

Arcadia University

ScholarWorks@Arcadia

Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works

Undergraduate Research

Fall 2017

Springsteen's Oppressed Working Class

Kaylee Bumpus
kbumpus@arcadia.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bumpus, Kaylee, "Springsteen's Oppressed Working Class" (2017). *Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works*. 50.

https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/undergrad_works/50

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Curated Undergraduate Works by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact hessa@arcadia.edu, correllm@arcadia.edu.

Springsteen's Oppressed Working Class

Kaylee Bumpus

December 7th, 2017

US285.1: Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

Dr. Jeanne Buckley

Abstract

Bruce Springsteen's exploration through the lives of oppressed working class people has been a prevalent theme throughout the four decades of his musicianship. This paper will discuss the motivations, methods, and impact of the blue collar characters that Springsteen writes about in his songs. The characters from specific songs will be analyzed and placed into one of three categories: law-abiding working class citizens, dreamers attempting to flee desolation, or sympathetic criminals. Specific examples will be used from some of Bruce Springsteen's more well-known songs, such as "Thunder Road", "Born to Run", "The River", and "Born in the U.S.A.", and other songs will also be investigated. This paper will connect these examples to real world social injustices that working class Americans endure, and to the failure of the American Dream.

From his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park*, all the way through his most recent albums, *Wrecking Ball* and *High Hopes*, Bruce Springsteen has written his music through the eyes of fictional characters. The common denominator between all of his characters is the social class they reside in: the working class. As a former working class man himself, Springsteen feels a sense of obligation to use his background to highlight numerous social injustices that are prevalent in the real world. Through the use of his characters, Bruce becomes a storyteller, formulating the lives of characters facing adversity. Working-class characters struggling to find their place in the world has been the baseline for Bruce since the beginning, and his continuous effort to find new perspectives for his characters is the key to his creativity and musical intelligence. Bruce Springsteen pulls from his experiences of growing up in a working class world to tell the stories of blue-collar characters in an array of American landscapes and lifestyles. The struggles that some of his characters face forces them to submit to a life of crime, while others simply want to make an honest living sticking with the job they have always known. Still others, like Bruce himself, attempt to escape from their current situation in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

A Jersey boy from Freehold, NJ, Bruce Springsteen was born into the working class to a mother who worked as a secretary and a father who was a factory worker. His childhood consisted of watching his parents work tirelessly to make ends-meet, his father often working multiple jobs, including working as a bus driver and a prison guard (Garman, 1996). The Springsteen family was essentially poor, although young Bruce did not realize it, with his parents and grandparents living under the same roof. Toddler Bruce ruled the household as his

grandmother adored him and his mother ceded to her power. Eventually, Bruce's mother moved the family out of his grandparent's house to a tiny, half-shotgun house four blocks away. For the latter part of his childhood, Bruce spent the majority of his time living with his grandparents, as he felt like they were his true parents (Springsteen, 2016). In Freehold where Bruce was raised, the factories were the main source of employment for the middle to lower class families. The working class lifestyle that plagued his adolescent life were the spark that ignited Bruce's interest in rock and roll, as a creative outlet that enabled him to express his frustrations. Supported by his mother, Bruce's passion for music developed instantly, and it became clear to young Bruce that he wanted more for himself than the life that his father lived (Garman, 1996). Once Bruce came to this realization, his mother took out a loan to buy him his first guitar, on which he discovered his true talent. By the time he was discovered, Bruce was well-known on the Jersey shore scene, where he spent the much of his time playing his music in bands and bars (Pithouse, 2016). Bryan Garman discusses the influences of Bruce's early career by stating, "Springsteen's first three albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park* (1973), *The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle* (1973), and *Born to Run* (1975)- are grounded firmly in his working-class experience, but, as Jim Cullen argues, are primarily concerned with escaping the economic limits that circumscribed his life (Garman, 1996 , pg 73)." These "working-class" experiences became the framework for the stories of the characters that constitute the music of Bruce Springsteen.

The struggles with poverty that Springsteen experienced throughout his childhood and into young adulthood influenced the creation of the blue-collar characters that live their troubled lives in his songs. The choices these characters make to improve their quality of life differ

between the albums, filled with stories of criminals, honest working citizens, and dreamers attempting to flee. The theme of working class struggles first appears early on in Springsteen's work, populating much of his first three albums, with characters who wish to break free from their poverty-ridden lives in search of the "promised land". Springsteen's "promised land" is symbolic of American success, a place where one can go to find endless economic opportunity, away from the fiscal constraints of his or her current lifestyle. On Bruce's third studio album, *Born to Run*, these so-called "dreamers" who want to escape from their economic confines become more evident. "Thunder Road" provides a prime example of a couple of teenagers desperate to break free from their suffocating town of desolation, in exchange for a life of promise and optimism. The speaker of the song attempts to persuade "Mary" to come along with him in search of a brighter future where they can grow together romantically in a place with more opportunity for the both of them (Smith, 2000). Bruce sings, "All the redemption I can offer, girl, is beneath this dirty hood / With a chance to make it good somehow / Hey, what else can we do now (Springsteen, 1975)?" The narrator feels as though their only true shot at a life of success and happiness is to leave familiarity behind, as frightening as it may be, and venture into the unknown (Smith, 2000). Similarly, the song "Born to Run" exemplifies Bruce's ideals of escaping one's restricted life of misfortune in exchange for a life of prosperity and triumph. "Born to Run" characterizes Bruce's own life, and it is clear that this motto is important to him, as it is not only the title of a song and album, but his autobiography as well. Like many of his characters, Bruce "ran" from his Jersey shore home the first chance he got, even though, with aspirations to become a rock and roll legend, the risk of failure was high (Pithouse, 2016) .

Bruce's voice, full of passion and hope, cry out the iconic lyrics, "We gotta get out while we're

young, 'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run (Springsteen, 1975).” Comparable stories of individuals with the wish to escape their crumbling hometowns appear in some songs in other Springsteen albums, such as *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, typically consisting of less optimistic and more bleak tunes.

Another group of Springsteen's characters who appear in his songs are the law-abiding citizens who are determined to make an honest living sticking with their blue-collar jobs. The albums, *The River* and *Born in the USA*, examine the lives of working class individuals whose lives revolve around endless hours of labor for scarce amount of pay. Although these characters lead miserable lives in their desolate towns, their fear of leaving is far greater than that of enduring the adversities they are familiar with. In some cases, such as in the song, “The River”, an unfortunate turn of events strikes, forcing the characters to remain in their struggling situation, with the dream of fleeing remaining just that. Remembering the characters from “Thunder Road” who wanted to escape to find a more promising life, “The River” continues that same story 5 years later after Mary became pregnant with the narrator's child. This unexpected event not only halted the couple's plan of leaving town, but forced the speaker to get a factory job to support his unplanned family. When “The River” picks up the story, the speaker has been laid off his job, his marriage is failing, and he is reminiscing the past when he and Mary lived simple, carefree lives. Unfortunately, these individuals unwillingly face the exact circumstances they had been trying to avoid in “Thunder Road”; stuck with a worthless job in a crumbling town (Smith, 2000). In the title track of “Born in the U.S.A.”, the protagonist is a veteran of the Vietnam War who has trouble finding work after returning home. This song remains one of the most misunderstood pieces of all time, as most listeners simply hear the upbeat patriotism that the chorus seemingly

gives off, declaring a prideful declaration of one's own birthplace. However, the truth is in the lyrical verses of the song, which describe the woes of the working men who were sent to fight in the war, simply because they had no way to avoid the draft in the ways the wealthy could (Springsteen, 2016). Upon returning home, the veteran in the song is unable to find work. Bruce sings, "Come back home to the refinery / Hiring man said 'son if it was up to me' / Went down to see my V.A. man / He said 'son, don't you understand' (Springsteen, 1984)." Due to the unpopular nature of the Vietnam War and the protests that occurred in America during the time, returning veterans were often mistreated and denied jobs they would have been able to obtain prior to serving (Smith, 2000). Springsteen's struggling laborers who remain in their hometowns appear in the least number of songs, as desperately surviving in a worthless town would typically cause an individual to either flee or submit to criminal behavior. However, the main character in the song "Youngstown" from the album, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, was one of the minority who found himself trapped unemployed in a collapsing town, with nowhere to run to. Similar to "Born in the U.S.A.", this individual was drafted into the Vietnam War and has returned home. Unlike the previous song, the character in "Youngstown" found work at the local blast furnaces, where the weapons are made for the war. As the song continues, times change and the steel mill is no longer needed to make weapons, so the narrator loses his job (Browne, 2014). In a depressing cry for help, Springsteen sings, "In Youngstown / My sweet Jenny, I'm sinkin' down / Here darlin' in Youngstown (Springsteen, 1995)." This desperate plea gives identity to numerous individuals who live in economic towns that were once dependent on the factory jobs present there. Once factories in these towns shut down, the town itself crumbles shortly thereafter, without a financial backbone providing income to consumers. Springsteen depicts the aftermath

of this occurrence in the glum tone set by “My City of Ruins” in his album *The Rising*, which takes place in the town that was once important to Springsteen’s growth as a young musician. Stuck in hometowns such as these, it is easy to see why one would choose to escape from its sinking grip, or defer to crime as a way to reconcile financial burdens.

Springsteen’s final group of characters delve into the darker sides of human nature, in which desperation and hopelessness push individuals past their moral boundaries, into a state where violence and criminal behavior become the explicit answer to any problem. The albums, *Nebraska*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, explore the lives of a variety of criminals, and the stressors that motivated their criminal actions. In the song “Atlantic City”, from the album, *Nebraska*, a criminal perspective is gained from a character who understands his wrongful doing, yet regretfully concedes to law-breaking in order to reconcile his personal economic hardships (Levine, 2005). The second verse creates a sense of irony when Springsteen sings, “Well I got a job and tried to put my money away / But I got debts that no honest man can pay (Springsteen, 1982).” In regards to this lyrical phrase, Samuel J. Levine explains the paradox by stating, “The speaker wants to pay his debts, but his debts are so substantial that he cannot pay them if he remains an honest man; therefore, he will choose the only viable alternative, to pay his debts through dishonesty, manifesting itself in criminal activity (Levine, 2005 , pg 772).” This explanation generates a superior understanding, at an emotional depth, of the speaker’s submission to criminal behavior as a result of the condition of desperation he could no longer endure. Likewise, in the song, “Johnny 99”, from the album, *Nebraska*, a sympathetic perspective can be gained in regards to the pressures that main character “Ralph” weathered that prompted him to lose control and commit murder. Ralph’s actions cannot be justified by any

means, however, his story provides insight into his “struggle for survival (Levine, 2005 , pg 774)” that caused him to perform such an atrocity. The song itself is told in a third-person narrative that emphasizes the series of events that quickly transpired, ending up in the courthouse during the trial of “Johnny 99”, the nickname given to Ralph as a result of his crime (Levine, 2005). Ralph’s final statement to the judge portrays an explanation similar to that of the criminal in “Atlantic City”, stating, “I had debts no honest man could pay / The bank was holdin’ my mortgage and they was takin’ my house away (Springsteen, 1982).” Contrary to “Atlantic City”, Ralph acknowledges to the judge that he is not an innocent man and does not ask to be acquitted of responsibility, yet further, he challenges the judge to sentence him to execution. Ralph’s confession that he believes he would be better off dead creates a stark realization of the agonizing life he must have been living for him to rather be killed than continue his life in jail (Levine, 2005). Springsteen’s in-depth examination of criminal life and the justice system in his music is serious work for a rock and roll artist, but necessary to portray the emotional torments that a struggling existence can have on working class people facing a life of poverty.

Springsteen has often been referred to as a working class hero; a powerful figure giving voice to the powerless. As an icon to blue-collar America, Bruce uses his music in support of poor and working class people to challenge the oppressive systems that create such social injustices (Pithouse, 2016). From his personal experiences as a child in a working class family, Bruce recognizes that similar circumstances are prevalent across America, increasingly so with the amount of unemployment in today’s world. Using inspiration from the memories of his past, Bruce has focussed on bringing to public attention the social issues that plague the working class world. His status as a famous musician allows him the unique opportunity to connect to his

listeners on a personal level, with relatable songs that may spark a fire in the souls of people to bring about social change (Leopold, n.d.). In a CNN article, Todd Leopold quotes the biography written by Marc Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'n' Roll, saying, “‘As he's gotten older, he has come to believe more in the power of bringing people together with that music and sending them out into the world with ideas that need to be acted on,’ Dolan said (Leopold,).”With his array of characters, Springsteen not only calls attention to the oppression of blue-collar America, but also demonstrates the necessity of struggling individuals to hold onto the prospect of hope and redemption no matter what.

The theme of struggling working class Americans is a key element in discussing the topic of the American Dream, which has been analyzed thoroughly by numerous artists, including Bruce Springsteen. In the article, “Whitman, Springsteen, and the American Working Class”, author Greg Smith compares the idea of the American Dream and the reality of working class life in the following quotation:

“In Springsteen’s songs, the stark realism of contemporary American working-class life is presented as a powerful reminder that the idealism surrounding this notion of the American dream is often just that- an inspirational concept of the way things should be, but by no means an accurate reflection of the way they are. Indeed, Springsteen’s songs are frequently centered around the ironic discrepancy between what the American Dream offers in theory and what actual working people often get in reality (Smith, 2000, pg 306-307).”

Smith’s interpretation of Springsteen’s music is relevant to understanding the logic behind the creation of Bruce’s characters that face a variety of circumstances associated with blue-collar

lifestyles. Springsteen is an author in his work, placing characters in numerous American landscapes in order to connect to a broader audience on a personal level. By doing so, Bruce brings to light the failure of the American Dream through the injustices faced by those working class individuals for whom this ideal of success and prosperity was originally intended (Zolten, 2012).

References

- Garman, B. (1996). The ghost of history: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and the Hurt Song. *Popular Music & Society*, 20(2), 69-121.
- Hiatt, B., Browne, D., Fricke, D., Dolan, J., Walsh, T., Vozick-Levinson, S., . . . Sheffield, R. (2014, January 16). 100 Greatest Bruce Springsteen Songs. Retrieved December 07, 2017, from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-bruce-springsteen-songs-of-all-time-20140116/youngstown-19691231>
- Leopold, T. (n.d.). Bruce Springsteen and the song of the working man. Retrieved December 07, 2017, from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/18/showbiz/bruce-springsteen-wrecking-ball-working-man/index.html>
- Levine, S. J. (2005). Portraits Of Criminals On Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska: The Enigmatic Criminal, The Sympathetic Criminal, And The Criminal As Brother. *Widener Law Journal*, 14(3), 767-785.
- Pithouse, R. (2016, September 22). Under the influence of ... working class rocker Bruce Springsteen. Retrieved December 04, 2017, from <https://theconversation.com/under-the-influence-of-working-class-rocker-bruce-springsteen-65827>
- Smith, G. (2000). Whitman, Springsteen, and the American Working Class. *Midwest Quarterly*, 41(3), 302-320.
- Springsteen, B. (2017). *Born to run*. Toronto: CNIB.

Womack, K., Zolten, J. J., & Bernhard, M. (2012). Bruce Springsteen: cultural studies, and the runaway American dream. Farnham, England: Ashgate.

Springsteen, B. (1982). Atlantic City. On *Nebraska* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1984). Born in the U.S.A.. On *Born in the U.S.A.* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1975). Born to Run. On *Born to Run* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1982). Johnny 99. On *Nebraska* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1980). The River. On *The River* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1975). Thunder Road. On *Born to Run* [Studio recording]. New York, NY: Columbia Records

Springsteen, B. (1995). Youngstown. On *The Ghost of Tom Joad* [Studio recording]. Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Records