a very interesting insight into, what would then be the longest narrative on the album.

This narrative is taken up again in the third stanza, which shows how the narrator sees himself applying this theory: “I lost my money and I lost my wife / them things don’t seem to matter much to me now” (20-21), in other words I have lost, but I cannot pursue what I have lost. Why he can’t is ambivalent, but events led him to stop caring altogether. Again there is the tension between racing as an escape towards freedom and racing as an addiction. If “Racing in the Streets” is precursor to “Darkness on the Edge of Town” than the narrator here is the same adrenaline addicted racer we encountered there, who was in a relationship with a woman who was disinterested in his great passion: racing. A choice emerged between racing and the relation, and the latter has ended “Darkness on the Edge of Town.” If this sources of freedom, racing, is so obsessive that it costs him his relation, it may be called a addiction. What is clear, though, is that the racer has lost his attempt at a ‘white picket fence’ ideal. Immediately following those words the narrator states:

Tonight I'll be on that hill 'cause I can't stop

I'll be on that hill with everything I've got

Well, lives on the line where dreams are found and lost

I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost

For wanting things that can only be found

In the darkness on the edge of town (22-27)

Reminiscent of “Racing in the Street” again the narrator believes in the pursuit of a lifestyle that risks everything to feel truly alive; even understanding the risks involved. “Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost” (24), the narrator pulls “found” before “lost”, contrary to the usual “lost and found,” an act of pessimism: now it will end is loss. Fairview functions antagonistically, including safety, security. Fairview, and his ex-girlfriend residing there are not extreme, and not as challenging. The racer thrives on this contrast, and his ability to do more than her. He has found a place where he can risk life and limb in order to feel alive. In his own way he understands life, and this is what he chooses to do with is. Finally, there is a hint at what can be found in the darkness, as it is equated to the racer´s dreams.

Dreams are dreamt in the dark, behind eyes closed to everyday reality. In pursuing dreams one often has to risk all, and take a step into the unknown, onto an, as of yet, unlighted path. Yet the pursuit of happiness in one’s dreams is something anchored firmly in the American identity, and is a sure way to develop one’s own identity by trial and error. It is what the racer´s ex-wife will not risk that sets this man on edge. Neither the racer from ‘Darkness on the Edge of Town,’ nor the narrator from ‘Badlands’ have established their dreams; it seems that they do not even have their dreams clearly defined yet. They do look for the dream, the American Dream in a broader context. They look beyond the standard answer of upward mobility into an ideal of freedom that may be so demanding it will not tolerate things as essential as relationships.

The songs on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* may be categorised into two groups. There are the narrators who are able to cope with life and the ones that are unable to secure their own interests trough compromise, or otherwise. Most songs find their way in either category. Songs like “Factory,” “Streets of Fire” and “Something in the Night” focus on characters that are in some way or other downtrodden: they have had to give in to their personal circumstances disappointments. On the other hand there are the songs carrying a sense of hope and resolution, such as “Badlands” and “Darkness on the Edge of Town.” “Badlands” message is strong in its conviction that something positive can be made out of all possible situations, even if badlands are the only resource. “Darkness on the Edge of Town” is slightly more reserved in its positivity, but the narrator is very determined to act in the way he believed to best for himself: putting everything at risk in order to feel alive. This song is tinged with the effects of those convictions though, as it also includes the ruins of his old life. “Darkness on the Edge of Town” includes a former girlfriend, and the ruins of a once pursued white-picket-fence ideal. Much like “Darkness on the Edge of Town,” “Racing in the Streets” shows a very confident narrator. Possibly this is the same narrator at an earlier stage of development. What puts this song in a category of its own is the way it appears to show a fully redeemed character, living his American Dream, but reveals a man who wants to be free be but is nevertheless bound to a girlfriend grappling with depression. He has life balanced, she has not, a strong contrast between the two characters, and trough them the two categories.

# Conclusion

If reading rather than listening to *Darkness on the Edge of Town* was an experiment and the meaning of that experiment was to find out whether Springsteen’s writing has enough depth to undergo a close reading then the album may be considered a success in this light also. In the now affirmed words of David Marsh for *Rolling Stone*:

Each side is discrete progression of similar lyrical and musical themes, and the whole is a more universal version of the same picture. Ideas, characters and phrases jump from song to song like threads in a tapestry, and everything is one long interrelationship. But all these elements are designed to focus our attention on what Springsteen has to tell us about the last three years of his life (64)

Even though the focus of the close reading has certainly not been to discover, or read into the texts any biographical information, Marsh’s point holds. There is no dire need to know what happened to Springsteen in the years prior to writing this album, but having both the reading and the background allows the reader a broader picture. There is fair reason to assume that Springsteen has written this material and composed the album in order to propel his own investigation forward. Jon Landau, Springsteen’s manager, states: “I think a lot of this album, ultimately, had to do with Springsteen's own personal growth; trying to come to terms with his idea of what it meant to be a man" (*The Promise*, 00:40). In this case Landau might be trusted on what it meant to Springsteen as he himself was part of that development, being his mentor and producer at the time. Speaking of the struggles with identity and direction Steve van Zandt noted: “He [Springsteen] was starting to have some conversations with Jon Landau, which I think helped a great deal. He was drawn back to a more solid time, the John Wayne character; 'I know right from wrong' sort of clarity that I think we all search for” (*The Promise*, 00:42). This attitude certainly reappears within the album, in “Badlands” for example, as the narrator learns to trust his own instincts rather than follow the masses:

I don't give a damn for the same old played out scenes

I don't give a damn for just the in-betweens

Honey, I want the heart, I want the soul

I want control right now (5-7)

*Darkness on the Edge of Town*  may be understood as an exploration of what it means to become an adult. In his thematic choices, Springsteen may be linked closely to the three examples of American culture: Whitman, Steinbeck and Hopper. This incorporates the dealing and compromising of one’s adolescent dreams, together with the normative American Dream, whilst maintaining hold of one’s identity and individuality. These four artists share a task in defining the American Dream, and closely related to that task lies the challenge to define being American. On top of those two comes the challenge of investigating what it means to be an American individual. Forming a framework for these three key notions in American culture, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* grapples with coming to the conclusion that, in Springsteen’s words:

life is no longer wide open, adult life is a life of a lot of compromise - and that is necessary, there are a lot of things that you should be compromising on. There are some essential things that you do not want to compromise on. Figuring those things out. What's the part of life where you need to compromise, to pay your bills, get along, feed your kids, and make your way through the world, and what is the part of life where you can't compromise or you'll lose yourself? (*The Promise*, 00:53)

Springsteen does not offer a precise roadmap to life. As signalled in the opening words of ‘Badlands,’ where the narrator finds himself in an incomprehensible crossfire, this album grapples with questions that are often too large to be answered.

If *Born to Run* was the peak of adolescence, then *Darkness on the Edge of Town* are the first steps into the adult world, whilst still having that tang of youth that believed that adulthood would grant ultimate –parent free – liberty. This tang of youth, and the period of adjustment between adolescence and adulthood, comes with a set of drawbacks. The childlike understanding of ultimate freedom without parents is just one part of that problem. The other part which echoes forth from the songs is the inability to have a relationship because of the lust for freedom. This is most prominent in songs like “Racing in the Street” and ‘Darkness on the Edge of Town’. Noteworthy is what Patti Scialfa, Springsteen’s wife and member of the E-Street Band, has to say on that: “there are a lot of brilliant songs that did not make the album. They would have altered the picture. When you look at *Darkness,* the person is not really attached to anybody else in that record; there are no love songs on that record” (*The Promise*, 00:39). It seems this is the price that the narrators pay for pursuing the dreams that are deemed critical for staying true to their developing notion of self.

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# Apendix: lyrics of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*

### “Badlands”

Lights out tonight trouble in the heartland

Got a head-on collision smashin' in my guts man

I'm caught in a crossfire that I don't understand

But there's one thing I know for sure I don't give a damn

For the same old played out scenes I don't give a damn

For just the in-betweens honey I want the heart I want the soul

I want control right now talk about a dream

Try to make it real you wake up in the night

With a fear so real spend your life waiting

For a moment that just don't come

Well don't waste your time waiting

Badlands you gotta live it every day

Let the broken hearts stand

As the price you've gotta pay

We'll keep pushin' till it's understood

And these badlands start treating us good

Workin' in the field till you get your back burned

Workin' 'neath the wheels till you get your facts learned

Baby I got my facts learned real good right now

You better get it straight darling

Poor man wanna be rich, rich man wanna be king

And a king ain't satisfied till he rules everything

I wanna go out tonight, I wanna find out what I got

Now I believe in the love that you gave me

I believe in the faith that could save me

I believe in the hope and I pray that some day

It will raise me above these

[chorus]

For the ones who had a notion, a notion deep inside

That it ain't no sin to be glad you're alive

I wanna find one face that ain't looking through me

I wanna find one place, I wanna spit in the face of these

[chorus]

### “Adam Raised a Cain”

In the summer that I was baptized my father held me to his side

As they put me to the water he said how on that day I cried

We were prisoners of love a love in chains

He was standin' in the door I was standin' in the rain

With the same hot blood burning in our veins

Adam raised a Cain

All of the old faces ask you why you're back

They fit you with position and the keys to your daddy's Cadillac

In the darkness of your room your mother calls you by your true name

You remember the faces the places the names

You know it's never over it's relentless as the rain

Adam raised a Cain

In the Bible Cain slew Abel and East of Eden he was cast

You're born into this life paying for the sins of somebody else's past

Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain

Now he walks these empty rooms looking for something to blame

You inherit the sins you inherit the flames

Adam raised a Cain

Lost but not forgotten from the dark heart of a dream

Adam raised a Cain

### “Something in the Night”

I'm riding down Kingsley

figuring I'll get a drink

Turn the radio up loud

so I don't have to think

I take her to the floor

looking for a moment when the world seems right

And I tear into the guts

of something in the night

You're born with nothing

and better off that way

Soon as you've got something the send

someone to try and take it away

You can ride this road 'till dawn

without another human being in sight

Just kids wasted on

something in the night

Nothing is forgotten or forgiven

when it's your last time around

I got stuff running around 'round my head

That I just can't live down

When we found the things we loved

They were crushed and dying in the dirt

We tried to pick up the pieces

And get away without getting hurt

But they caught us at the state line

And burned our cars in one last fight

And left us running burned and blind

Chasing something in the night

### 

### “Candy's Room”

In Candy's room there are pictures of her heroes on the wall

But to get to Candy's room you gotta walk the darkness of Candy's hall

Strangers from the city call my baby's number and they bring her toys

When I come knocking she smiles pretty she knows I wanna be Candy's boy

There's a sadness hidden in that pretty face

A sadness all her own from which no man can keep Candy safe

We kiss my heart's pumpin' to my brain

The blood rushes in my veins fire rushes towards the sky

We go driving driving deep into the night

I go driving deep into the light in Candy's eyes

She says baby if you wanna be wild you got a lot to learn, close your eyes

Let them melt let them fire let them burn

'Cause in the darkness there'll be hidden worlds that shine

When I hold Candy close she makes these hidden worlds mine

She has fancy clothes and diamond rings

She has men who'll give her anything she wants but they don't see

That what she wants is me, oh and I want her so

I'll never let her go no no no

She knows that I'd give all that I got to live

All that I want all that I live to make Candy mine

Tonight

### “Racing In The Street”

I got a sixty-nine Chevy with a 396

Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor

She's waiting tonight down in the parking lot

Outside the Seven-Eleven store

Me and my partner Sonny built her straight out of scratch

And he rides with me from town to town

We only run for the money, got no strings attached

We shut 'em up and then we shut 'em down

Tonight tonight the strip's just right

I wanna blow 'em off in my first heat

Summer's here and the time is right

We're goin' racin' in the street

We take all the action we can meet

And we cover all the northeast state

When the strip shuts down we run 'em in the street

From the fire roads to the interstate

Some guys they just give up living

And start dying little by little piece by piece

Some guys come home from work and wash up

Then go racin' in the street

Tonight tonight the strip's just right

I wanna blow 'em all out of their seats

Calling out around the world

We're going racin' in the street

I met her on the strip three years ago

In a Camaro with this dude from L.A.

I blew that Camaro off my back

And drove that little girl away

But now there's wrinkles around my baby's eyes

And she cries herself to sleep at night

When I come home the house is dark

She sighs "Baby did you make it all right"

She sits on the porch of her daddy's house

But all her pretty dreams are torn

She stares off alone into the night

With the eyes of one who hates for just being born

For all the shut-down strangers and hot rod angels

Rumbling through this promised land

Tonight my baby and me we're gonna ride to the sea

And wash these sins off our hands

Tonight tonight the highway's bright

Out of our way mister you best keep

'Cause summer's here and the time is right

We're goin' racin' in the street

### ´The Promised Land”

On a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert

I pick up my money and head back into town

Driving cross the Waynesboro county line

I got the radio on and I'm just killing time

Working all day in my daddy's garage

Driving all night chasing some mirage

Pretty soon little girl I'm gonna take charge

The dogs on Main Street howl 'cause they understand

If I could take one moment into my hands

Mister I ain't a boy no I'm a man

And I believe in a promised land

I've done my best to live the right way

I get up every morning and go to work each day

But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold

Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode

Explode and tear this town apart

Take a knife and cut this pain from my heart

Find somebody itching for something to start

[chorus]

There's a dark cloud rising from the desert floor

I packed my bags and I'm heading straight into the storm

Gonna be a twister to blow everything down

That ain't got the faith to stand its ground

Blow away the dreams that tear you apart

Blow away the dreams that break your heart

Blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and brokenhearted

[chorus]

### “Factory”

Early in the morning factory whistle blows

Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes

Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light

It's the working, the working, just the working life

Through the mansions of fear, through the mansions of pain

I see my daddy walking through them factory gates in the rain

Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him life

The working, the working, just the working life

End of the day, factory whistle cries

Men walk through these gates with death in their eyes

And you just better believe, boy, somebody's gonna get hurt tonight

It's the working, the working, just the working life

### “Streets of Fire”

When the night's quiet and you don't care anymore

And your eyes are tired and there's someone at your door

And you realize you wanna let go

And the weak lies and the cold walls you embrace

Eat at your insides and leave you face to face with

Streets of fire

I'm wandering, a loser down these tracks

I'm dying, but girl I can't go back

'Cause in the darkness I hear somebody call my name

And when you realize how they tricked you this time

And it's all lies but I'm strung out on the wire

In these streets of fire

I live now, only with strangers

I talk to only strangers

I walk with angels that have no place

Streets of fire

### 

### “Prove It All Night”

I've been working real hard, trying to get my hands clean

Tonight we'll drive that dusty road from Monroe to Angeline

To buy you a gold ring and pretty dress of blue

Baby just one kiss will get these things for you

A kiss to seal our fate tonight

A kiss to prove it all night

[chorus]

Prove it all night

Girl there's nothing else that we can do

So prove it all night, prove it all night

And girl I'll prove it all night for you

Everybody's got a hunger, a hunger they can't resist

There's so much that you want, you deserve much more than this

But if dreams came true, oh, wouldn't that be nice

But this ain't no dream we're living through tonight

Girl, you want it, you take it, you pay the price

[chorus]

Prove it all night, prove it all night girl and call the bluff

prove it all night, prove it all night and girl, I prove it all night for your love

Baby, tie your hair back in a long white bow

Meet me in the fields out behind the dynamo

You hear the voices telling you not to go

They made their choices and they'll never know

What it means to steal, to cheat, to lie

What it's like to live and die

[chorus]

### 

### “Darkness on the Edge of Town”

They're still racing out at the Trestles

But that blood it never burned in her veins

Now I hear she's got a house up in Fairview

And a style she's trying to maintain

Well if she wants to see me

You can tell her that I'm easily found

Tell her there's a spot out 'neath Abram's Bridge

And tell her there's a darkness on the edge of town

Everybody's got a secret Sonny

Something that they just can't face

Some folks spend their whole lives trying to keep it

They carry it with them every step that they take

Till some day they just cut it loose

Cut it loose or let it drag 'em down

Where no one asks any questions

Or looks too long in your face

In the darkness on the edge of town

Some folks are born into a good life

Other folks get it anyway anyhow

I lost my money and I lost my wife

Them things don't seem to matter much to me now

Tonight I'll be on that hill 'cause I can't stop

I'll be on that hill with everything I got

Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost

I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost

For wanting things that can only be found

In the darkness on the edge of town

1. Springsteen was awarded the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song, as well as the Academy Award for Best Original Song for “Streets of Philadelphia,” soundtrack to the 1994 motion picture of with the same name. In 2009 Springsteen received a Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song for “The Wrestler.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 1940 John Ford adapted Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* to film. The film was received favourably, receiving seven Academy Award nominations and winning two: Best Supporting Actress, Jane Darwell as Ma Joad and Academy Award for Directing, John Ford. Springsteen was introduced to the film before reading the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The text offers no definite evidence of the narrator being male or female, for the sake of conciseness the narrator is referred to using the male pronoun, instead of him/her. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Lost Generation is used to indicate the generation which came of age during the Great War, of which a large percentage was killed or directly affected by it. A group of writers chose to accept the phrase as a badge of honour and grappled at the effect of the war and its consequences of their lives and generation. Some prominent members are Ernest Hemmingway, Gertrude Stein , F. Scot Fitzgerald and T.S. Elliot. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Granted, a number of (un)successful nations have claimed that persistence in the face of adversity is a pillar to success. Think for instance of the Greek Iliad, or the Roman Aeneid in which struggle and persistence are common themes. So the claim is not that these are exclusively American trades, but they are essential to the American dream. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Springsteen has been known to incorporate real places into his songs, but also creates metaphorical places. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The main argument to support the claim that this is the same Sonny as is encountered in “Racing in the Streets” rests on the fact that among the few names mentioned on *Darkness on the Edge of* Town, Sonny appears twice. Secondly, it seems that both songs have a street racing theme and future a couple which has relational problems related to that theme. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Racing in the Streets’ lines 17 to 20, discussed in *The In-between Scenario*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)