"They wanted to know why I did what I did:" Reading Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska" through Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Principle

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Abstract

Bruce Springsteen and Ernest Hemingway, two masters of their respective forms, are rarely spoken of in conversation with each other. One rose to fame as a serious-minded author before parlaying that recognition into a macho persona that became a cultural icon of the early twentieth century; the other, gained notoriety as an electrifying performer known for his lyrical verbosity and blue-collar work ethic who has sustained a successful musical career for over 50 years. Yet, on the level of artistry and technique, we can see that as Springsteen moved into his second decade in the early-1980s, his lyrical style, especially on 1982's *Nebraska*, shifted into a mode that could be considered Hemingwayesque. This essay examines the song "Nebraska" through the tenets of Hemingway's theory of writing, the Iceberg Principle, which denotes the idea that if writers are "writing truly enough" they can show only the tip of their metaphorical icebergs, and the reader will intuit the rest. Reading "Nebraska" through this principle exposes the dense layers of narrative execution, character development, and complex thematic resonances that reverberate underneath the mere 167 words Springsteen uses to tell the story of serial killer Charles Starkweather. In doing so, this study reveals the audacity, and considerable skill, of Springsteen's poetics.

In his review of *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, legendary rock critic Lester Bangs (1973) calls the record "cosmically surfeiting" before describing Bruce Springsteen's lyrical content and delivery as

"breathtakingly complicated."[1] While *Greetings*' linguistic gymnastics retains its ability to impress, it was not ultimately the artistic direction Springsteen would follow. Despite a steady paring down of lyrical output in his records of the late 1970s, even as they remained musically boisterous, the 1982 release of *Nebraska* was as striking in its paucity of words as *Greetings* had been in its surfeit. With its grainy, monochromatic cover image of an empty highway, surrounded by sharp red lettering, to its barebones instrumentation, to its lack of any promotional concert appearances, everything about *Nebraska* is sparse.

Springsteen's movement toward lyrical minimalism and narrative economy, particularly on the title track, recalls the experimental expressionism practiced by early twentieth-century Modernists like Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway more so than it does the work of his contemporaries. Hemingway is of particular interest to this study not only because he managed to bring the Modernists' experimental approach to the mainstream, but because his articulation of his method of writing as metaphorically like an iceberg provides a useful way to read Springsteen's "Nebraska"--a dramatic monologue about Charles Starkweather, who, along with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate, killed eleven people across Nebraska and Wyoming between November 1957 and January 1958. While Springsteen has never discussed Hemingway as an influence, reading "Nebraska" through Hemingway's

[1] Lester Bangs. "Review: *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J*," *Rolling Stone*, 5 July 1973, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/greetings-from-asbury-park-nj-249992.

Iceberg Principle provides a useful framework for understanding the complexity submerged beneath the song's enigmatically simple lyrics.

The burgeoning field of Springsteen Studies is refreshingly multidisciplinary: beyond expected disciplines like musicology and literary studies, it includes critical approaches to Springsteen's works and life by scholars from psychology, sociology, linguistics, history, political science, gender studies, and even theology. There are several collections of scholarly articles dedicated to Springsteen, including *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* (2010, Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, eds.), *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* (2012, Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten, and Mark Bernhard, eds.); *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music* (2018, William L. Wolf, ed.); and the hybrid academic/popular collection *Long Walk Home* (2019, Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers, eds.).

In addition to articles published in a variety of academic journals, a concentration of work in the field can be found in the *Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* (*BOSS*, for short). Of particular interest to this study are articles by Irwin H. Streight, Seth C. Kalichman and Joshua M. Smyth, Ryan Sheeler, Alan Rauch, and Char Roone Miller, all of which perform analyses of the *Nebraska* record from various academic disciplines. Also of note is Warren Zane's book *Deliver Me from Nowhere* (2023) on the making of *Nebraska*, which includes both a thorough historical narrative of the album's genesis and strong considerations of its key songs. This scholarship provides a solid base on which to build a close reading of the historical, cultural, and biographical details that inform the "Nebraska" lyrics and production.

In the intellectual salons of Paris in the 1920s, under the mentorship of influential Modernists Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, Hemingway

developed the direct, minimalistic writing that he would become known for. Hemingway scholar Verna Kale writes that it was through Stein's mentorship that Hemingway developed his 'craft of omission' wherein he "put crucial elements of plot beneath the surface of a story," as he learned to "pare down dialogue, to drop similes in favor of concrete images, to abandon adverbs almost entirely and, when adjectives were necessary, to place them in the predicate."[2] But Stein and Pound were not only artistically important to Hemingway; as Kale writes, "Where Stein would influence Hemingway's nascent stylistic experiments, Pound would serve as an advocate and agent, helping Hemingway to place some of his earliest works in the little magazines and introducing him to other literary personalities around the Latin Quarter."[3]

Ultimately, Hemingway would break off his relationships with both Stein and Pound after his fame had significantly eclipsed theirs[4], and yet their influence can be felt in every aspect of his work, especially the theory of writing he presented in his 1932 book *Death in the Afternoon*. Ostensibly a guide to the world and history of bullfighting, Hemingway's first work of non-fiction regularly digresses into discussions of politics, personal history, and advice on writing including Hemingway's description of his literary style in terms of iceberg imagery:

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as

[2] Verna Kale, *Critical Lives: Ernest Hemingway* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 38.
[3] Ibid., 36.
[4] This is a common theme for Hemingway; the list of his former friends that were once his champions is long and includes people like Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Harold Loeb, and his three ex-wives: Hadley Richardson, Pauline Pfeiffer, and Martha Gellhorn.

> though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.[5]

Over the years, the Iceberg Principle has become synonymous with Hemingway's literary persona as macho pursuits like hunting, fishing, and bullfighting are with his popular one. In his exhaustive study of *The Sun Also Rises*, H.R. Stoneback writes that this minimalist style is intended to make "the reader feel more than is understood and to urge the reader to participate actively in decoding the action,"[6] because there is just enough detail to give the reader an impression from the exposed "one-eighth" of the textual iceberg to allow readers to fill in the rest.

Hemingway's style appears straightforward, and even simple; however, as Philip Young writes, "it is a style which normally keeps out of sight the intelligence behind it."[7] (Young 1966, 204). Young goes onto describe the way Hemingway's work appears to offer absolute objectivity of what he is describing by presenting "perceptions [that] come direct to the reader, unmixed with comment," which creates "the impression … of an intense and disciplined objectivity, a matter-of-fact offering of whatever details are chosen to build in the reader the response for which the author has provided only the stimulus."[8] Yet the simplicity in Hemingway is deceptive, owing to the calculated and deliberate way he wrote. The affective qualities of his writing are the direct result of his narrative construction, which provides only the illusion of objectivity, an illusion that encourages the reader's participation. It is not that Hemingway had no

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[5] Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribners, 1960), 192.
[6] H.R. Stoneback, *Reading Hemingway's* The Sun Also Rises*: Glossary and Commentary* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2007), 211.
[7] Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 204.
[8] Ibid., 204.

more to say about a tree, a wound, a feeling of love, or a mass evacuation he was describing, but that he left the spaces blank so that his reader can participate in the construction and perhaps even come to understand just how often Hemingway is subverting the whole notion of objectivity[9]. As we will see, this illusion of objectivity is vital to understanding Springsteen's presentation Starkweather's story in "Nebraska."

Released just shy of a decade after his debut album[10], *Nebraska* shares little in common with that first record, lyrically or sonically, even as it remains recognizably Springsteen's work. Bangs' aforementioned *Rolling Stone* review of *Greetings* claims that Springsteen has "got more [words] crammed into this album than any other record released this year."[11] Bangs' estimation was not only likely correct for that year, but it is nearly the case for Springsteen's entire oeuvre. According to a study performed by Seth C. Kalichman and Joshua M. Smyth which looked at, amongst other things, average words per song (AWPS) on each Springsteen record, there is a clear drop in AWPS from his first two albums[12] until Springsteen arrived at the lyrical sweet spot (289.2 AWPS[13]) in the late 1970s that has remained his preferred style of writing. This study also reveals just how atypical "Nebraska" is as a song in his oeuvre, from the view of AWPS, as it has only 167 words, significantly lower than his overall average.

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[9] The best of many examples of this is Jake Barnes' first-person narration in *The Sun also Rises* where the astute reader can see how Jake's seemingly reportorial portrayals of his friends are usually suspect, if not wholly unreliable.

[10] *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* was released on 5 January 1973 and *Nebraska* was released nine years and nine months later, on 30 September 1982.

[11] Bangs, "Greetings," 1973.

[12] *Greetings from Asbury Park* (369.1 AWPS) and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* (463.5 AWPS).

[13]Kalichman and Smyth's methodology for arriving at their numbers is described in detail in their article. It should be noted that their study (first published online in 2021) does not include Springsteen's latest album of original material, *Letter to You* (2020).

To illuminate this trend beyond the quantitative changes, we can consider the significantly different descriptive approaches found in "Rosalita" (1973 [word count: 528]), "Thunder Road" (1975 [word count: 417]) and "Nebraska" (1982 [word count: 167]) [14], three songs that present similar narratives about young lovers on the run in very different ways. Springsteen describes "Rosalita" as his "musical autobiography," and "a kiss-off to everybody who counted you out, put you down or decided you weren't good enough."[15] (193). While more of an emotional[16] autobiography than factual, the song provides a profusion of detail to create a place wherein the desires, perceived injustices, and small-scale acts of rebellion play out. The cast of characters is large, even for an eight-minute song, and includes characters with outlandish names like Little Dynamite, Little Gun, Jack the Rabbit, Weak Knees Willie, Sloppy Sue, and Big Bones Billy[17]. Few of these characters do all that much in the narrative of the song, yet Springsteen's inclusion of their mostly purposeless posturing creates a milieux of urban aimlessness that the speaker can push back against. The argument the speaker presents is couched in a rescue mission, wherein he must save Rosalita and whisk her away to California, the land of sunshine, promise and opportunity, far from the suffocating "swamps of Jersey." The couple will go to a "little café where they play guitars all night and all day,"

[14] "Rosalita," unlike the other two, has a repeated chorus, but even if we only count the chorus once it still has 467 words, fifty-nine more than "Thunder Road," and 309 more than "Nebraska."
[15] Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 193.
[16] In his book *Songs*, Springsteen writes, "Most of my writing is emotionally autobiographical. You've got to pull up the things that mean something to you in order for them to mean anything to your audience. That's how they know you're not kidding" (2003, 69).
[17] In addition to Rosalita, her parents, and the speaker.

the exact opposite of the downtown streets, pool halls, department stores, and the small houses that his cast of characters occupy.

The notion of escaping to some promised land is a major theme of *Born to Run*[18] and "Thunder Road" (the first track) sets the tone for the whole record. "Thunder Road" and "Rosalita" share a great deal of lyrical DNA; however, Springsteen's narrative technique has shifted. Gone are the wildly named characters, the hyperbolic activities of parents, and the idealistic pronouncements of youth. Unlike the speaker in "Rosalita" who heroically fights through the wilderness in the final stanza, the speaker of "Thunder Road" announces, resolutely, that "I'm no hero, that's understood." Unlike the elaborate internal rhyming schemes Springsteen uses to describe a broken-down car, we get "the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets," an image so stark it delivers a level of evocative power unseen amid the torrential downpour of lyrics in his first two records. The significance of cars as symbols of freedom for these characters, and so many of Springsteen's characters[19] cannot be overstated. In the worlds Springsteen creates, a car is never just a means of conveyance but is a nearly mythical object[20] that has the power to move one away from hopelessness.

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[18] For instance, the title track ends with a promise of reaching a place where "we'll walk in the sun;" "Night" contains the hopeful promise to the auditor that they will "break on through to the inside," a space apart from the working-class life described in the rest of the lyrics; and the desperate speaker of "Meeting Across the River" feels it will just take one simple criminal act to alleviate his poverty.

[19] In addition to the already mentioned songs, consider the role cars (or other motorized vehicles, like motorcycles) play in "Spirit in the Night," "Backstreets," "Meeting Across the River," "Racing in the Streets," "The Promised Land," "Darkness on the Edge of Town," "The River," "Cadillac Ranch," "Stolen Car," "Drive all Night," "Wreck on the Highway," "Used Cars," "Gypsy Biker," "Hitch Hikin'," "The Wayfarer," and "Drive Fast (The Stuntman)."

[20] See Miller (2019) for an examination of the car as metonymic device across *Nebraska*.

"Thunder Road" presents an unbroken dramatic monologue (aside from the first four lines, in which the speaker establishes setting) wherein the first-person narrator offers up his rationale for why Mary should run off with him. While not as pessimistic as the songs that would populate Springsteen's next three records, "Thunder Road" is certainly less celebratory than is "Rosalita." Redemption comes from beneath a "dirty hood;" the characters recognize themselves as being less than ideal: "I'm no hero" and "You ain't a beauty;" the speaker sees himself as a "killer in the sun," while Mary, despite seeming quite young, has left a trail of boys who now stand with her "graduation gown [lying] in rags at their feet." These images, along with the "burned out Chevrolets" are entirely devoid of "Rosalita's" whimsy, connoting a place of desperation, pain, and even trauma (the gown in rags implies molestation) that must be escaped if the two characters hope to survive. Both stories are about lovers surrounded by characters looking to keep them apart and ultimately to destroy them.

"Nebraska" traffics in these same archetypal elements, but the danger that had been lurking in the dark corners of these mythologies comes to the forefront in a narrative drained of any optimism. The clearest sign of this is the lyrical absence of the car itself, the symbol of freedom in the other two songs is merely implied in "Nebraska." It has slipped below the surface of Springsteen's iceberg, meaning that we only intuit its existence through lines about going "for a ride," and travelling through the "badlands of Wyoming." It is not a focal point of the story and so contributes nothing to the construction of the speakers' heroic image, nor does it connote boundless freedom.

Consider the coda of "Thunder Road" as an example of the confluence of form and content as it pertains to Springsteen's car symbolism. When Clarence Clemens' soaring saxophone solo explodes at

the end of the song like a revving engine and spinning wheels, it takes over for the words that the speaker "ain't spoken." The musical line, with its melodic rise and fall, and looping pattern, expresses the hope, fear, and even repetitious nature that the young lovers will encounter somewhere down that road. It's a thrilling moment of optimistic ecstasy that is not diminished even after many repetitions. "Rosalita" has a similarly ecstatic Clemens coda, but "Nebraska" has none of this triumphalism, neither lyrically nor musically. Although all the songs end with instrumental codas, the willowing harmonica line is so unfocused that it creates a stark contrast to the deliberateness of Clemons' saxophone lines. Rather than a liability, however, the sparseness of Springsteen's form elevates the song's themes in ways that can be illuminated through Hemingway's theory of writing.

The key intertext behind the creation of "Nebraska" is Terrence Malick's 1973 film, *Badlands*, which Lloyd Michaels calls a "subjective adaptation of the Starkweather Case."[21] Malick, with his post-narrative, impressionistic style has gained as many fans as detractors, leaving audiences both baffled and elated by his work, often simultaneously. Springsteen's introduction to Malick came through a late-night television broadcast of *Badlands* in the fall of 1981.[22] The influence of the film was not restricted to content, as the final product evinces Springsteen's incorporation of formal qualities from Malick's work, as well as that of two other texts, particularly in terms of narrative perspective. As critics like

[21] Lloyd Michaels, *Terrence Malick* (Champagne, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 21.
[22] Warren Zanes. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's* Nebraska (New York: Crown, 2023), 111.

Michaels,[23] Robert Sinnerbrink,[24] and Malick himself have pointed out, *Badlands* presents the adult world through the eyes of a child. In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, Malick mentioned the influence of "books like *The Hardy Boys*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn*—all involving an innocent in a drama over his or her head," as well as "Nancy Drew, the children's story child detective."[25] Although seemingly incongruous, the childlike perspective on horrific events is reminiscent of another film about a serial killer, Charles Loughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). Springsteen confirmed the influence of Loughton's film in VH1's *Storytellers*, saying that he was interested in creating an "aural projection of … *Night of the Hunter*."[26]

A third intertext for "Nebraska" is the work of the Southern Gothic author Flannery O'Connor, whose influence on Springsteen is explored by Streight in his essay "Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O'Connor, and the Songstory." As Streight points out, by referencing a footnote in a Norton Anthology, O'Connor's influence on "Nebraska" is clearest in the use of the word "meanness" in the song's final line.[27] This is a direct allusion to O'Connor's character The Misfit in her celebrated story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Like both Malick and Springsteen's presentations of Starkweather, The Misfit is a character who blends ruthlessness and sensitivity. When "Nebraska's" speaker's only explanation for his actions

[23] Michaels, *Terrence Malick,* 24.
[24] Robert Sinnerbrink. *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 26-27.
[25] Michaels, *Terrence Malick,* 103.
[26] *VH1 Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomedi (2005; New York: Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.
[27] Irwin H Streight, "Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O'Connor, and the Songstory" in *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, ed. Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 136.

is that there is a "meanness in this world," the line echoes the nihilistic worldview The Misfit expresses when he says, after discounting the reality of Christ, "there's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness."[28] (O'Connor 1971, 132). The single word connection is subtle, but it manages to open the intertextual conversation between the two works by emphasizing the banality and quotidian reality of evil that O'Connor explores so devastatingly in her stories. In a 1998 interview with Will Percy, Springsteen acknowledged O'Connor's influence:

> There was something in those stories of hers that I felt captured a certain part of the American character that I was interested in writing about … It was always at the core of every one of her stories-the way that she'd left that hole there, that hole that's inside of everybody. There was some dark thing – a component of spirituality – that I sensed in her stories, and that set me off exploring characters of my own.[29]

This sort of subtle incorporation means that the Malick, Loughton, and O'Connor connections remain mostly submerged within the actual song. As does the considerable time Springsteen spent researching his subject, which went beyond familiarizing himself with the story that inspired Malick's film by reading *Caril*, the biography of Starkweather's 15-year-old accomplice Caril Ann Fugate written by Ninette Beaver, B.K.

[28] Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) in *The Complete Short Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 132.
[29] Will Percy. "Rock and Read: Will Percy Interviews Bruce Springsteen" (1998) in *Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader*, ed. June Skinner Sawyers (Penguin Books, 2004), 307.

Ribley, and Partick Terse. Wanting to know more, Springsteen called KMTV in Omaha, the station where Beaver, the first person to interview Fugate after her arrest, had worked. Surprisingly, given the time gap, Beaver still worked there and was in the office when Springsteen called.[30] In explaining his motivation for such intense research, Springsteen told Zanes that "I was up to something besides song writing … I'm not sure what I was doing. The book was pretty obvious. That was just…you could call it research. But the phone call was an unexpected thing for me to make. I'm not sure what led me to do that. But I was getting deeply into it"[31] It is difficult to define just what that "something" is, and Springsteen has never fully articulated it, but it clearly goes well beyond just getting the details right. Rather, his phone call appears to be an attempt at getting closer to his subject, as a way to embody the character(s) he is attempting to describe. "When I made that phone call," Springsteen told Zanes, "It was all just information, as far as I can understand. I've written plenty of music over the years that I've just flat out researched, to get the details right. That's a part of the kind of writing that I do. It sort of began with that in some ways, but I think there was more going on."[32]

In his *Storytellers* appearance Springsteen offers another clue, saying "You can put together a lot of detail, but unless you pull something up out of yourself, it's just going to lay flat on the page." Springsteen continues, "You've got to find out what you have in common with that character, no matter who they are and what they did."[33] He had to learn about Fugate

[30] Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 127.
[31] Ibid., 126-127.
[32] Ibid., 128.
[33] *VH1 Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomedi (2005; New York: Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.

and Starkweather to find the commonalities necessary to build the character, even if those commonalities are never outwardly expressed in the song because that research, like his use of allusion, form an invisible foundation that is vital to achieving the emotional connections at the heart of the work. As Sheeler writes, "By putting himself into these scenarios, Springsteen is able to drive home the stories in a real and sometimes frightening way. He does not seek to justify their deeds; instead, the listener gets an opportunity to see the thoughts behind the actions."[34] In describing Hemingway's approach to research and specificity that went into his work, John W. Aldridge writes that

> In order to live an authentic life and produce an authentic fiction, one has to proceed with the greatest caution and select only those experiences, express only those emotions, that have proved their validity because they have been measured against the realities of honest feeling and what one senses in one's deepest instincts to be true. The result in Hemingway's fiction is not a realistic reflection of a world but the literal manufacture of a world, piece by piece, out of the most meticulously chosen and crafted materials.[35] (Aldridge 1987, 123)

The same can be said of the world Springsteen manufactures in "Nebraska," built out of meticulously chosen elements, not only words, but the whole of the production technique, and the way both draw from the connections to the subject that come from extensive, and even obsessive,

[34] Ryan Sheeler, "A Meanness in this World: The American Outlaw as Storyteller in Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*," *American Studies Journal* 50, no. 08 (2007): 14.
[35] John W. Aldridge, "Afterthoughts on the Twenties and *The Sun Also Rises*." in *New Essays on* The Sun Also Rises, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123.

research. Yet, the results of Springsteen's efforts go beyond technique, as they led to a deeper level of philosophical engagement with the darker parts of human nature. He had been exploring these topics already on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and parts of *The River*, but songs like "State Trooper," "Atlantic City" and "Reason to Believe" on *Nebraska* reveal a deeper engagement with the depths of human depravity and desperation. In the same way that Hemingway's war experience on the sidelines of World War I and the Spanish Civil War informed the existential ideology of his novels, Springsteen's investigative drive shaped his shifting worldview in his late-1970s/early-1980s records.

The production history of *Nebraska* has been thoroughly documented by Zanes and others, but it is important to this study to consider the use of the TEAC 144 Portastudio 4-track tape recorder because it is an integral aspect of the song's formal qualities. This consumer-level multitrack recording device, which utilized commercially available cassette tapes rather than higher quality two-inch magnet tape, the industry standard at the time,[36] allowed Springsteen to work out song ideas and arrangements more efficiently and economically than working in a studio or with other musicians. After completing an LP's worth of demos, Springsteen went to work with the E Street Band, trying to re-record the songs in a studio. The process did not go well, as Springsteen wrote:

> On listening, I realized I'd succeeded in doing nothing but damaging what I'd created. We got it to sound cleaner, more hi-fi, but not nearly as atmospheric, as authentic … At the end of the day, satisfied I'd explored the music's possibilities and every blind alley, I pulled

[36] Zanes, *Deliver me From Nowhere*, 146.

out the original cassette I'd been carrying around in my jeans pocket and said, "This is it."[37]

It is key to recognize is that Springsteen's choice was, first and foremost, artistic. This lo-fi recording was not done for commercial reasons; in fact, some on his team saw it as extremely unwise to release it.[38] And transferring the material to a professional medium proved to be an arduous task[39]. The more commercial route would have been to press on in the studio, drop the songs that were not working, release the polished versions on an album with the songs that would eventually end up on *Born in the USA*, and keep to himself the fact that he thought the demos were better. None of that happened, and so we can take everything about the recording (the sparseness of the instrumentation, the uneven mix, the tape hiss throughout, the distorting buzz on certain lines, and the uneven harmonica melody) into account in reading *Nebraska* as a unified, if not premeditated, artistic statement.

Before getting into the words, it is useful to consider the music and production a bit more, since music, as Springsteen has stated, "informs the lyric with so much extra information."[40] First off, the lo-fi aesthetic of the production reflects something of the improvisational nature of Starkweather and Fugate's spree. Theirs was not a plotted journey, rather, one horrific choice required another, until they felt they had to kill everyone

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[37] Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 300.
[38] Especially since he had several the songs that would become major hits when released on 1984's *Born in the USA*, already in the can (Zanes 2023, 176).
[39] See Zanes (2023) 191-199 for an admirably thorough and technical (while still accessible) history of the challenging process of bringing what was on the cassette to the masses.
[40] *VH1 Storytellers: Bruce Springsteen*, directed by Dave Diomedi (Columbia Music Video, 2005), DVD.

who crossed their paths. Springsteen, in 1982, was a far cry from an amateur musician, but the use of the TEAC 144 along with the rushed and unrehearsed nature of his performance, gives the record the feel of an amateurish production. This is not a negative, as the ongoing success and discourse around the whole record can attest to, but it changes the way we understand the finished product.

Nebraska, as a whole, with its lack of rigid professionalism, represents a form of child's play, something that seems out of step with a lot of the very dark material on the album, especially the title track, and yet adds important thematic layers to the whole project. Thus, Springsteen is breaking the rules of the professional musician, just as Malick broke the rules of the established Hollywood narrative form, and Starkweather inflicted unintended terror on a series of communities in a way that could be read as amateurish. The form here contributes to Springsteen's personification of Starkweather as an enthusiastic amateur who does not fully considering the ramification and consequences of his actions as a professional killer might.

Performing those actions with any foresight, however, would have significantly changed the nature of the acts by removing the amateurish aspect manifest in the general sloppiness of each product. In the same way that Springsteen's performances on the recording would have likely changed had he thought what he was recording would have been heard by the world, Starkweather might have acted differently had he realized where each violent act would have led. If nothing else, both men might have tried to clean things up a little more, in each of their respective situations, instead of leaving messy trails behind. Hence, the entirety of the song's unpolished form reflects the nature of Starkweather's amateurish killing spree without ever drawing explicit attention to what it is doing.

Another important aural attribute of "Nebraska" is the faint, but nevertheless present glockenspiel. This song is not the first time Springsteen has incorporated the small metallophone into his arrangements[41], yet its inclusion here is another direct allusion to Malick's film. The musical score of *Badlands* makes frequent use of compositions from *Musik für Kinder* by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman, which are a part of Orff's *Schulwerk*, a music education program for children. Percussive instruments, like the xylophone, are a key part of Orff's method and are particularly prominent in pieces like *Gassenhauer*, which are used throughout *Badlands*. This association between Orff, these instruments, and childhood is key in considering the way the film is constructed as a child's view of the adult world. Springsteen, in his nod to Malick's film score, employs the glockenspiel because, as he told Zanes, "it harkened back to childhood, [and] gave a sense of coming from that childlike space." Springsteen continued, "there's something in the instrument that reminds me of what's used on [*Badlands'*] soundtrack."[42]

Yet, despite its significance to Springsteen's conception and memory of the song[43], the glockenspiel is almost inaudible for most of the released version; however, the formal importance of the glockenspiel's faint presence is illuminated through Hemingway's Iceberg Principle. There is no blatant moment where the instrument announces its presence, nor does Springsteen take a heavy-handed approach to pushing what it might be doing thematically. Rather, the sounds drift under the surface of the

[41] The high-pitched tinkling tones of the glockenspiel can be heard, with varying prominence, on the studio recordings of "Thunder Road," "Born to Run," "Candy's Room," "Prove it all Night," and "Hungry Heart."
[42] Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 152.
[43] It also comes up in his *Storytellers* episode when he talks about creating a child's version of the adult world like Loughton does in *The Night of the Hunter*.

arrangement, bobbing up occasionally enough to be noticed and subtly evoke the connection to childhood, thus accomplishing the goal of creating an "aural version" of Loughton's (and Malick's) films in a way that is never explicitly stated, but is perhaps felt and vaguely heard.

As much as the music and form subtly reveal underlying meaning, it is the lyrics in "Nebraska" that best exemplify Hemingway's principle. Consider the opening memory: "I saw her standing on her front lawn / Just twirling her baton." The line is simple, but the image conveys a great deal of information. As Springsteen points out in *Born to Run*, in the *Nebraska* songs, "The writing was in the details; the twisting of a ring, the twirling of a baton, was where these songs found their character."[44] The 'front lawn' evokes a suburban setting, and the baton (another reference to Malick's film) tells us something about the age of the woman the speaker is describing. Baton twirling requires enough physical strength and coordination, as well as considerable time and effort to master, signifying the ambition and drive of the character, suggesting that the speaker is not watching a young child; however, baton twirling is also an activity that is usually outgrown, indicating that this is likely not an adult woman either. Hence, the listener can quickly intuit that the speaker is describing a girl in her adolescence, an important liminal space in human development where the pressures and attractions of both childhood and adulthood pull at a person. Without overt description, Springsteen has established a rough age, a demographical location, aspects of a character's personality, and the theme of liminality in a single, somewhat ambiguous line.

These kinds of subtle gestures are as important to shaping the speaker as they are in shaping Fugate's character, and the world they both

[44] Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 299.

inhabit. One of the most effective techniques Springsteen employs to this end is direct address. The honorific "sir" is used by the speaker four times throughout the song, and although it could be read as similar to the sort of ambiguous second person address, he often employs[45], the fifth verse identifies the auditor: a "Sheriff." This allows us to identify the song as a dramatic monologue, which Alan Rauch states "is present in most of Springsteen's work," but "is most striking in the album *Nebraska*."[46] In describing the form, Rauch writes that "as readers of the monologue we encounter that character – who is in the process of speaking to an identifiable but silent listener – in a dramatic moment in his or her life. During the course of the monologue the speaker reveals, often unwittingly, deep personal traits."[47] As is the case with Robert Browning's famous dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess," we are listening in to a one-sided conversation which reveals more about the speaker (whether Browning's Duke or Springsteen's Starkweather) than he seems intent on sharing.

The direct address in "Nebraska" manages to capture, in the most efficient way possible, the unnerving charm of the central murderer. Malick's cinematic version of Starkweather (named Kip and played by Martin Sheen) has an unsettling ability to turn on the charm, even as he is about to do horrific things. Kip uses 'sir' to address the father of Holly (Malick's version of Fugate, played by Sissy Spacek), even as he threatens him with a gun; he shows genuine interest in Cato (Kip's friend, played by

[45] Springsteen's oeuvre is filled with second person addressees like 'son,' 'sonny,' 'baby,' and many uses of the indefinite 'you.'
[46] Alan Rauch, "Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue," *American Studies* 29, no. 1, (1988): 33.
[47] Rauch, "Dramatic Monologue," 30.

Ramon Bieri, that they hope will give them shelter), even though he will not think twice about shooting him a few scenes later after he attempts to flee.

After being arrested, Kip is full of compliments for the officers, saying they "performed like a couple of heroes," until the sheriff feels so conflicted about his being charmed that he throws Kip's hat out of the car to reassert his authority. Kip indulges in his celebrity when speaking to reporters in the hanger, throwing out personal items like saintly relics; and when he is taken away by helicopter, Kip again fixates on complimenting an officer on his hat. It does not seem like he thinks he will gain anything through his politeness, other than to be liked for that moment. Of course, Kip is not Starkweather, but his character is inspired by him, and Springsteen's personification of Starkweather owes as much to Kip as it does to the historical figure. This connection allows Springsteen to emphasize one of Malick's major themes: the way outer facades can cover over the sometimes-dark realities hiding beneath, and the way a culture's obsession with the trappings of celebrity—whether artistic, athletic, or political—helps to facilitate that phenomenon[48].

Furthermore, using direct address frees Springsteen from having to describe the way his version of Starkweather uses a seemingly genuine obsequiousness to disarm, and even gain trust from his interlocutors. Rather, we experience that obsequiousness in two ways: the introduction of the sheriff so late into the song means that for the first half of the song listeners may assume themselves to be the addressee. Listener and sheriff are both experiencing the speaker work his charm. Just like the characters in the film that laugh at Kip's jokes and are lulled into siding with him,

[48] Sissy Spacek articulates this reading particularly well in an interview included in the Criterion Collection edition of *Badlands*.

including Holly, we can begin to ignore the horrific things he has done as we empathize with his plight. This is all part of the way Springsteen finds his own way into the character--by placing himself in the role of someone that knows he has done something terribly wrong but still wants to see himself as a good person. The speaker refers to "innocent people" that have died, so he is not framing himself as some sort of bringer of justice, but quite the opposite. Yet that does not mean that he does not want to be liked or, more importantly, remembered. According to Jeff McArthur, the grandson of Fugate's lawyer John McArthur, Starkweather refused to plead insanity because "nobody remembers a crazy man."[49] Instead, Starkweather (at least in the constructed form Springsteen is working with) seemed to intuitively know that he was constructing a public persona based on the James Dean archetype, despite, according to Zanes, being the polar opposite of Dean in terms of charisma and looks.[50] (Zanes 2023, 123).

Whether it was the media's construction, Sheen's performance in Malick's movie, or the general public's morbid fascination with serial killers, Starkweather's public persona has become a mythologized version of a person that, by most accounts, was below average in terms of stereotypical ideas of beauty, intelligence, and personality.[51] "Nebraska," however, is written from Starkweather's point of view; therefore, Springsteen's research into his personality had to include both the real and the fantasy versions of Starkweather, so that both could inform his characterization. This is the preparatory work that Hemingway sees as so necessary for someone to write well.

[49] Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 122.
[50] Ibid., 123.
[51] Ibid., 123.

Springsteen's research meant he came to understand something of Starkweather (or at least his constructed persona), his situation, and his time. He does not spell out that information, but channels it into the way the character addresses his listener. Springsteen is able to show rather than tell, which allows the listener to feel emotionally rather than grasp intellectually who the speaker is, and how he sees himself, which in turn forces listeners/readers to consider their own personal responses to the character. As Rauch points out, Springsteen's technique "allows our sympathy to be conscripted initially (often, as in "Nebraska," at the expense of judgement); but finally, when we have heard the entire song and can no longer empathize, judgement remains available to us in order to distance ourselves from the speaker."[52]

Springsteen's use of narrative gaps and non-sequiturs also contributes to the construction of his speaker's psyche. There is a major gap, for instance, in the first stanza between going for a ride and the death of ten people, a gap that is partially filled in as the song continues. In the second verse he describes some of his route (from Lincoln, Nebraska to the badlands of Wyoming), the type of gun he is carrying (sawed-off .410), and what he did ("killed everything in my path"). The specificity here is as important to crafting the character as is the vagueness of the previous verse. His movement through the so-called "heartland" of America connotes the corruption of an area thought to be safe and wholesome.

The speaker here is a snake in the garden, bringing violence and destruction. The last line of the verse is delivered with the same matter-of-factness as the rest, even though the speaker is confessing to a heinous crime. There is no attempt to soften the reality of what he is saying, and

[52] Raunch, "Dramatic Monologue," 37-38.

there is no sign of remorse. The speaker is simply relaying the reality of his actions in the same way he relayed the reality of his movements and the reality of his weapon, thus employing that same illusion of objectivity that is also vital to Hemingway's style. Vital because it replaces the significant explanation of why with the less significant details of how and thus seems to provide answers while actually obfuscating them.

The speaker's statement that he does not feel sorry for what he has done, and in fact, sees the whole endeavor as "fun," alongside his recognition of the "innocence" of his victims in the first verse, and the flippant way he talks about being executed, emphasize that Springsteen has shaped the character not as a sociopathic killer without knowledge of right or wrong. Rather, the Starkweather Springsteen has crafted is well aware of what he has done and is more than a little arrogant about his deeds. We can consider Springsteen's choice to include Starkweather's request to have Caril Ann, his "pretty baby," sitting on his lap when he is electrocuted, as a part of this arrogance, especially as it speaks to the way Starkweather changed his story regarding Fugate's innocence during the trial. These moments also speak to Starkweather's actual personality and behavior at the time of his arrest, as the suggestion that Fugate be executed while sitting on his lap is also taken from his own words.[53] In each of these cases, Springsteen is providing just the tip of the iceberg with his short glimpses at historical details and letting the rest of the story drift below the surface. The stripped-down nature of the song compels listeners toward a deeper consideration and encourages us to make our own judgements about the macho posturing of the speaker.

[53] Zanes, *Deliver me from Nowhere*, 126.

The structure of the song further reflects Springsteen's attempts to capture the wandering and narcissistic nature of Starkweather's mind through its loops and narrative jumps. Consider the shifting approach to each verse: while the first and second verses are purely reportorial, verse three injects some personal reflection into the middle of the narrative, as if the weight of the speaker's confession has just hit him, and he feels it necessary to justify it somehow, though he cannot. In verse four, the speaker returns to his narrative to describe the jury finding him guilty and the judge sentencing him to death. In the second half of the verse, the speaker seems to begin to imagine that death as he describes how it may occur in a "prison storeroom/with leather straps across my chest." Unlike the first two verses, the reportorial tone here is overtaken by the speaker's speculation. This imagined scenario continues into the fifth verse, where the speaker again pictures the moment of his execution. The obsessive looping of the speaker's mind is clear when the sixth verse restates the information from the fourth verse in a slightly more poetic manner. The second line takes on almost Shakespearian syntax in the way its clauses are arranged. Rather than his soul being hurled into a great void, its "into that great void my soul'd be hurled." Of course, this helps to make the rhyme with world work better, but the archaic construction of the line is an attempt at formality that reveals the high-minded aspirations of Springsteen's Starkweather character. In this way, the lines capture his fixation on posterity as he restates the same information with a classical flair, either to make himself, or the event, more important, by elevating it through a formalized poetic phrase.

In terms of the narrative space given to killing and death in the song, the speaker spends far more time considering and describing his own impending death than he does on the deaths of all his victims. This is, of

course, a natural inclination; however, it becomes more revealing if we consider the purpose of this dramatic monologue. Ostensibly, it seems that the speaker is attempting both to describe and explain his actions. Hence, he begins with simple description, statements of facts, locations, weapons, etc., but quickly moves into an emotional response. It is as if the gravity of his crimes hits him mid-discourse, and so he must re-assert the tough-guy persona he has been crafting, the sort of persona that could call a killing-spree "fun." Here form takes over from content in representing the speaker's psyche. We are glimpsing his thought patterns, and we can see that they have been fully overtaken by his complete self-interest. Hemingway does something similar in *The Sun Also Rises* when Jake regards himself, and his wounded genitals, in the mirror of his bedroom. His thoughts dart about, from comments on his furniture, to the quality of bullfighting papers, to the architecture in Italy, to the odd behavior of an Italian general, to his unrequited love for Brett, until every thought becomes about the injustice of his injury, and he is overcome with tears.[54] Hemingway does not have to tell us that Jake's trauma sends him into depressive spirals because we are experiencing it. The same is true of Starkweather here. Springsteen's narrator does not have to tell us that he is fixating on his own death; it is impressed upon us, even as what is being expressed says the opposite.

After the fifth verse, the form of the song changes ever so slightly with the injection of a short harmonica interlude. It comes directly after the speaker's dark joke about having his "pretty baby" sit on his lap while he is executed. This longer than typical instrumental interlude, accompanied by the wail-like sound of the harmonica, as Char Roone Miller points out,

[54] Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun also Rises* (1926) (Scribners, 2006), 38-39.

"evokes a foreign yet bodily sound – one that … does not directly respond to the authoritative demand to explain its agency but does operate in parallel with the human voice."[55] The harmonica represents a pause, a moment for the speaker to reflect on the cruelty of his statements, with possible regret. The rawness of the instrumentation evokes a connection to the speaker's inner struggle that the attempts at macho posturing found in his words cannot achieve. Miller calls the words an "alienated human voice" that is offset by "the intimate sound of the harmonica."[56] When this wailing ends, however, the weight of the speaker's actions returns, and he repeats the same information from the fourth verse before recounting a conversation he had with an anonymous "they": "They wanted to know why I did what I did / Well sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world." The pronoun "they" is key here, as it connotes a group that has asked the speaker a question. These could be reporters or police officers, and so it is instantly reminiscent of the final scenes from *Badlands* in which Kip attempts to charm a group of reporters before being loaded into a police car. The whole of the verse, and especially the last two lines are performative: the speaker is telling us about a time he was asked to tell a group of people the thing that he is now telling us. The group is not identified, yet "they" are there, informing every aspect of what the speaker says, including the last instance of direct address using the honorific "sir." The speaker is playing the part of a 'good old boy,' supplicating to the authority of the law in order to garner favor, despite having no actual respect for the law or the value of any human life, other than his own. In this way, these lines articulate everything that is prominent about the real

[55] Char Roone Miller, "'Ghostly Voices Rose from the Fields': *Nebraska* and Political Hopelessness," *American Political Thought* 8, no. 1 (2019): 136.
[56] Miller, "Ghostly Voices," 137.

Starkweather, Kip from *Badlands*, and even Mitchum's Harry Powell from *The Night of the Hunter* – all evil men with a desire for fame and the remarkable ability to charm even their most fervent detractors. The word "meanness" in the final line that also draws an allusion to The Misfit, another figure that, despite espousing horrific worldviews, manages to garner empathy from his auditor: the grandmother, whose family The Misfit's henchmen have just murdered. Similarly, we as listeners, and Springsteen as the writer, find ourselves empathizing, in the way Rauch describes, with a character who has enacted extreme violence on wholly innocent people.

In his essay on Springsteen's connections to O'Connor, Streight writes that "Springsteen is remarkable as a songwriter in his intention and ability to step inside someone else's skin, to see the world through their eyes, and to step back and allow his own voice, as he says of the *Joad* songs 'to disappear into the voices of those [I've] chosen to write about.'"[57] This ability to step inside someone else's skin has everything to do with Springsteen being a writer who, as Hemingway says, "knows enough about what he is writing about."[58] "Nebraska" the song, and *Nebraska* the record, represents a culmination of the song writing journey Springsteen was on in the first decade of his career as he moved from the lyrically verbose, and poetically complex songs of his first two albums, through the significantly simplified, yet far more evocative songs of his next three records, to the dark, and often disturbing, worlds he creates through remarkable lyrical economy on *Nebraska*.

[57] Streight, "Songstory," 140.
[58] Hemingway, *Death*, 192.

Yet, despite the lack of lyrical and musical grandiosity he had become known for, Springsteen still manages to pack a considerable amount of narrative and thematic meaning into the mere 167 words of "Nebraska" by submerging so much of what informs the narrative. In letting go of his earlier hyper-specific, overly detailed, and verbose style of writing lyrics, Springsteen allows us to become active interpreters, and even makers of meaning alongside him. Just like when we read a Hemingway text informed by his Iceberg Principle, in "Nebraska" we get to "participate actively in decoding the action."[59]

For Springsteen's part, this is a great compliment to his audience, as he gives us space to discover the depths of meaning at play, rather than deliver it in some didactic manner. This approach also reveals the level of confidence he had in his songwriting ability at that time. Springsteen, and others, have described his live performances not as just concerts, but as being "in concert" with the audience. Indeed, his performances are more than just unidirectional experiences that go from the stage outward, but, at their best, become exchanges of emotional energy from performer to spectator and back again until those demarcations lose much of their meaning[60] As this close reading shows, audience participation in not only part of his live performance but is a fundamental aspect of his songwriting. The subtle lyrical and instrumental details submerged in "Nebraska" create a space for Springsteen to find himself in his characters, and for his listeners to find themselves in his songs.

[59] Stoneback, *Reading*, 211.
[60] Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (Waveland Press, 2011), 38.