“Hearts Recycled but Never Saved”

A Search for Self in the Modern Day Dystopia of Green Day’s *American Idiot*

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Master’s Thesis

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May 2016

Abstract

Tross nærmere ti år med mager kommersiell suksess opplevde den amerikanske rocketrioen Green Day enorm suksess med utgivelsen av albumet *American Idiot* i 2004. Konseptalbumets voldsomme popularitet ble i stor grad tilskrevet dens evne til å til å ta pulsen på en spesiell tid for USA. Landet var et snaut år inn i krigsoperasjonen Operation Iraqi Freedom og president George W. Bush hadde stor oppslutning blant det amerikanske folk. *American Idiot* ble ansett som et angrep på presidenten og hans politikk. Albumet beskrev gjennom sine karakter ikke bare en tilstand av motstand, men en tilstand av apati. *American Idiot* står fortsatt meget sterkt i amerikansk populærkultur i dag og har blant annet blitt omdannet til en suksessrik Broadway-musikal. Albumet har blitt tillagt et overdrevent politisk fokus både av allmennheten og de få akademiske tekster som eksisterer omkring arbeidet. Denne oppgaven etterstreber å undersøke hva det er som har gjort at verket stadig står så sterkt og argumenterer for at karakterene i historien representerer evige og langt større spørsmål enn akkurat hvordan apatien følt av enkeltindivider omkring USAs krigføringer på 2000-tallet fortonet seg. I første kapittel ser jeg på *American Idiots* forståelse av det post-industrielle samfunn og maktelitens kontroll av massene og samspillet mellom mediene og folket. Videre følger jeg første del av reisen til albumets sentrale karakter og utforsker hvordan hans tanker og handlinger går inn i diskusjon med en rekke filosofiske tekster, først og fremst Søren Kierkegaards *The Present Age.* Det påfølgende kapittelet utforsker de freudianske konseptene Eros og Thanatos og hvordan å ikke hengi seg til én av dem speiler Kierkegaards påstand om at det moderne mennesket kveles av refleksjon og således har sluttet å handle. I det siste kapittelet ser jeg på hvordan albumet snakker direkte til overnevnte påstand av Kierkegaard før den sentrale karakterens retur til utgangspunktet gir næring til en diskusjon om hvordan mennesket i den moderne verden kan leve et autentisk, fritt liv, og om det i det hele tatt er mulig. Helt avslutningsvis argumenterer jeg for at albumets dystre materie og konklusjon ikke nødvendigvis betyr at verket symboliserer en framtid der individet har mistet all makt over egne liv og om hvordan verket resonnerer med det filosofen Herbert Marcuse kaller ”kunstens kategoriske imperativ.”

Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Lene M. Johannessen. She has been a tremendous help throughout, especially early on as I tried to find my direction. I would also like to thank her for her open-mindedness regarding my primary source material, of which many were skeptical. Her enthusiasm and our constructive conversations have been of utmost importance to the outcome of this project.

Thank you to Kristine for being ever-present and making sure that my nutritional needs have been taken care of every single day during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank her for (almost) always being up for some light-hearted banter, which is a great stress relief after a long day of writing and reading.

I would like to thank family and friends, especially the former, for asking about the project's progression and my general well being.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen for granting me the funds to travel to London to see the musical adaption of *American Idiot* at the West End. Even if the musical did not end up being a big part of the thesis the experience was nevertheless great.

Thank you to fellow students for constructive feedback during the Work in Progress seminar. A special thank you to Yngve Kirkerød, who took time out of his busy schedule to read through the text in an effort to eliminate any potential linguistic blunders or other atrocities I might have committed.

And last, but certainly not least, thank you to Francesco Totti. Without your humble presence upon this Earth my life would not have been the same. Grazie Capitano.

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Preface

I got my hands on *American Idiot* for the first time on Christmas Eve 2004 as it steadily emerged through a gradually more torn wrapping paper. 12 years later, I have the opportunity to thoroughly dig through its first layer of meaning and, hopefully, all the way down to its core.

My only reservation about diving into *American Idiot* was its creator's lack of academic credibility. It is fair to say that among popular, more or less contemporary American artists, Green Day has not been held to the same standards as say Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen. However, we should not dismiss someone's potential contribution to a possible enticing conversation just because their music and audience might be viewed as somewhat less sophisticated than for instance the artists mentioned above.

When I began this project its direction was unclear. The idea initially was to examine the unexamined themes of *American Idiot* through a textual analysis. But it soon became apparent that looking solely at the lyrics would not be enough to account for the album's totality and complexity. I identified three facets that made up the totality of the work: the lyrics, the music and the booklet. By doing so, the thesis already from the start regarded *American Idiot* as far more complex than it has been given credit for, examining previously overlooked elements vital to its totality.

Yet, exactly where the project would go thematically was still unclear to me. I chose to write about *American Idiot* because I saw so many signs suggesting that it had to have something more to it than merely saying that George W. Bush was doing a bad job at running the U.S. One theme that had always stood out to me more than a political one was a sense of desperation, of struggle in trying to make sense of oneself

and one's surroundings. I therefore spent the summer before the project was due to start by reading texts by existential philosophers. My suspicions were confirmed as I found writings pertaining to what I felt was an overlooked part of *American Idiot.* Especially *The Present Age* by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard seemed to closely echo what I believed was an extensive critique in *American Idiot,* not of the U.S. under president Bush in particular, but of modern society and the modern individual in general. *The Present Age,* published in 1846, provided the framework necessary to bring *American Idiot* with me out of the prevailing notion of the album as a piece of work only relevant to the time of its release. Additionally, I read scholarly works on music to better understand how to best relay the incredibly rich specter of emotions music can convey. Finally, the booklet has been by my side every single second during the writing process.

In essence, the thesis is a very close reading of the characters and what they represent and convey about modernity, individualism and self-realization. By incorporating all the elements mentioned above, it makes for a very dense thesis. Sacrifices had to be made: I have not accounted for every single lyric, every single note or every word written in the booklet. But it ended up as what it had to become. Since there has been done so little work dealing with *American Idiot* from a non-political perspective, this thesis had to bite over all the elements previously overlooked to account for the work's totality. Whether it bit off more than it could chew is not for me to decide, but it can hopefully pave the way for more critical research on *American Idiot.*

Introduction:

"A New Kind of Tension"

When California-based punk-rock band Green Day released their seventh studio album *American Idiot* in September of 2004, they had been largely irrelevant, with the notable exception of one song, for the better part of 10 years. The three-piece had struggled to recreate the success of their major label debut *Dookie* from 1994. Lyrically, early Green Day and primary songwriter Billie Joe Armstrong had the knack for accurately portraying teenage angst and boredom and the band soared to stardom with tracks such as "Basket Case," "Longview" and "When I Come Around." Commercial success gradually decreased though, with the 2000 effort *Warning* as a low-point in that respect. Front man and guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong, bassist Mike Dirnt and drummer Trè Cool's (real name Frank Edwin Wright III) next move would be a surprise that turned out to be a game-changer. They recorded a concept album entitled *American Idiot.*

American Idiot contains 13 songs and revolves mainly around the character Jesus of Suburbia, a name and role adopted by the story's protagonist. Briefly summarized, Jesus, wrestling with feelings of alienation, marginalization and rage, decides that in order to find some kind of truth or meaning to his existence, he has to leave Suburbia behind and head for the city. After some time there the character St. Jimmy emerges, a character that will later be revealed as the protagonist's alter ego. St. Jimmy is a prophet of destruction and rampage, outspoken against the powers that be, embodying all the societal suppressed emotions of the protagonist. Together the

two enter a downward spiral culminating in St. Jimmy's suicide and the return to a life Jesus attempted to leave behind. The female alibi of the story is a character simply referred to as Whatsername. Like the other characters of our story, she is not at ease with what life has to offer. Rhetorically coming across as less aggressive than her counterparts, the main song from her point of view suggests a strong opinion on the questions this thesis raises through its analysis of the album. While Whatsername leaves the protagonist behind relatively quickly, she remains the only glimmer of hope at the conclusion of a tale that ends on a rather bleak note.

While some songs on *Warning* had provided social commentary, there was little to suggest that Green Day's next album would be a political heavyweight in the form of a rock-opera. In theory, releasing a concept album that could be understood as nothing short of a 13-track attack on the state and values of contemporary American society in the midst of then president George W. Bush's widely supported mission to eradicate the "Axis of Evil," seemed like a bad idea.

Perhaps most descriptive of President Bush's support at the time were the reactions after the then best-selling female group of all time, Dixie Chicks, performed at the Sheperd's Bush in London in March 2003. At the conclusion of their melancholic song "Travelin' Soldier," depicting the story of an 18 year-old who gets sent to Vietnam and returns in a casket, the group received overwhelming response from the audience as the USA's invasion of Iraq was imminent. This prompted lead-singer and native Texan, Natalie Maines, to tell the audience that "we're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas" (*Shut Up and Sing)*. The comment was mentioned in a review by British newspaper *The Guardian* and then picked up by the Associated Press. When the 12 words crossed the Atlantic it stirred absolute uproar. The band was immediately cut out of rotation by country radio, and radio

stations put out garbage cans so people could throw their Dixie Chicks CD's in the trash. People rallied to burn their CD's and ran them over with tractors. Americans phoned radio stations to express exactly what they felt after Maines' comments, and statements ranged from "they should strap Natalie to a bomb and drop her over Baghdad," to television-host and political commentator Bill O'Reilly stating on national television that the Dixie Chicks were "foolish women who deserve to be slapped around," to the slightly more amusing "freedom of speech is fine, but you don't do it outside the country" (*Shut Up and Sing).* The comment in London would also lead to death threats and a Senate hearing.[1]

Such then, was the contemporary climate in which Green Day released *American Idiot.* Sure, Green Day and the Dixie Chicks belong to different musical genres with different audiences, but the aftermath of the split-second comment, which absolutely did not warrant such a vile response, clearly exemplifies the wave of patriotism that rode America in the wake of 9/11. It is of course not hard to imagine why the U.S. public endorsed swift justice towards those who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. However, the aftermath of 9/11 created a national state of paranoia and 2001 saw an increase in anti-Muslim attacks by 1700 %. Following up on those numbers, Lacey B. Long comments in *American Idiot to the 'American Eulogy': Green Day's Rock Operas as Apocalyptical Political Protest During the George W. Bush Administration* that "the American Idiot was no longer just the President but millions of his constituents, people who promoted and acted upon rumor, ignorance, bigotry and fear" (23).

As we know, amid this collective state of xenophobia, President Bush was able to ride the patriotic wave to gain support for invading Iraq. Claiming that Iraq

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[1] All these events are chronicled in the 2006 documentary *Shut Up and Sing.*
[2] Also referred to by scholars as "short story composite" or "composite novel," the

had weapons of mass destruction, the President played on the fear and paranoia that emerged after the Twin Towers collapsed: “We will meet that threat now with our air force, navy, coast guard and marines, so that we do not have to meet it later with armies of firefighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities.” There was no evidence that Saddam Hussein and Iraq had these weapons, but Bush told the public convincingly that, “we will accept no other outcome but victory” (Announcement Operation Iraqi Freedom, 19 March 2003).

Despite the political climate it entered, *American Idiot* became a massive success going on to sell over 6 million copies in the U.S. alone, and this in an age where illegal downloading was starting to eat into sales, and legal downloading and streaming did not yet exist. The group brought home a Grammy in the category “Best Rock Album” at the Grammy Awards in 2005 and came in at number 22 when music magazine *Rolling Stone* ranked the 100 greatest albums of the decade (*Kerrang!* ranked it at number 1). Critics found themselves dumbfounded, with *Rolling Stone* asking: “Tell the truth: did anybody think Green Day would still be around in 2004?” (*Rolling Stone*). *American Idiot* would propel the band back to sold-out stadiums and world tours. In 2009 musical director Michael Mayer took the concept album to the stage and eventually to Broadway. In 2010 the show earned itself two Tony awards from three nominations at the 64th Tony Awards. In addition to this, Playtone Entertainment, owned by actor Tom Hanks and producer Gary Goetzman, bought the rights to turn the album into a movie with Universal distributing. The band themselves were inducted into the Rock n’ Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, an achievement that would not have been possible without *American Idiot*. Safe to say, *American Idiot* brought Green Day back from the abyss.

However, academic writing on *American Idiot* is rather limited and its presence in such texts tends to be reduced to mentions in works on music or politics. Some have delved deeper into the material of *American Idiot,* however, most notably Lacey B. Long's already mentioned MA thesis *American Idiot to the "American Eulogy": Green Day's Rock Operas as Apocalyptic Political Protest During the George W. Bush Administration* (The University of Georgia, 2011). Long takes on multiple songs and even incorporates the band's follow-up album *21.st Century Breakdown* into her discussion. It makes for a fascinating read, even if we might respectfully disagree about some lyrical interpretations. Although Long's thesis is primarily concerned with *American Idiot* as a work dealing with immediate issues of contemporary America, as opposed to this thesis' broader focus, it is worth revisiting for interesting views.

This thesis' aim is to capture *American Idiot* in a far wider net than just analyzing it in light of the political climate of its release, as has been the norm so far. The longevity of the record, the fact that it has gone on to become a successful musical now playing in multiple countries, and a feature film based on the record is in development, surely suggest that it has more to it than just an anti-Bush message. Of course, suburban youth felt alienated long before George W. Bush stepped into the Oval Office, and the struggle to make meaning of one's existence is almost as old as man himself. Already in 1846 Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote about the mishaps of his own times in *The Present Age.* In it, Kierkegaard laments many of the same things about society that Jesus and St. Jimmy do in *American Idiot.* In "Jesus of Suburbia," Jesus states that "To live and not to breathe/Is to die in tragedy," signifying that to be alive does not necessarily mean that you are leading a fulfilling life. This closely echoes Kierkegaard's sentiment in *The Present Age* that our

passionless age has gained "in *scope what it loses in intensity"* (68) and that man is no longer willing to "suffer and be true to himself" (69). Man, according to Kierkegaard, has stopped being true to himself by using his gained scope to be everything and in turn be nothing. This condition of living without truly being alive is what scares Jesus in "Jesus of Suburbia." The observations made in *The Present Age* provide a surprisingly poignant framework for the reading of the characters of *American Idiot* as individuals struggling apathetically with modern society in general and not only with U.S. society in the time of a warmongering president.

In addition to Kierkegaard, my exploration of the themes raised in *American Idiot,* individual responsibility, herd mentality, capitalism and the possibility for inducing lasting personal or societal change, will bring other philosophers into the text. Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Guy Debord and Herbert Marcuse are thinkers whose ideas intertwine with the themes of *American Idiot.* Common for the secondary material presented as part of the analyses in the following chapters is a focus on the paradox of the struggle for individualism in an age where, at the end of the day, we are all the same. Whether the literature or philosophical ideas concern existentialism or popular culture, they all see society as a spectacle that creates a lot of noise without there really being much to make noise about. We fall in line with whatever line we are supposed to fall in line with (Nietzsche). Everything we do is to be reduced to something that is common so that we do not stand out from the public (Kierkegaard). We chase individualism as we are encouraged to do, but we chase it to the point where everybody ends up the same. We live capitalism as we have made ourselves dependent on its product, and only for brief moments are we able to escape our reality where we are defined by society and boxed in by that definition (Debord, Fiske). We face apathy as our lives turn into mere

episodes, where days become indistinguishable as the pattern of everyday life repeats itself. It is because of this apathy the characters in *American Idiot* seek control over their own life-projects (*American Idiot)*.

The concept album is, according to the *Collins Dictionary,* "an album that has a unifying theme or that tells a single story," as opposed to the more traditional album format of single entities with no relation to each other except for their creator. This thesis sees the stories of *American Idiot* as entering the tradition of the American short-story cycle.[2] From the earliest instances of the short-story cycle, two ideas emerged as to how a story would fit in with a cycle, being, according to James A. Nagel in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*: "That each contributing unit of the work be an independent narrative episode, and that there be some principle of unification that gives structure, movement, and thematic development to the whole" (2). In other words, a short-story cycle contains stories that are unified by a common theme, a protagonist, setting, etc. As examples Nagel uses William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses,* Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time,* John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* to illustrate the genre (6).

At first glance, *American Idiot* might seem more like a straightforward story than a collection of short stories. It is easy to see how each piece fit together and therefore is part of a coherent whole, but perhaps harder to see that they stand on their own individually. I will argue that the clue is mainly in the music. As an integral part of each piece, the great variance in sound sets each story vastly apart. The soundscapes provide each story with their own, unique structure and in turn, as we will see, a true sense of independence. Without this independence, it would, for

[2] Also referred to by scholars as "short story composite" or "composite novel," the names offering slight differences in definition, I will use short-story cycle in this thesis except when quotes use other names.

example, make no sense to release singles. If one song did not work without the others, a single would leave the listener unfulfilled. When *American Idiot* is comprised of 13 independent songs telling a unified story, this is possible because "the stories in a cycle have a dual existence that the chapters of a novel seldom have" (Nagel, 248). Thus, the double-life of each song enables the components of *American Idiot* to stand alone as individual narratives as well as together as a coherent album. This duality both enriches and complicates the story as part of the short-story cycle: it is able to account for both lyrics and the soundscapes they are held by.

With that in mind, music obviously has to be of utmost interest for this thesis. For not only have previous works on *American Idiot* overstated the album's political focus, they have arrived at their conclusions by focusing exclusively on the lyrics. I propose that in order to do a comprehensive and thorough analysis one has to focus on three aspects of the album: the lyrics, the music and the booklet. The lyrics are instrumental in trying to decipher the meaning of the album, but the other two aspects are also important tools in the crafting of this coherent piece of art. The music, other than for the reasons outlined above, is a significant part of the narrative and a device in the telling of the story. The instrumentation and melodiousness of a song is especially relevant in the detection of moods, whether the mood of a character or in a more general sense. The music is also a transitional device, in some ways more important than the lyrics in moving the story along and setting the pace of the narrative. How the music flows from one song into the next is also of interest; for instance, an abrupt musical change can indicate a sudden alteration of atmosphere or pace. In other words, the music contributes both to the independence of each song as well as being a major contributor to the unification of those pieces.

Additionally, the album's booklet stands as a vital part of *American Idiot's* complex totality. Apart from the band name and album title, the cover of *American Idiot* comprises a sole image. The image is of a raised arm clenching its fist around a hand grenade, safety pin still intact. The grenade is not in the usual color green, but is instead red, as the grenade itself is shaped like a heart.[3] Blood is running down from the heart-shaped grenade onto the white arm holding it. Both the arm and the grenade appear quite cubical, almost Picasso-esque. This style combined with the imagery itself makes for an intense cover, the grenade being the last symbol of resistance, a symbol the hand desperately tries to hold onto.

The booklet pages themselves take the form of a journal. The first page is a day schedule where the track list of the album has been crammed together, unsuccessfully trying to fit in with the standard seven-days-a-week. At the top it reads "Property of Jimmy. So stay out!" with the last sentence forcefully underlined. From there on out the lyrics follow each other in accordance with the chronology of the album. As appropriate for journal entries, each lyric is accompanied by a date (except for the song "Extraordinary Girl"). This underlines the album's telling of the story in a chronological order, the first entry being on February 23 and the last, after moving through the year, being on January 1. Another facet of the booklet that will be examined throughout is that the lyrics are written by hand. The handwriting can often reveal differences in the writer's state of mind: sometimes the writing appears to have been calmly written, other times in haste. Together with the content of the lyrics, these differences serve to underline variations between the songs and where the writer finds himself emotionally at any given time. On a couple of occasions, however, the handwriting does not belong to the journal's owner at all; another character has

[3] This image is referenced in the song "She's a Rebel": "She's holding on my heart like a hand grenade."

gained access and penned a part of the story. All these elements constitute a part of the complete work, and by treating these aspects as vital components of *American Idiot's* totality, our discussion will be far more comprehensive than previous work that has been done.

Bearing the "trinity" of aesthetic components that I have identified as crucial to understanding the totality of *American Idiot* in mind, this thesis consequently aims to understand the album as a far more ambitious and multi-layered work than it has been considered in the past. By exploring the characters' existential crisis as something not exclusively provoked by George W. Bush, and following them through their journey, we will explore the characters as exemplifying man's relation to society and his attempts to transcend his condition as a marginalized piece in a carefully controlled puzzle. Can the apathy and reflectiveness of the present age be overcome? Or is our age truly "one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose," as Kierkegaard labeled the present age in 1846? (33).

Somewhat ironically, the album follows an individual opposed to the failings of the modern day individual as proposed by *The Present Age.* In my discussion, I have divided the album into three parts,[4] where each part constitutes a chapter. The first chapter offers some historical background as to how the benefactors of a docile public in post-war developed countries, in this case the U.S., applies strategies to make people act in a certain way while making sure that the people themselves think that

[4] The three parts are reminiscent of established features of the classical bildungsroman. The first part takes place largely as the crisis of the protagonist brews, the middle part sees the protagonist trying to address this crisis while the final part brings with it some kind of resolution, for better or for worse. I will reference the story's coming-of-age quality a couple of times, but it is not a primary concern.

their actions are autonomous. The chapter uses the concrete example of PR-strategies and how appeal to independence, for instance, broke down the taboo of women smoking (*Happiness Machines,* Curtis). We see how media bias was evident in the immediate aftermath of the initiation of Operation Iraqi Freedom, but trace the role of the media as shaper and mirror image of public opinion back to Søren Kierkegaard's lamenting of his present age in 1846. To further illustrate the predicament of the times we live in, *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord explains how social relations have been replaced by the mere representation of them and how commodification has replaced direct living.

Moving on to the unfolding events of Jesus of Suburbia, the chapter then explores the decline of the suburban ideal and the protagonist's use of drugs and alcohol to escape that ideal. It explores the Kierkegaardian concept of leveling, which serves to reduce everything extraordinary to something common. The chapter sees the protagonist transforming from a smoked-out Suburban deadbeat to an advocate for change. However, his enthusiasm cannot even sustain the length of the first chapter, as the protagonist eventually rejects Jesus of Suburbia, claiming the entire character to be based on lies.

The second chapter begins with the introduction of St. Jimmy, later to be revealed as the protagonist's alter ego. A prophet of rampage and eventual self-destruction, St. Jimmy represents the protagonist's Thanatos, his death drive. As the protagonist is about to succumb to the darkness of his alter ego, the character Whatsername appears as the protagonist's Eros, his will to live and flourish. These Freudian concepts are further explored in the chapter's analysis of four songs, as they set up a conflict the protagonist must resolve.

The last chapter exposes the protagonist's concealment behind adopted and subconscious alter egos. Coming from a selfish place, these characters, most notably St. Jimmy, mark the protagonist's revenge upon society for his own failings to transcend it. Through the eyes of Whatsername, the song "Letterbomb" outlines how the protagonist essentially is the modern, docile individual he strives to avoid; a follower paralyzed when called upon to actually do something. In the wake of "Letterbomb," the protagonist realizes that all of his failings are integral to becoming who he is (Nietzsche). The chapter sees the death of St. Jimmy and discusses whether the destructive alter ego is the hero or villain of the concept album, or perhaps both. As the protagonist returns to Jingletown, the final chapter explores the very different opinions of Kierkegaard and Debord as to how one can fight the present age, and why both St. Jimmy and Whatsername are unsuccessful in providing a way out for the protagonist. Finally, the last song of *American Idiot* again firmly establishes the protagonist as just another member of the indolent public, while the ambiguous fate of Whatsername leaves the listener with a slight hope for a resolution to the dilemma the individuals of the modern day find themselves in according to *American Idiot.*

“In the Land of Make Believe” – A Burst of Enthusiasm

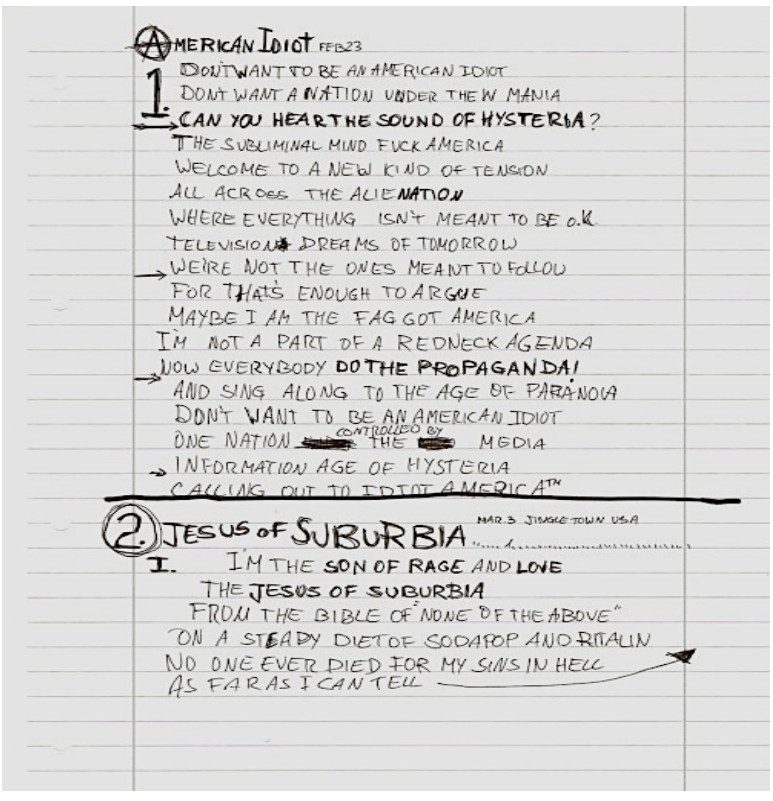
AMERICAN IDIOT

The album starts out full throttle with the title song “American Idiot,” the recurring theme of rage easily identifiable in both the music and in the booklet-turned-journal. The track’s title is written with a pen that seems to have been clenched in an enclosed fist at the time of writing, the pen forcefully guided over the letters numerous times. The first striking thing about the title is the first letter “A.” A horizontal line strikes through the letter and with a circle around it forms the symbol known for being used by anarchists, especially by punk-rock bands of the late 70s. This suggests that whoever is speaking in “American Idiot” identifies with the causes voiced by the late 70’s punk scene. Common themes in the heyday of punk were anti-establishment attitudes, politics and class barriers. Punk bands associated with this era normally relied on a sound based on a simple structure that would be played aggressively and at a fast pace, and this pattern is recapped in “American Idiot.” However, punk’s time as a societal movement and audible political voice was short-lived and was itself only a burst of enthusiasm where the participants thought they could transcend societal norms and perhaps induce lasting social change. This at least gives us some sort of idea about the album’s initial idealism. Had *American Idiot* taken place in the late 70s the speaker in “American Idiot” would at least have had a movement to turn to, but in 2004 the punk movement had been reduced to an obscure fragment of its former self.

Before we move on to the lyrics of “American Idiot,” we will however have to establish who the speaker is, like we have to with every song to understand its

perspective. With Jesus and St. Jimmy being two different facets of the same character, it can sometimes be a challenge to determine who is speaking at any given moment (and sometimes even Jesus and the protagonist deviate, although they are tightly interwoven). When Whatsername has the stage it is easily identifiable in the journal, as the handwriting is distinctly more feminine and in italics. Jesus and St. Jimmy, however, have the same handwriting. Jesus explicitly introduces himself in "Jesus of Suburbia," track number two, while St. Jimmy is introduced in "St. Jimmy," track number six. None of them are really present as the story kicks off. "American Idiot" is certainly written in Jesus/St. Jimmy's handwriting, but who is actually speaking seems to be a matter of indifference.

"American Idiot" can therefore be read and heard as an introduction, setting the stage by describing what kind of society the characters of *American Idiot* find themselves in. The song is political at the surface, but philosophical at its core, describing a society where the people uncritically swallow what the media serves them, falling in with the crowd. Those who choose to stand on the outside are looked down on, as outcasts and threats. "American Idiot" consequently raises concerns treated by both philosophers and theorists on popular culture.


AMERICAN IDIOT FEB 23
1. DON'T WANT TO BE AN AMERICAN IDIOT
DON'T WANT A NATION UNDER THE W MANIA
CAN YOU HEAR THE SOUND OF HYSTERIA?
THE SUBLIMINAL MIND FUCK AMERICA
WELCOME TO A NEW KIND OF TENSION
ALL ACROSS THE ALIENATION
WHERE EVERYTHING ISN'T MEANT TO BE O.K.
TELEVISION DREAMS OF TOMORROW
WE'RE NOT THE ONES MEANT TO FOLLOW
FOR THAT'S ENOUGH TO ARGUE
MAYBE I AM THE FAG GOT AMERICA
I'M NOT A PART OF A REDNECK AGENDA
NOW EVERYBODY DO THE PROPAGANDA!
AND SING ALONG TO THE AGE OF PARANOIA
DON'T WANT TO BE AN AMERICAN IDIOT
ONE NATION CONTROLLED BY THE MEDIA
INFORMATION AGE OF HYSTERIA
CALLING OUT TO IDIOT AMERICA™
2. JESUS OF SUBURBIA MAR 3 JINGLE TOWN USA
I. I'M THE SON OF RAGE AND LOVE
THE JESUS OF SUBURBIA
FROM THE BIBLE OF "NONE OF THE ABOVE"
ON A STEADY DIET OF SODA POP AND RITALIN
NO ONE EVER DIED FOR MY SINS IN HELL
AS FAR AS I CAN TELL

The first words uttered in *American Idiot* are, with forceful intonation: "Don't want to be an American idiot." Who is the American idiot? Who is it the speaker does not wish to be? Other commentaries on the album, whether academic or not,

usually draw the grossly simplistic conclusion that the idiot in question is George W. Bush, but as mentioned, I will argue that *American Idiot's* reach is far wider. This thesis will instead argue that the "idiot" is part of a manipulated public, carefully deceived into accepting certain "truths." The speaker in "American Idiot" takes the position of someone entrapped in a contemporary collective state of mind he fails to identify with, the tone varying from angry to serious to sarcastic as he sees his fellow man buying into whatever he is told to:

> Maybe I am the faggot America
> I'm not a part of a redneck agenda
> Now everybody do the propaganda!
> And sing along to the age of paranoia

By the use of the personal pronoun the speaker takes his position of opposition. He labels himself a "faggot" and the people setting the agendas as "rednecks." The choice of words is by no means by accident. The two words stand in sharp contrast to each other. "Redneck" is at its most stereotypical used to describe poor, white people of the rural south. Often they are thought of as feeble and narrow minded and even xenophobic. The speaker in "American Idiot" takes these stereotypical attributes and places them onto the ruling Republican power of his day and extends it to those who support them. The choice to brand himself a "faggot" stems from the use of the term as a slur, often deployed by the very people the speaker believes to be "rednecks," directed towards people considerably further to the left on the political spectrum. Thus, the speaker places himself at the side of the existing governing power, acknowledging himself as an outsider.

As the speaker in "American Idiot" refuses to be part of the "redneck" agenda the rest of society seem to fall in line with and blindly accept, he is painting a picture of the story's collectivity as one in which the people have relinquished their power to their leaders, the people themselves becoming a grey, undifferentiated mass. Kierkegaard argues that this is a phenomenon of the present age, and could not have happened in antiquity "because the people, *en masse, in corpore,* took part in any situation which arose, and were responsible for the actions of the individual" (*The Present Age,* 60). Now, the speaker in "American Idiot" argues, we are reduced to mere puppets, dancing to the beat of the governing power who ensures that we "do the propaganda!" like a carefully choreographed dance. The present age individual has become a spectator of his own reality. That so few of those around him seem to recognize the minimal role they play in the influence of their everyday life echoes the critique of the dimming down of society as a whole, of the contentedness with which we go about our lives. The speaker in "American Idiot" ironically portrays the oblivious public who believe they are actually free in the final two lines of the verse above: "Now everybody do the propaganda!/And sing along to the age of paranoia."

Exploring these exact illusions of autonomy in the 2002 BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self,* director Adam Curtis explains how one man figured out how to control the democratic masses. By applying principals of psychoanalysis developed by his uncle Sigmund Freud, Austrian-American Edward Bernays pioneered the PR-wave that followed World War I. By changing the approach from focusing on what consumers *need* to what consumers unconsciously *want,* Bernays changed consumerism drastically. For instance, he was able to change the taboo of women smoking in public. Through the help of a psychoanalyst, Bernays found that the cigarette, to women, was a symbol of male sexual power. In the 1929 Easter Day

parade in New York he equipped several women with cigarettes, and they lit the cigarettes at Bernays' signal. He had tipped off the press beforehand, saying he had heard that a group of suffragettes planned to light up "Torches of Freedom." Wide coverage followed and soon cigarette sales soared. By using the results yielded from psychoanalysis, Bernays was able to appeal to the perceived suppressed and inner desires of women. Now women could smoke in public as well, not necessarily because they enjoyed the taste of the cigarette so much, but because it gave them a sense of power and independence. Ironically, they had in essence been told to do so.

Curtis comments that, "by satisfying people's selfish desires one made them happy and thus docile" ("Happiness Machines," Curtis). With a docile and content public, the chance of the re-emergence of what Kierkegaard calls "a revolutionary age" is minimal and thus beneficial to the nation's rulers. In this state, the governing power will try to maintain this public contentment. While PR-strategies have varied through the times, they always aim at creating the illusion that the public make a decision by themselves and not because they were told to do so. The inability to detect this unconscious influence is part of what constitutes the individual portrayed in "American Idiot": "Can you hear the sound of hysteria?/The subliminal mind fuck America."

The indictment in the album's first song echoes an observation editors Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom make in their introduction to Heidegger in *Existentialism Basic Writings* that "we drift along with the crowd in the busy-ness of day-to-day existence … we become so engrossed with what is in front of us at the moment that we are blind to the larger background that makes our actions possible" (196). So easily seduced are the masses by what is going on at any given moment that they lose sight of the bigger picture and their own role in it. Drifting along with the

crowd means a blind acceptance of that particular crowd's norm. In a passage entitled "Herd instinct" in *The Gay Science,* Friedrich Nietzsche writes that where there is morality, there is a ranking of our drives and actions. That ranking is based off of what is profitable to the herd: "By means of morality, individuals are led to be functions of the herd and to attribute value to themselves merely as functions" (130). The speaker in "American Idiot" sarcastically notes this tendency in his own time where people are content with being a mere function, as we shall discover.

The propaganda that ensures a collective state of paranoia cannot only be induced by the governing power, however. The media, too, plays a significant role in defining the issues of the present day. There are several references to this state of paranoia and the role of the media in its creation in "American Idiot." In the booklet the aforementioned line "Can you hear the sound of hysteria?" is marked in frantic, bold letters, standing out from the rest of the lyrics like a sensational headline, while the last verse of the song is entirely dedicated to the media-induced frenzy the speaker observes:

> Don't want to be an American idiot
> One nation controlled by the media
> Information age of hysteria
> Calling out to idiot America™

The use of the word "control" suggests that the speaker sees a premeditated media, abandoning the principle of impartial reporting. Referencing the hysteria following the attacks on 9/11 (as touched upon in the introductory chapter), "American Idiot" depicts the "information age of hysteria" as a persuader of the public state of mind. In

fact, following 9/11, a study initiated by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) followed news programs on six different networks for a three-week period that started on the day the first bomb was dropped on Iraq. It showed that out of 1617 on-camera sources 64 % of all sources supported the war (U.S. sources made up 76 % of the total), while 71 % of U.S. sources supported the war efforts. Of all sources, 10 % were opposed to the war, but only 3 % of the U.S. sources were against the war (Calabrese, 166). Even if this is a reference to something that was immediate at *American Idiot's* time of release, the critique echoes something larger that the album deals with throughout: the reduction of the individual into a being of predictability and passivity. While consuming the hysterics of the time is a dangerous development for society, it poses no threat to the individual who takes comfortable refuge in the public, assuming no risk or responsibility. I quote Kierkegaard at length:

> More and more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence, will aspire to be nothing at all – in order to become the public: that abstract whole formed in the most ludicrous way, by all participants becoming a third party (an onlooker). This indolent mass which understands nothing and does nothing itself, this gallery, is on the look-out for distraction and soon abandons itself to the idea that everything that any one does is done in order to give it (the public) something to gossip about. (*The Present Age*, 64-65)

Securely positioned in the middle of the masses, the individual of the reflective age does nothing while claiming to do the right thing, which is whatever the public does. Together on their high horse, the indolent crowd looks down on those who deviate

from the path (the "faggot"). The public looks to the media for which stand to take on pressing issues, while the media report the stand taken by the public. Commenting on Kierkegaard's work, Jane Rubin says that the media and the public end up being mirror images of each other and therefore none of them take any responsibility. Instead, they together create an illusion that a stand is in fact being taken (*Too Much of Nothing,* 52).

In *The Present Age,* Kierkegaard writes with incredibly accurate foresight that in our age "nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere" (35). The media have had, and still have, the power to set the agenda, to decide what is important and at any given moment bury that matter. Like a restaurant offers a daily special, the media decide what is on the menu for us to care about today. In *American Idiot* the "present age" has become the "information age," and it does exactly what Kierkegaard wrote about already in 1846: it offers immediate publicity.[5] In the universe of *American Idiot* the media preaches hysteria, a sensation echoed by the public.

In the booklet the words "idiot America" are written in a larger font than the rest of the line and it appears with the unregistered trademark symbol ™ at the end. According to Lacey B. Long in "*American Idiot to the 'American Eulogy': Green Day's Rock Operas as Apocalyptic Political Protest During the George W. Bush Administration*" the use of this symbol indicates "a corporate hand in this distinct brand of Americanism" (24). Long's claim that being subject to media influence and the prevailing emotions of the crowd is a "distinct brand of Americanism" seems unnecessarily harsh. As evident by our insights into Kierkegaard and of crowd

[5] Billie Joe Armstrong himself said on the coverage of the war in Iraq: "I never thought I'd see a war brought to you on TV, twenty-four hours a day, and it became like entertainment." (Lynskey, 523)

psychology, these instances of seduction by mass control and falling in with the crowd is not necessarily more American than it is typical of any other democratically ruled and developed nation.

However, Long is right in claiming involvement by a corporate hand. One of the core elements of punk will always be an anti-establishment attitude, the spite with which they view corporate businesses exploit people or resources for profit. The lyric's affiliation with the ideals of the punk movement is evident in the previously explored A of "American Idiot" and by placing the trademark symbol behind the phrase, the punk protagonist of the opening song notes that a state of idiots is to someone's benefit; whose benefit exactly, whether weapon manufacturers or others is, however, subordinate to the fact that there is always someone benefitting. And unbeknownst to most, those same may have instigated the current state themselves in order to make a profit. For instance, corporations may deliberately use or manipulate the media, as in Bernays' cigarette campaign. The speaker in "American Idiot" perhaps places the trademark symbol to signify that corporate America has a hand in the unfolding events and that there is a reason why the current "information of hysteria" is calling out to "idiot America."

According to the chorus in "American Idiot" the nation is experiencing "a new kind of tension/all across the alienation." The word alienation has a double function: The final six letters have in the booklet been written so that the word "nation" stands out. Among several definitions of the word "alienation," the following two are especially relevant for our analysis: 1) a turning away, estrangement and 2) the state of being an outsider or the feeling of being isolated, as from society (*Collins Dictionary).* The protagonist in "American Idiot" fits both those definitions. A turning away suggests a conscious decision to distance oneself from society. In the case of

"American Idiot," the speaker sees a society that has taken on a collective mindset of hysteria and paranoia by embracing the propaganda. When rejecting this national fury and stating that "maybe I am the faggot America," the speaker has alienated himself from society, while society at the same time is alienated by his stand. On the speaker's own behalf there might be a hint of optimism in the fact that he references alienation "all across." It suggests a hope that even if he is in the minority, there are others who sense the tension of the paranoid society of *American Idiot.*

Lurking beneath the surface of these overt messages, however, is a far more extensive critique of modern society. In *The Society of the Spectacle,* Guy Debord argues that we have replaced social relations with the mere representation of them. We have succumbed to the power of the commodity that at an earlier stage reduced the need of *being* into *having.* But now, "the present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing" (16). The images that disconnect us from actual *being* is part of what constitutes the spectacle. Instead of direct social relationships, our social relationships are filtered through the images of the spectacle. Our attention is drawn towards it, but it does not function as a force of unification. Rather, "the unity it imposes is merely the official language of general separation." (12).

While *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967 it has not only stood the tests of time, but become even more relevant in the age of ever more advanced technology in general and social media specifically. What better picture can we paint of the modern day "spectacle" than the tightly gathered crowd where no one is interacting with each other but rather with a tiny screen that emerges from the pocket at the slightest hint of boredom? The reason why we do this might not solely be

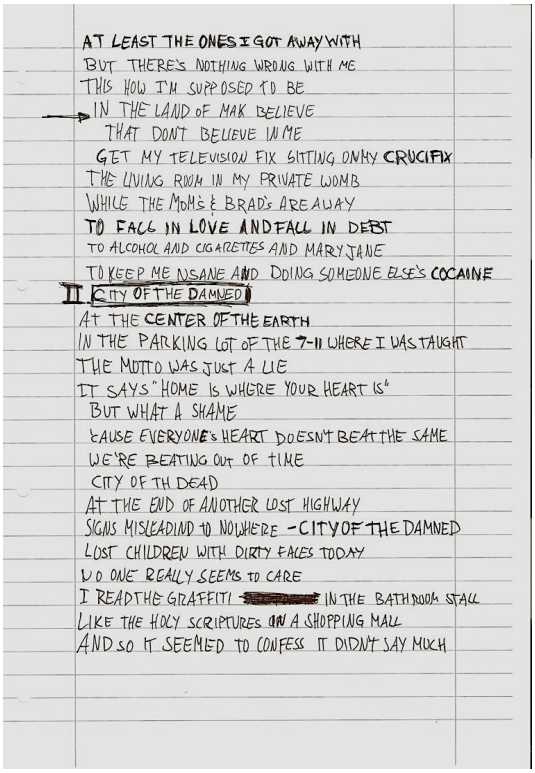
because the screen at that moment has urgent information that we need, but because we no longer live directly in relation to each other, we do not know what to do when the potential of direct social contact arises. Our relation to each other is mediated through appearances and not lived directly.

Like most of what the speaker in "American Idiot" observes, the spectacle too is a source of wealth and power to some. Debord argues that when looking at the totality of the spectacle, it is "both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production… It is the very heart of society's real unreality" (13). Having commodified almost every aspect of our lives, it is in the interest of the forces behind the "television dreams of tomorrow" that we keep pseudo-realizing ourselves by stacking up on even more produced goods. We seek immediate gratification and the commodities we currently hold might not be the commodities we need for a successful tomorrow. Thus, the spectacle makes up a smoke screen of what is real while the smoke itself takes its place as what we perceive or think of as real.

By presenting impossible dreams of tomorrow ("Television dreams of tomorrow") the public does nothing but long for something they cannot get, but spend their time staring at anyway. Again, we see Kierkegaard's docile public in action, where "the shrewdest thing of all is to do nothing" (34). So when the speaker in "American Idiot" rejects the "Television dreams of tomorrow" and declares that "We're not the ones meant to follow" it is a rather bold statement. In fact, he sets out to transcend the age he lives in. With this in mind, and the society described by the speaker in "American Idiot," we move on to the unfolding events of the journey of *American Idiot.*

JESUS OF SUBURBIA

The second song on the album, "Jesus of Suburbia," is structured as a collection of songs, turning the track into an over nine minute musical escapade containing five parts[6]. The song is a musical rollercoaster, varying greatly in tempo and intensity. Abrupt changes as well as longer developed changes occur during the song, especially in the transitions between the parts.


AT LEAST THE ONES I GOT AWAY WITH
BUT THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME
THIS HOW I'M SUPPOSED TO BE
IN THE LAND OF MAK BELIEVE
THAT DON'T BELIEVE IN ME
GET MY TELEVISION FIX SITTING ONMY CRUCIFIX
THE LIVING ROOM IN MY PRIVATE WOMB
WHILE THE MOMS & BRAD'S ARE AWAY
TO FALL IN LOVE AND FALL IN DEBT
TO ALCOHOL AND CIGARETTES AND MARYJANE
TO KEEP ME INSANE AND DOING SOMEONE ELSE'S COCAINE
II CITY OF THE DAMNED
AT THE CENTER OF THE EARTH
IN THE PARKING LOT OF THE 7-11 WHERE I WAS TAUGHT
THE MOTTO WAS JUST A LIE
IT SAYS "HOME IS WHERE YOUR HEART IS"
BUT WHAT A SHAME
CAUSE EVERYONE'S HEART DOESN'T BEAT THE SAME
WE'RE BEATING OUT OF TIME
CITY OF TH DEAD
AT THE END OF ANOTHER LOST HIGHWAY
SIGNS MISLEADIND TO NOWHERE -CITY OF THE DAMNED
LOST CHILDREN WITH DIRTY FACES TODAY
NO ONE REALLY SEEMS TO CARE
I READ THE GRAFFITI [redacted] IN THE BATHROOM STALL
LIKE THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN A SHOPPING MALL
AND SO IT SEEMED TO CONFESS IT DIDN'T SAY MUCH

If "American Idiot" generally illuminates and introduces the flaws of the society in which Jesus dwells, part one of "Jesus of Suburbia" serves the purpose of thoroughly introducing that character. It is dated March 3 and is one of two journal entries in the booklet that also reveal the protagonist's location. This part of the story is set in the protagonist's hometown, Jingletown, USA.[7] In the first verse, Jesus claims to be from "the bible of 'none of the above." This brings to mind the "none of the above" option available to voters in an election who wishes to discard all candidates. This continues the discussion from "American Idiot" where the public has given their powers to their leaders, content with merely disagreeing, but assuming no action. The public has been discarded; they are "none of the above."

[6] The parts are entitled "I. Jesus of Suburbia," II. City of the Damned," "III. I Don't Care," "IV. Dearly Beloved" and "V. Tales of Another Broken Home." In my text, the roman numerals have been omitted.

[7] An actual Jingletown can be found in Oakland, California. Green Day themselves originate from Oakland.

Admitting this, Jesus places himself among the herd, as he is the Jesus of the bible of "none of the above," the very epitome of the present age individual.

The first part of "Jesus of Suburbia" thus gives the impression of someone who has more or less succumbed to the daftness of a life that amounts to nothing more than what is within immediate reach every day. Facing this boredom, Jesus relies on momentary escapes such as alcohol, marihuana and cocaine:

> To fall in love and fall in debt
> To alcohol and cigarettes
> And Mary Jane to keep me insane
> And doing someone else's cocaine

As we saw from our discussion on "American Idiot," the protagonist of the story is very much aware of the predicament modern society has put him in. In attempting to escape or resist it he turns to substance abuse. This might not be as irrational as it instinctively sounds. In *Understanding Popular Culture,* John Fiske argues that a form of resistance against the dominant power of the day can be *jouissance*:

> *Jouissance,* translated variously as bliss, ecstasy, or orgasm, is the pleasure of the body that occurs at the moment of breakdown of culture into nature. It is a loss of self and of the subjectivity that controls and governs the self – the self is socially constructed and therefore controlled, it is the site of subjectivity and therefore the site of ideological production and reproduction. The loss of self is, therefore, the evasion of ideology. (Fiske, 50)

In the brief moments of *jouissance,* achieved by sex, drugs and alcohol, Jesus can let go of the apathy modern society bestows upon him, for at that moment he is not a product of its ideology. At the breakdown of culture into nature, nothing has to assume meaning. In these moments, the ever-present demand for meaning in the modern human being is avoided and unimportant. Additionally, the very action taken to achieve *jouissance*, and the subsequent behavior, is frowned upon by the ruling social moral. So not only do these moments help escape social control, it also infuriates it. However, the momentary instances of *jouissance* chased by Jesus in "Jesus of Suburbia" cannot induce permanent changes to modern society. If anything, these escapes from reality only pushes Jesus further into the realm of the individual in the "reflective age." Great plans of revolution might be conceived in states of *jouissance,* but they are rejected or forgotten when one returns to the socially constructed self.

Attempts at escape also come in different, more socially acceptable forms. Jesus tells us: "Get my television fix/Sitting on my crucifix," a reference to the temporary fulfillment of a need. This might refer to the already explored drug habit, but the more interesting aspect is the actual "fix" of television. We recall "American Idiot" and its stance outside the story itself commenting on "Television dreams of tomorrow." When Jesus gets his "television fix" this alludes to being part of the herd, Jesus as a prisoner of the spectacle: a drugged-out character in front of his television set, using both drugs and the images on TV to distance himself as far from his dire reality as possible. This is another instance of the Debordian concepts discussed in "American Idiot": images disconnect us from being, and social relationships are replaced by, in this case TV's, representation of them.

The connection to the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified by the Romans, is obvious. But Jesus of Suburbia is not hanging on his crucifix; he is sitting, and no one exercised physical force to place him there. There is nothing at this point to suggest that Jesus of Suburbia's crucifixion will earn him a martyr's death similar to that of his namesake. His crucifixion is instead a symbol of slow death; sitting in front of his TV smoking marijuana, watching days come and pass bearing no indication that a change will come about on its own. Indeed, the passivity and laziness of this individual could have adorned the cover of Kierkegaard's *The Present Age.*

The reduction of the self into a passive victim of the spectacle who escapes his condition by occasionally numbing his body is the character we meet in the song's first part, but Jesus assures us in the chorus that in the eyes of society, he is who he ought to be:

> But there's nothing wrong with me
> This is how I'm supposed to be
> In the land of make believe
> That don't believe in me

The culture in which he lives is content with a citizen who poses no threat to the status quo, and endorses the spectacle to make sure it stays that way. Jesus' escapes into *jouissance* reduce his ability to revolt in the long term as it results in nothing. Likewise is his need for television a manifestation of the numbing down of the individual, as he assumes a passive role and commits to nothing: This is how Jesus is "supposed to be."

Jesus calls his Suburbia a land of "make-believe." This might allude to the American suburban façade, where the exterior rarely matches the interior. Few images are so fitting of the conformist masses explored in "American Idiot" as the stereotypical American suburb: miles and miles of indistinguishable houses that assume no personal character, reflecting their occupants, Kierkegaard's grey, indolent public. The initial suburban idea, however, was not one of conformity, but of uniqueness: "To be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape," wrote Lewis Mumford on the idea of Suburbia in *The City in History* in 1961 (485-6). The popularity of Suburbia resulted in exodus from the cities in favor of this individual haven, but ironically, as the masses reached the suburbs, they wiped out that which lured them there in the first place:

> The penalty of popularity, the fatal inundation of a mass movement whose very numbers would wipe out the goods each individual sought for his own domestic circle, and, worse, replace them with a life that was not even a cheap counterfeit, but rather the grim antithesis. (Mumford, 486)

A stream of people to the suburbs did not bring with it a pack of individuals, whose own ideas and thoughts would contribute to the ideal of suburban uniqueness. Rather, Mumford sees a Suburbia that developed into the home of the indistinguishable herd that Jesus finds himself living in:

> A multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste,

> inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible. (486)

Mumford's presentation of modern day Suburbia coincides with Jesus' observations. As opposed to the original ideal of uniqueness, the suburb has become a meat grinder of greyness. Jesus sees himself as a result of this process, "This is how I'm supposed to be," while at the same time recognizing the suburban concept as an illusion, "In the land of make believe." The suburban landscape can be read as a metaphor for the people who inhabit it, thus including the protagonist of *American Idiot,* as well as the modern age. The suburban landscape as Mumford described it in 1916 strangely echoes Kierkegaard's concept of "leveling," which he writes about in *The Present Age:*

> While a passionate age storms ahead setting up new things and tearing down old, raising and demolishing as it goes, a reflective and passionless age does exactly the contrary: it *hinders* and *stifles* all action: it levels. (51)

Everything that is extraordinary, unusual or spurred by passion is to be reduced to something trivial and common. Kierkegaard sees a reduction of the individual into a

being that serves no purpose unless it constitutes a part of a collection of individuals. Alone, the individual holds no real power in the reflective age. Like the ideal Suburbia offers its inhabitants an empty canvas to fill with their own uniqueness which in reality ends up a common canvas of the dimmest color, the leveling in *The Present Age* results in the reduction of the individual into a passive, conformist spectator. The process of leveling in society is an abstract one, according to Kierkegaard, for "the leveling process is the victory of abstraction over the individual" (52).

Whereas the first part of the album's second song is musically an intense and high tempo affair, the second part, "City of the Damned," considerably slows down the pace of the story. As the lyrics of the first part draw to a close, the music keeps the song in the same soundscape for about 14 seconds, before a slight alteration in the chord progression signals change. A drop in tempo follows and the emergence of piano and acoustic guitar as the most prominent features of the soundscape complete the transition into "City of the Damned." Where "Jesus of Suburbia" presents the listener with quite a hectic and explicit overview of the protagonist's everyday life, the musical change into a softer soundscape adheres to the more introspective lyrics of "City of the Damned":

> At the center of the earth in the parking lot
> Of the 7-11 where I was taught
> The motto was just a lie
> It says "Home is where your heart is" but what a shame
> 'Cause everyone's heart doesn't beat the same

We're beating out of time[8]

From the parking lot at the local 7-11, Jesus resents his hometown and the notion that he is somehow bound to it by default. In this second part, Jingletown is referred to as "the center of the earth" in both of the part's verses. The fact that those around him hold on to Jingletown, those whose hearts are where their homes are, places, for the first time in "Jesus of Suburbia," Jesus temporarily outside the herd. Where the first part exposed a character that is "how I'm supposed to be," Jesus' observation that "everyone's heart doesn't beat the same" effectively tells the story of someone whose sense of belonging has vanished.

When explaining the loss of absolutes in Nietzsche's famous declaration that "God is Dead" in *The Gay Science,* Guignon and Pereboom write that the loss of absolutes leaves us "abandoned', 'forlorn', 'thrown' into a world with no pregiven justifications or sense of direction. And though most of us cling to society for comfort and protection, the fact is that, at the deepest level, we are ultimately alone" (xvii). As we have seen in Debord, the appearances of the modern day spectacle create a mediated existence in which the world is filtered and blurred. In *American Idiot,* Suburbia constitutes a part of that spectacle, concealing profound feelings of solitude: "We're beating out of time/City of the dead."

A retreat to the suburban façade can be seen as the attempted avoidance of the feelings that emerge in the aftermath of the loss of absolutes. Jesus finds himself abandoned, forlorn and without a sense of direction *within* the suburban "Groundhog

[8] In the song the line is sung "*it's* beating out of time," which relates even more distinctly to the feelings of abandonment and forlornness. That the lines in the booklet read "we're" suggests that Jesus is not the only one struggling with discontentment in Suburbia, as briefly touched upon in "American Idiot." The actual pronunciation of the line thus further emphasizes Jesus' sense of solitude.

Day," whereas those around him retreat to it in order to avoid the same emotions. For the "herd," the predictability and stability of Suburbia offers security, for Jesus that same security represents a one-way street of nothingness and boredom.

While there is no explicitly expressed intent in "City of the Damned" of leaving, Jesus gets confirmation in the last verse that Jingletown is a place that holds no bright future:

> I read the graffiti in the bathroom stall
> Like the Holy Scriptures in a shopping mall
> And so it seemed to confess
> It didn't say much but it only confirmed
> That the center of the earth is the end of the world
> And I could really care less

While the exact words of the graffiti Jesus reads in the bathroom stall are not revealed, the writing is literally on the wall. This idiomatic expression of impending doom does not seem to greatly affect Jesus, however, who concludes that it "only" confirms Jingletown as the end of the world. Jesus instead seems rather indifferent, painting a very bleak picture of both the character's mind and milieu.

This bleakness is mirrored in both verses of "City of the Damned," Jesus describing Jingletown as a prison in which he does not belong, while at the same time being too apathetic to escape. While the transition into a softer soundscape from "Jesus of Suburbia" adheres to the introspectiveness of "City of the Damned," it also constructs a contrast between the lyrical content and the music. The soundscape of the verses is relatively light-hearted and the sound of the vocal melody is rather gleeful

and sounds more like something that would inspire hope than destroy it. This serves to underline Jesus' dejected acceptance of his life: "It didn't say much but it only confirmed/That the center of the earth is the end of the world/And I could really care less," while at the same time illustrating the contradiction between this acceptance and his inner conflict: "'Cause everyone's heart doesn't beat the same."

This submission to a John Doe existence prompts Jesus to the sort of everyday rebellion we witnessed in the first part of "Jesus of Suburbia," where substance abuse temporarily bypasses the established social norms. Shopping malls and 7/11s are physical manifestations of capitalism, the driving force behind the society in which the protagonist of *American Idiot* fails to relate. His use of these establishments is not intended to spur on the machine that operates them, but is rather an act of opposition. According to Fiske, institutions like shopping malls are places where capitalism exercises their power (32). As Jesus makes use of the 7/11 and the shopping mall he turns capitalist spaces into his own. The graffiti in the bathroom stall is consequently an example of the proletariat appropriating capitalist space by physically marking it. These are "tactics of everyday life" where "people have to make do with what they have,' and everyday life is the art of making do" (Fiske, 34).

The markings left in the bathroom stall appear to Jesus as "Holy Scriptures" ("I read the graffiti in the bathroom stall/Like the Holy Scriptures in a shopping mall"), echoing his claim from the first verse that Jingletown is a place that has succumbed to every conformist aspect of the modern age. But moreover, the line's juxtaposition of Holy Scriptures and shopping malls adheres to Kierkegaard's concept of leveling: in the present age the concept of something extraordinary (Holy Scriptures) can be taken and used and ultimately reduced to writings in a shopping mall's bathroom stall.

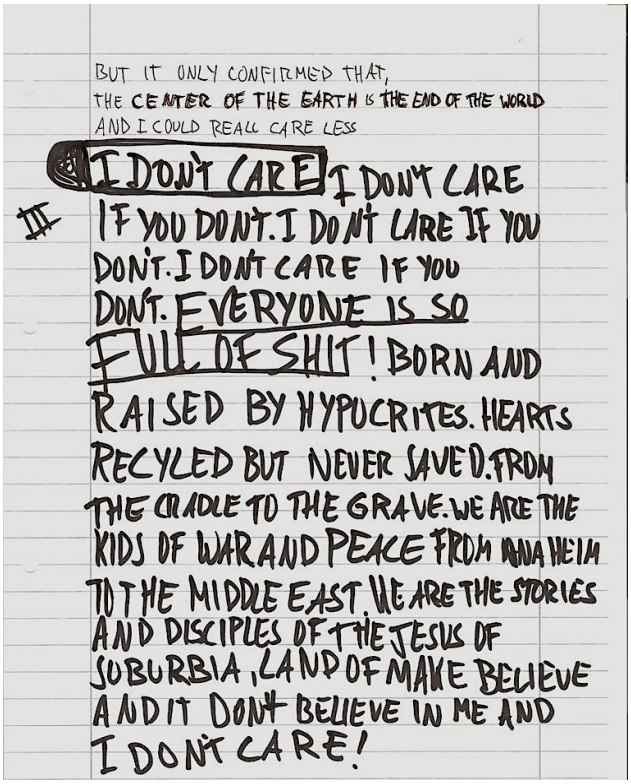
These Holy Scriptures, however, do not induce some great revelation. In fact, the final line of the part's last verse suggests little has changed since the earlier, matter-of-factly declaration "But there's nothing wrong with me/This is how I'm supposed to be." Albeit concluding that his place of residence is "the end of the world," Jesus also concludes that he could not care less, suggesting no intent of action to stray off the path of damnation. Rather, it suggests resignation. Not even the conscious awareness that life is amounting to nothing prompts him into rebellion. The reflective nature of "City of the Damned" thus echoes Kierkegaard's observation that "both the individual and the age are thus imprisoned, not imprisoned by tyrants or priests or nobles or the secret police, but by reflection itself" (48).

"City of the Damned" ends with the second repetition of the chorus where Jesus labels Jingletown "City of the dead" and "City of the damned," backed by loud cheers of "hey!" which reminds us that Jesus is not the only disillusioned citizen of Jingletown.[9] The cheers ring out like chimes of support, agreeing with Jesus' dark analysis of the opportunities Jingletown has to offer. As the last "hey!" is sung this part ends with the last line of the chorus: "No one really seems to care." At the word "care," the song immediately picks up in tempo and intensity. Lead by the drums, this constitutes a six second bridge into part three, with the word "care" starting out in the soundscape of "City of the Damned," but transforming into an aggressive, hoarse scream.

Thematically there is little change between part two and three, as "I Don't Care" starts where "City of the Damned" left off, from "No one really seems to care"

[9] There are references in "Letterbomb" and "Homecoming," two songs that appear much later in the cycle, to "the underbelly" which might be the name of Jesus' crew. For instance, in "Homecoming," the line goes: "He'd rather be doing something else now/Like cigarettes and coffee with the underbelly." However, there is no mention of this name prior to "Letterbomb."

to “I don’t care if you don’t.” There is, however, a striking difference in how the lyrics appear in the booklet. The first two parts, as well as “American Idiot,” are penned rather neatly. The lyrics follow the lines in the booklet and more often than not are constructed to fit the rhythm of the song. “I Don’t Care,” on the other hand, is written with a marker rather than with a pen, and shows no regard for the lines provided for structure. It looks like what one might imagine a rant looking like on paper. If the first two parts of “Jesus of Suburbia” consists of representation and reflection respectively, the third part increasingly unleashes the rage previously only hinted at.



However, the very first part of “I Don’t Care,” that reiterates the protagonist’s state of not caring, is, despite the increase in tempo and intensity, similar to “City of the Damned” in that the soundscape is almost playful. It further suggests a light-hearted indifference in the face of the predicament outlined by Jesus in “City of the Damned.” However, after the initial lines “I don’t care if you don’t/I don’t care if you don’t/I don’t care if you don’t care” are repeated four times, a distorted voice comes in and sings “I don’t’ care,” and the word “care” again stretches into a gradually more gut wrenching scream. Similarly, the soundscape turns notably darker, the guitars providing two forceful strums at the last syllable of each line, as to underline the last word of each claim as the most forceful:

Everyone is so full of shit!

Born and raised by hypocrites

Hearts recycled but never saved

From the cradle to the grave

These statements clearly contradict Jesus' previous claim that he does not care. This stance of total indifference to one's own life brings to mind Heidegger, who claims that for the human being to not care about his own condition is almost impossible: "The first claim is that humans are beings who *care* about what they are. What is characteristic of us is that we care about what our lives are amounting to, and because of that we care about our surroundings and what happens to us there" (Guignon & Pereboom, 189). The notion in "Jesus of Suburbia" prior to "I Don't Care," is that life cannot amount to more than it is currently amounting to, a fact the protagonist accepts or at least hesitates to challenge. The verse above, then, perhaps suggests development or anticipates development at a later stage.

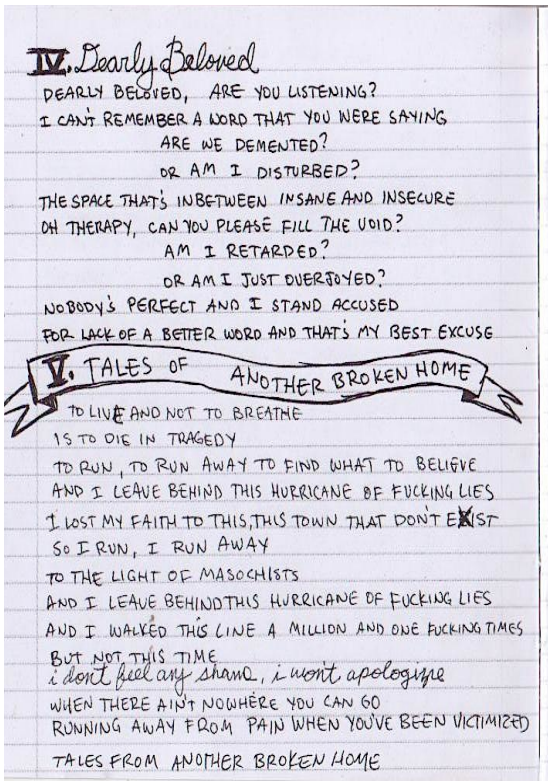
The last lines of this rant-like part of "I Don't Care" indicates that Jesus may in fact not be the one who speaks: "We are the stories and disciples of/The Jesus of Suburbia." Up until this point, the song has been sung from the first person perspective.[10] The sudden reference to a "we" and the slight distortion of the voice (that additionally enters the soundscape from the sidelines, its sound almost exclusively coming out through the left speaker) suggests interference from an unnamed character. This character rips into some of the critique Jesus touched upon earlier, but with considerably more fury. The metaphor "Hearts recycled but never

[10] The exception being the line "We're beating out of time" from "City of the Damned," but as previously explored the line is sung "*It's* beating out of time."

saved" describes the same phenomenon Jesus observed in "City of the Damned" when he concluded that, "The motto was just a lie/It says 'home is where your heart is but what a shame/'Cause everyone's heart doesn't beat the same." Both statements depict a society in which norms and expectations are so well established that the individual is chained to a predictable sequence of events in life.

Abhorring this standardized path of the individual in the information age ("Hearts recycled") and its conclusion in damnation ("but never saved"), the "we" in "I Don't Care" can be read as back-reference to the chorus of "American Idiot": "We're not the ones meant to follow." The lines "We are the stories and disciples of/The Jesus of Suburbia" suggest that the function of the protagonist in *American Idiot* is to be the embodiment of Suburban alienated youth opposed to walk the path millions have walked before them. Additionally, the lines from the two songs above illustrate how, in the short-story cycle, two seemingly independent pieces can be held together as parts of a coherent, thematic whole.

Immediately following the end of the distorted speaker's lines in "I Don't Care," the first person perspective returns and the vocal melody again becomes gleeful. Jesus continues to not care, oblivious to the implication that he is the symbol of a generation raised on lies ("Everyone is so full of shit!/Born and raised by hypocrites"). In no discernible way has he realized or accepted this position as the song ends with the repeated proclamation "I don't care" with the distorted voice rambling indistinguishably in the background, revealing a glimpse of what is yet to come.


IV. Dearly Beloved
DEARLY BELOVED, ARE YOU LISTENING?
I CAN'T REMEMBER A WORD THAT YOU WERE SAYING
ARE WE DEMENTED?
OR AM I DISTURBED?
THE SPACE THAT'S INBETWEEN INSANE AND INSECURE
OH THERAPY, CAN YOU PLEASE FILL THE VOID?
AM I RETARDED?
OR AM I JUST OVERJOYED?
NOBODY'S PERFECT AND I STAND ACCUSED
FOR LACK OF A BETTER WORD AND THAT'S MY BEST EXCUSE
V. TALES OF ANOTHER BROKEN HOME
TO LIVE AND NOT TO BREATHE
IS TO DIE IN TRAGEDY
TO RUN, TO RUN AWAY TO FIND WHAT TO BELIEVE
AND I LEAVE BEHIND THIS HURRICANE OF FUCKING LIES
I LOST MY FAITH TO THIS, THIS TOWN THAT DON'T EXIST
SO I RUN, I RUN AWAY
TO THE LIGHT OF MASOCHISTS
AND I LEAVE BEHIND THIS HURRICANE OF FUCKING LIES
AND I WALKED THIS LINE A MILLION AND ONE FUCKING TIMES
BUT NOT THIS TIME
i don't feel any shame, i won't apologize
WHEN THERE AIN'T NOWHERE YOU CAN GO
RUNNING AWAY FROM PAIN WHEN YOU'VE BEEN VICTIMIZED
TALES FROM ANOTHER BROKEN HOME

As the last chord of part three fades out, the bass line of "Dearly Beloved" kicks in, leading "Jesus of Suburbia" into its calmest soundscape yet. In writing, part four is by far the most carefully constructed out of the five parts, consisting of two verses that immediately follow each other with no chorus or bridge. In the booklet, lines three and four of the first verse have been indented; the same in lines two and three of the second verse. This careful structure stands in stark contrast to the mayhem of "I Don't Care," and mirrors the tenderness of the melody and the steady pace with which it moves along.

The structure might suggest that the protagonist wrote the lyrics, not as a journal entry, but as a poem. Additionally, the title is written in cursive, differing from all the other parts of "Jesus of Suburbia" as well as all the other songs on *American Idiot.* While "City of the Damned" too was reflective, it also concluded that there is no point in caring. "Dearly Beloved" seems, however, to take the reflection from Jesus' immediate reality to a loftier, more existential place, raising questions, the most poignant being: "Oh therapy, can you please fill the void?" Reiterating his stance of not caring about living in a place he considers the end of the world and that has no faith in him, refusing to extend his rebellion beyond that of physical evasion, he nevertheless asks therapy to fill the void generated by this existence.

Of course, Jesus' questions are probably of a more rhetorical nature, seeing human fulfillment as a commodity that can be bought, for example through therapy. It echoes the critique from "American Idiot" and Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* of the commodification of every aspect of our lives and the mediated representations we live our lives through. If Jesus is gradually embracing the critique from "American Idiot," he might see therapy as the ultimate example of the modern day calamity: The mediated modern day existence leading to a loss of meaning, creating a void that the individual attempts to fill, not by assuming direct action, but by talking to someone about what to do, thus in a sense doubling the reflection. Kierkegaard sees the expectation that meaning is handed to us simply because we are alive as false. We create meaning for ourselves through the choices we make (Guignon & Pereboom, 2).

The line of questioning in "Dearly Beloved" indicates a development in the character that through the first three parts sported the motto "I don't care." In the first part, Jesus concludes that "There is nothing wrong with me/This is how I'm supposed to be," but the questions asked in "Dearly Beloved" sees him challenging this, as he asks: "Are we demented?/Or am I disturbed?" and "Am I retarded?/Or am I just overjoyed?"[11] Without being able to pinpoint what, Jesus feels that there is something wrong with him. For the first time, he actively searches for answers rather than settling for those that seem obvious and comfortable to him. This is the first indication of a move towards accepting responsibility for one's own circumstance. Indeed, after having asked the questions he had previously and perhaps purposely overlooked, Jesus excuses himself for having indolently accepted his situation and its ultimate

[11] In the first part, Jesus confesses to being "On a steady diet of/Soda pop and Ritalin." When abused by people without ADHD, ritalin can stimulate the user into a euphoric high ("Or am I just overjoyed?"). The effect is quite similar to that which cocaine induces, a drug Jesus also admitted to using in the song's first part.

outcome of lifelong conformity: “Nobody’s perfect and I stand accused/For lack of a better word and that’s my best excuse.”

This realization comes about rather suddenly, from finishing part three with “I don’t care,” to apologizing for the lack of action in shaping one’s own fortune in part four. I will suggest that the clue lays in “I Don’t Care” and the significant difference between the soundscapes of part three and four. In *Suburban American Punks and the Musical Rhetoric of Green Day’s “Jesus of Suburbia,”* Lisa M. Chuang and John P. Hart distinguish between patterns of intensity and patterns of release in music. Intensity symbolizes instability, and release symbolizes resolution. In a comprehensive musical analysis where six different tables[12] of analysis are presented, they mark “I Don’t Care” with solely “intensity” in four tables and with both “intensity” and “release” in two. “Dearly Beloved” is marked exclusively with “release” in five tables and with both concepts in the table “melodic structure.” Whereas “I Don’t Care” was aggressive and chaotic, as underlined by the writings in the booklet, “Dearly Beloved” is calm and structured, also reflected in the booklet. The difference evokes the image of a storm and the immediate deafening silence following its conclusion. In the silence Jesus is left with all these questions, without knowing where they came from: “I can’t remember a word that you were saying.”

As noted, the only instance of someone other than Jesus narrating in “Jesus of Suburbia” occurs with the heartfelt tirade in the middle section of “I Don’t Care.” Jesus’ alter ego St. Jimmy is not mentioned and unknown to Jesus until he triumphantly appears on the scene in the later song “St. Jimmy.” That, however, does not mean his presence in *American Idiot* is first felt there. The fervent voice of “I Don’t Care’s” middle section comes in from the sidelines and later, in “St. Jimmy,”

[12] The tables in question are “rythmic structure,” “phrasing,” “instrumentation,” “congruent and incongruent,” “harmonic structure” and “melodic structure.”

the character of the same name will tell us that, “I’m the one from the way outside.” Additionally, Jesus’ inability to remember what it is that has been said suggests involvement from elsewhere, perhaps the subconscious, prompting him to ask all these questions.

Another suggestion that St. Jimmy in fact appears already at this early stage is the difference in soundscapes between the middle section of “I Don’t Care” and its surrounding sections. The middle section’s short-held notes stand in opposition to the other sections long-held ones, which results in a more forceful sound. They are also different in that the main patterns of the first and last sections are patterns of release, while “St. Jimmy’s section” has a pattern of intensity (Chuang & Hart, 196). The subtle emergence of St. Jimmy in “I Don’t Care” leaves Jesus dumbfounded in “Dearly Beloved,” marking the beginning of the end of reflection and the start of action.

As the harmonies of part four come to a close, the bass takes over to initiate the last part of the five part song. The bass speeds up the tempo and increases the intensity, and after a nine second intro the rest of the instruments and the vocals ignite simultaneously: “Tales of Another Broken Home” goes off into the most vibrant soundscape of “Jesus of Suburbia,” spending the first minute and 43 seconds from the start of the verse without taking a break from the high tempo and intensity set. With all the primary instruments (electric guitar, bass and drums) firing on all cylinders, the soundscape of “Tales of Another Broken Home” sets the stage for “Jesus of Suburbia’s” climax.

While “Dearly Beloved” suggested the beginning of a transformation from an oblivious, uninspired individual, the transformation of Jesus into a being of action is completed in part five. From confessing that he is at the end of the world but “I could

really care less" in part two, Jesus opens "Tales of Another Broken Home" by declaring that "To live and not to breathe/Is to die in tragedy." The Jesus that was content with merely being alive has now concluded that the way of life he is leading culminates in a tragic death. Jesus then announces his first course of action in the search for a truer life: "To run, to run away/To find what to believe." He decides that he has to try to fill in what Guignon and Pereboom refers to as a "gap," the space between "what is just 'there' in our lives and what could or should be" (xix).

According to Sartre and Heidegger, the rift between what is only "there" and what we feel could or should be is so severe that the best an individual "can hope for is to … live in the tension with maximum lucidity and intensity," whereas Kierkegaard sees meaning coming through commitment (Guignon & Pereboom, xix). While Kierkegaard preaches a commitment to religion, Jesus leaves Jingletown committed to doing *something* in order to replace his idle existence with an authentic one. In Guignon and Pereboom, authenticity is defined as a concept that "calls on us to live a more focused and intense life, a way of existence that integrates our feelings, desires, and beliefs into a unified whole" (xxxiv). *American Idiot's* Jesus does not know what these feelings, desires and beliefs are, and therefore leaves Jingletown, a place that has equipped him with no frame of reference to figure it out, "To find what to believe." *American Idiot* thus edges closer to a classic American coming-of-age tale, leaving one's inadequate homestead behind in search for a somewhat unidentifiable "more."

After declaring "And I leave behind/This hurricane of fucking lies," echoing St. Jimmy's "Everyone is so full of shit!" in "I Don't Care," Jesus states that "I lost my faith to this,/This town that don't exist." Jesus' past faith seems to be what Sartre termed *bad faith* (Guignon & Pereboom, 261). Equipped with a faith of self-

deception, people of "bad faith" tell themselves they are not free to choose among the many courses of action we are free to choose from. Jesus has restricted himself to a suburban deadbeat, playing the role of the uncaring, pot-smoking youngster without any aspiration. By taking on this role Jesus becomes what Sartre calls a being-*in*-itself, defined merely by his role as an indolent individual. By rejecting this role in "Dearly Beloved" and "Tales of Another Broken Home," Jesus edges closer to a being-*for*-itself, aware of his own consciousness, which he up until that point had denied by succumbing to "bad faith."

This transition leads to the rather sudden decision to leave Jingletown and head for the city (to remain unknown throughout). The decision pushes Jesus closer to the passionate individual Kierkegaard calls for in *The Present Age*. From a societal point of view Jesus' decision to leave Suburbia is borderline outrageous, seeing as he sacrifices security and stability, two of the utmost sought after qualities of our times. To Kierkegaard, who pondered, "In fact one is tempted to ask whether there is a single man left ready, for once, to commit an outrageous folly," Jesus might be a ray of light in the grey mass that is his public (33).

As part five draws to a close Jesus again reiterates that Jingletown presents a "hurricane of lies" and that the episodic days of conforming are behind him: "And I walked this line/A million and one fucking times/But not this time," the song continues into a lengthy instrumental part in the same fashion as the existing soundscape. However, this soundscape comes to a sudden end as all the instruments stop simultaneously, except a piano that accompanies the vocals through the last four lines of "Tales of Another Broken Home," concluding "Jesus of Suburbia" as follows:

I don't feel any shame, I won't apologize

When there ain't nowhere you can go

Running away from pain when you've been victimized

Tales from another broken home

In the booklet, the first line is written in italics[13], its style reminiscent of a child's. In fact, the whole passage seems to be presented *to* Jesus rather than *by* him. Perhaps, again, a comment made by an unnamed character that has seen these situations before ("Tales from *another* broken home"), the final lines first and foremost comment on and observe Jesus' refusal to acknowledge his own role in the life he is about to leave behind, blaming the town, lies made to him, etc. The commentator above perhaps points out Jesus' embracement of the victim role, for which he or she refuses to apologize.

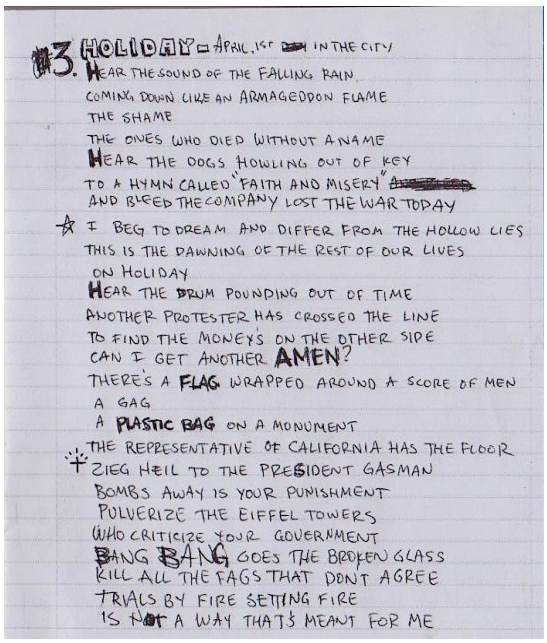
As the last word "home" is sung, the dominant soundscape of "Tales of Another Broken Home" comes back in full force and stays dominant until the song ends. "You're leaving/Oh, you're leaving home" is sung, but the lines are not part of the lyrics in the booklet, signaling that Jesus himself is not the speaker. The voice might belong to those aforementioned other individuals of suburban discontent who are unable or perhaps unwilling to break the chains Jesus broke when he discarded reflection and societal norms. The choir sees the protagonist off as "Jesus of Suburbia" comes to an end.[14]

[13] Whatsername's parts are written in italics, but are distinctly prettier than is the case here.

[14] In ancient Greek plays, the chorus consisted of a number of unidentified characters that collectively commented on the unfolding events of the play. Parts reminiscent of this function of the Greek chorus appear several places in *American Idiot,* first here at the end of "Jesus of Suburbia."

HOLIDAY

The cycle's third song, "Holiday," first and foremost represents *American Idiot's* second and final explicit political commentary. Whereas the first, "American Idiot," dealt with the relationship between the public and the media in light of the political climate at the time, "Holiday" is an all-out attack on U.S. foreign policy during the George W. Bush era.


#3. HOLIDAY - APRIL 1ST IN THE CITY
HEAR THE SOUND OF THE FALLING RAIN
COMING DOWN LIKE AN ARMAGEDDON FLAME
THE SHAME
THE ONES WHO DIED WITHOUT A NAME
HEAR THE DOGS HOWLING OUT OF KEY
TO A HYMN CALLED "FAITH AND MISERY"
AND BLEED THE COMPANY LOST THE WAR TODAY
I BEG TO DREAM AND DIFFER FROM THE HOLLOW LIES
THIS IS THE DAWNING OF THE REST OF OUR LIVES
ON HOLIDAY
HEAR THE DRUM POUNDING OUT OF TIME
ANOTHER PROTESTER HAS CROSSED THE LINE
TO FIND THE MONEYS ON THE OTHER SIDE
CAN I GET ANOTHER AMEN?
THERE'S A FLAG WRAPPED AROUND A SCORE OF MEN
A GAG
A PLASTIC BAG ON A MONUMENT
THE REPRESENTATIVE OF CALIFORNIA HAS THE FLOOR
ZIEG HEIL TO THE PRESIDENT GASMAN
BOMBS AWAY IS YOUR PUNISHMENT
PULVERIZE THE EIFFEL TOWERS
WHO CRITICIZE YOUR GOVERNMENT
BANG BANG GOES THE BROKEN GLASS
KILL ALL THE FAGS THAT DON'T AGREE
TRIALS BY FIRE SETTING FIRE
IS NOT A WAY THAT'S MEANT FOR ME

It moves the story into the city Jesus left Jingletown for, as the booklet reveals "Holiday" taking place on April 1st "in the city." As in "American Idiot" the speaker rarely references himself, a tool used to distance the songs from the actual events of Jesus' journey. As mentioned in "American Idiot," these songs function more as an outside commentary on the world in which Jesus' story takes place, the protagonist himself not a central part of the song.

"Holiday" does, however, possibly contain another foreshadowing of St. Jimmy. The vocal's slow tempo in the bridge borders on talking rather than singing and is intended as a speech as the speaker is introduced: "The representative of California has the floor." As in the middle section of "I Don't Care," the vocals are somewhat distorted and the tone more aggressive than when Jesus is the speaker:

Zieg heil to the President gasman

Bombs away is your punishment

Pulverize the Eiffel Tower

Who criticize your government[15]

Bang bang goes the broken glass

Kill all the fags that don't agree

The rhetoric is a lot sharper and focused than one would imagine Jesus capable of, even if "Jesus of Suburbia" represented significant character development. If the part belongs to St. Jimmy, he has progressed from the sidelines to the center, his voice equally distributed through the speakers, placing him in the middle of the action. We saw Jesus leaving Jingletown committed to doing *something* but not knowing exactly what. His alter ego's flaming political statements suggest a possible political path for Jesus to commit to.

There is, however, far more that links "Holiday" to "American Idiot" than there are elements tying the excerpt above to St. Jimmy's brief cameo in "I Don't Care." "Holiday" unifies with *American Idiot* thematically rather than by tying in with the exploits of Jesus of Suburbia. It echoes the feeling of betrayal ("I beg to dream and differ from the hollow lies") and marginalization ("The shame/The ones who died without a name") already commented on in the two previous songs. "Holiday" is thus, to some extent, an instance of the short-story cycle's "fringe story," a concept we will return to later.

[15] This references U.S. ally France and their outspoken opposition of the invasion of Iraq. In fact, two Republican representatives, Bob Ney and Walter Jones, pushed through a name change in menus at Congressional cafeterias. French fries and French toast became "Freedom fries" and "Freedom toast." Ney called it a "small, but symbolic effort to show the strong displeasure of many on Capitol Hill with the actions of our so-called ally, France" (CNN).

BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS

Dated April 2nd, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" immediately follows "Holiday." This is made clear in the music as well, as the final tone of "Holiday" drags into "Boulevard of Broken Dreams." The chords that run through "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" quickly overshadow that tone. The tremolo effect is added to the chords, which gives the chords a wave-like or trembling effect. In a song where the protagonist finds himself utterly alone, this effect underlines his solitude as it rings in the back of the soundscape like an ugly feeling of insecurity Jesus cannot shake.

As he left Jingletown, there was a feeling of optimism, the start of a quest for self-realization. As noted, the parts of "Jesus of Suburbia" traced the character development of Jesus from a slothful, unambitious youth to an action-taker and a shaper of his own fortune. "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" seems to halt this development, and even to some extent regress it. The walk down the metaphorical boulevard consists mainly of Jesus describing a feeling of complete isolation, both in the past and in the present: "I walk a lonely road/The only one that I have ever known." For a character that spurred forward at the end of "Jesus of Suburbia" and literally left his old life behind, a return to feelings of alienation ("My shadow's the only that walks beside me") and hopelessness ("My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating") represents a massive blow to the goals he set out to reach.

However, those goals were always blurry. Unable to live everyday life with "maximum lucidity and intensity," as proposed by Sartre and Heidegger, nor setting out on this journey with any concrete commitment to something, as proposed by Kierkegaard, Jesus only has the tools provided by modern society. Outside the comfort zone of Suburbia, where his role as a piece in the suburban puzzle was

defined and familiar, he is unable to escape his suburban self. The feeling of isolation is the same ("The only one that I have ever known"), and the belief that there was a geographical solution to an existential problem has proven to be false.

Thus, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" adheres to the idea shared by the most prominent authors of this thesis' secondary material, especially Kierkegaard and Debord, that the modern age essentially is the age of the herd and the death of the individual. Having broken free from his societally constructed self, Jesus stands at the beginning of a road that offers a wide range of possibilities. However, instead of embarking upon that road he admittedly walks down a known one instead. Brought up in the suburbs, a very concrete manifestation of Kierkegaard's leveling process, Jesus' decline into introspective reflection is unsurprising, for the individual in the passionless age is a creature of habit and predictability, if we are to believe Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Presented with the option of doing anything he wants, Jesus does nothing, thus reflecting the leveling process' suffocation of action.

There is nothing explicit in the lyrics of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" to suggest that the character is aware of this standstill. The relative calmness of the vocal melody sounds more like apathetic acceptance than desperation. Gone is the enthusiasm with which Jesus left Jingletown, the apathy of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" thus speaks to Kierkegaard's claim that "the present age with its sudden enthusiasms followed by apathy and indolence is very near the comic" (39).

This is, however, somewhat contrasted in the instrumentation. The instrumental bridge takes full use of the tremolo effect, while the song concludes with an almost 40 second long outro in which the electric guitars take prominence. The tremolo effect roars like a whirlwind out of control in the background whilst the lead

guitar plays a dark melody that greatly contrasts the vocal melody. In the first part of the second verse the lyrics do, however, suggest an inner conflict:

I'm walking down the line
That divides me somewhere in my mind
On the borderline
Of the edge and where I walk alone

The whole passage reads as foreshadowing of the yet to emerge alter ego St. Jimmy. Still unknown to Jesus, all the conflicts that are pulsating right beneath the surface is to be personified through this character. In the lines above, Jesus can only vaguely sense his alter ego's presence. As he walks on the "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" he seems to contemplate letting these somewhat unidentifiable conflicts manifest themselves. He is admittedly on the "edge," and while unsure of what kind of edge he is on, Jesus considers going over it, letting whatever society has made him repress take control. This is a small part of the song, but a first step towards the rejection of his current self that comes about in "Are We The Waiting."

ARE WE THE WAITING

The album's fifth song, "Are We The Waiting," moves forward at a slow, steady pace throughout. It portrays Jesus in the city where he intensely evaluates his existence:

And screaming
Are we we are

Are we we are

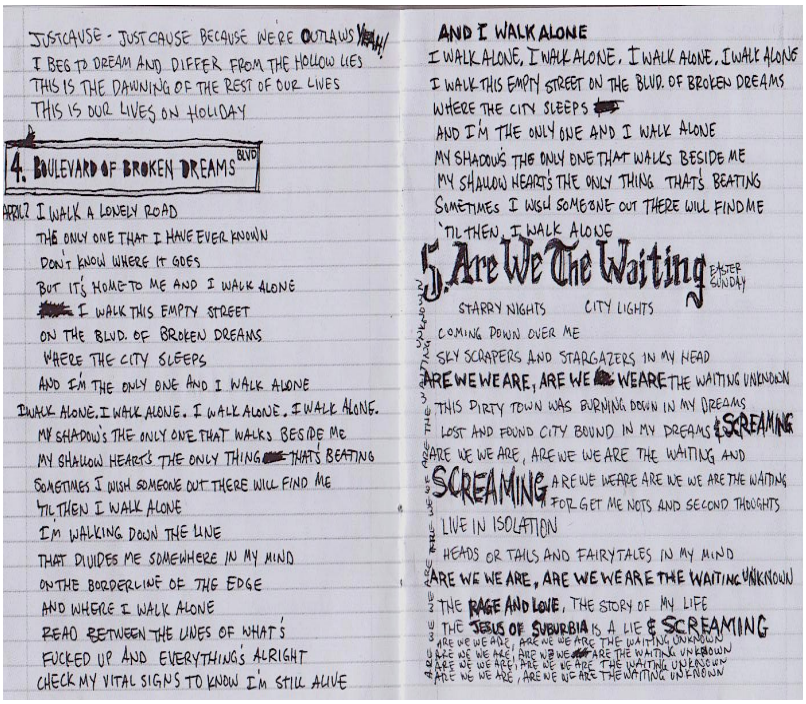
The waiting

No question marks are included, as he has already reached a conclusion: We are. In the last verse in this part of the cycle, Jesus uncovers what the waiting is for: "Are we, we are/Are we we are/The waiting unknown." The first verse, preceding the chorus above, is sung from the first person perspective. But as Jesus sings "and screaming," a choir of voices sings the remainder of the chorus. Coming from a place a little further back in the soundscape, it creates the effect that the chorus is sung back to Jesus from a distance, the voice of the others who are waiting for the unknown.[16] This expands *American Idiot's* realm and again effectively sets up the protagonist to be the representative of a whole generation, the choir of equally existentially stuck individuals singing back to him looking for guidance. This responsibility was something that was not given considering the line "I walk alone," that was repeated over and over again just one song prior. *American Idiot* thus portrays the upcoming generation as a generation that sees life as a waiting room, waiting indefinitely for their names to be called so that someone can fill their existence with meaning.

The first step out of the "waiting room" was in "Jesus of Suburbia," when our protagonist realized that the individual must instigate change, before it became clear in "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" that a change of scenery is an inadequate alteration in order to achieve some kind of personal authenticity. This realization leads Jesus' to confront himself in "Are We The Waiting." He sits around, as he did in Jingletown, waiting for an unspecific change (the "unknown"), realizing that he has simply relocated his problems from Suburbia to the city. This leads to the explicit rejection of

[16] Again reminiscent of the Greek chorus.

the whole Jesus of Suburbia persona right before the last chorus: "The rage and love/The story of my life/The Jesus of Suburbia is a lie."


JUSTCAUSE - JUSTCAUSE BECAUSE WE'RE OUTLAWS YEAH!
I BEG TO DREAM AND DIFFER FROM THE HOLLOW LIES
THIS IS THE DAWNING OF THE REST OF OUR LIVES
THIS IS OUR LIVES ON HOLIDAY

4. BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS BLVD

I WALK A LONELY ROAD
THE ONLY ONE THAT I HAVE EVER KNOWN
DON'T KNOW WHERE IT GOES
BUT IT'S HOME TO ME AND I WALK ALONE
I WALK THIS EMPTY STREET
ON THE BLVD. OF BROKEN DREAMS
WHERE THE CITY SLEEPS
AND I'M THE ONLY ONE AND I WALK ALONE
I WALK ALONE. I WALK ALONE. I WALK ALONE. I WALK ALONE.
MY SHADOW'S THE ONLY ONE THAT WALKS BESIDE ME
MY SHALLOW HEART'S THE ONLY THING THAT'S BEATING
SOMETIMES I WISH SOMEONE OUT THERE WILL FIND ME
'TIL THEN I WALK ALONE
I'M WALKING DOWN THE LINE
THAT DIVIDES ME SOMEWHERE IN MY MIND
ON THE BORDERLINE OF THE EDGE
AND WHERE I WALK ALONE
READ BETWEEN THE LINES OF WHAT'S
FUCKED UP AND EVERYTHING'S ALRIGHT
CHECK MY VITAL SIGNS TO KNOW I'M STILL ALIVE

AND I WALK ALONE
I WALK ALONE, I WALK ALONE, I WALK ALONE, I WALK ALONE
I WALK THIS EMPTY STREET ON THE BLVD. OF BROKEN DREAMS
WHERE THE CITY SLEEPS
AND I'M THE ONLY ONE AND I WALK ALONE
MY SHADOW'S THE ONLY ONE THAT WALKS BESIDE ME
MY SHALLOW HEART'S THE ONLY THING THAT'S BEATING
SOMETIMES I WISH SOMEONE OUT THERE WILL FIND ME
'TIL THEN I WALK ALONE

5. Are We The Waiting EASTER SUNDAY

STARRY NIGHTS CITY LIGHTS
COMING DOWN OVER ME
SKY SCRAPERS AND STARGAZERS IN MY HEAD
ARE WE WE ARE, ARE WE WE ARE THE WAITING UNKNOWN
THIS DIRTY TOWN WAS BURNING DOWN IN MY DREAMS
LOST AND FOUND CITY BOUND IN MY DREAMS & SCREAMING
ARE WE WE ARE, ARE WE WE ARE THE WAITING AND
SCREAMING ARE WE WE ARE ARE WE WE ARE THE WAITING
FORGET ME NOTS AND SECOND THOUGHTS
LIVE IN ISOLATION
HEADS OR TAILS AND FAIRYTALES IN MY MIND
ARE WE WE ARE, ARE WE WE ARE THE WAITING UNKNOWN
THE RAGE AND LOVE, THE STORY OF MY LIFE
THE JESUS OF SUBURBIA IS A LIE & SCREAMING

Jesus of Suburbia was, in the protagonist's own mind, a victim of circumstance, who left those circumstances in order to find meaning and truth in other and hopefully better circumstances. A character that avoided that which, according to Sartre, should be existentialism's first move, namely "to make every man aware of what he is and to make full responsibility of his existence rest on him," Jesus' role as a victim was brought about solely by himself (Guignon & Pereboom, 250). By rejecting the victimized Jesus, the protagonist assumes responsibility for his own existence and acknowledges Sartre's central claim that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (*The Humanism of Existentialism* in Guignon & Pereboom, 271).

Ironically, the rejection of Jesus in "Are We The Waiting" takes place on Easter Sunday, the same day the biblical figure of the same name came back from the dead. The rejection marks the protagonist's awakening from the indolent mindset that external forces decide whether or not his life makes sense to him. With Jesus of Suburbia gone, *American Idiot's* Easter Sunday, too, must contain a resurrection.

“Heart Like a Hand Grenade” – Eros and Thanatos

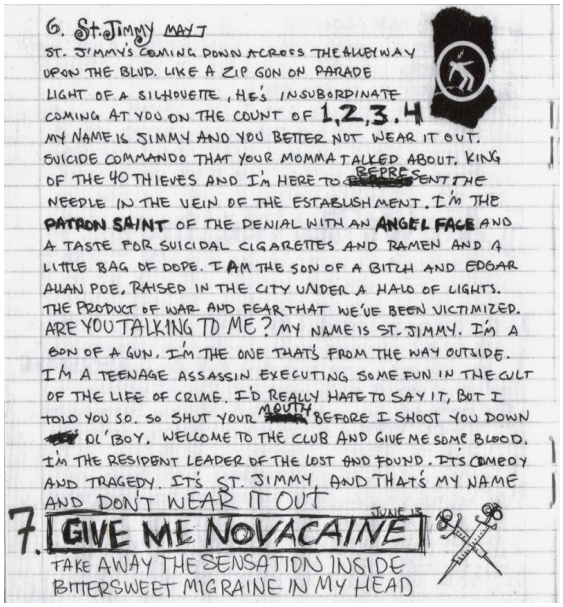
ST. JIMMY

As the Jesus of Suburbia character is rejected at the end of “Are We The Waiting,” on *American Idiot’s* Easter Sunday, the protagonist resurrects as St. Jimmy in the song of the same name that immediately follows. There is nothing to suggest that St. Jimmy is another facet of the protagonist at this point; that only becomes apparent in the later songs “Letterbomb” and “Homecoming.” St. Jimmy is already a fully fleshed character by the time he is introduced. The short-story cycle can bring out characters whose development the reader or listener has not been part of, for the gaps that exist in between stories are “not to be regarded as passive states of absence but rather as dynamic narrative components,” according to Rolf Lundén (*The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite,* 91).

St. Jimmy probably comes into existence in the immediate aftermath of the protagonist’s rejection of Jesus at the end of “Are We The Waiting,” and has thus, judging by the dates in the booklet, been part of *American Idiot’s* universe for almost a month when he is first introduced to the listener. Judging by the soundscape, St. Jimmy is a character reveling in chaos. From the slow pace of “Are We The Waiting,” the story suddenly finds itself in an intense palm-muted frenzy that at the beginning of the second verse develops into *American Idiot’s* most punk soundscape yet.

The way St. Jimmy introduces himself sounds like the manifestation of the opinions expressed in the opening track. In addition to voicing explicit opposition against the governing power, the flamboyant St. Jimmy declares himself “the resident

leader of the lost and found." "American Idiot" spoke of a "we" that were not meant to follow, although it never made clear whom this "we" consists of**.** The album then zoomed in on Jesus of Suburbia, who might very well be part of the "we," but whose seemingly aimless search for a meaningful existence led him nowhere. As the protagonist himself rejects this character, out steps someone apparently ready to lead those not meant to follow, against the propaganda, hysteria and subliminal brainwashing spoken of in "American Idiot."



The first verse of "St. Jimmy" has him approaching from a distance ("St. Jimmy's coming down across the alleyway"), his entrance described by what seems to be a bystander. A palm-muted section runs through the first verse, before exploding into an intense power chord progression as St. Jimmy takes the word himself in the second verse:

> My name is Jimmy and you better not wear it out
>
> Suicide commando that your Momma talked about
>
> King of the 40 thieves and I'm here to represent
>
> The needle in the vein of the establishment

In stark contrast to Jesus, who left Suburbia in order to search for an unidentifiable "something" to fill his existential void, St. Jimmy has a clear image of his societal role: "I'm here to represent/The needle in the vein of the establishment." Already

here, in his first moment in the spotlight, St. Jimmy takes the rhetoric of *American Idiot* back to that of its title track, echoing a position distinctly opposite of the establishment: "Maybe I am the faggot America/I'm not a part of a redneck agenda."

As a tool in establishing this new character, "St. Jimmy" offers multiple instances of intertextuality. The strategy is utilized to portray the leader of the lost and found as a character distinguishably different from the average Joe. He coins himself "King of the 40 thieves," a reference to "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from *One Thousand and One Nights.* It places him at the top of the hierarchy of outcasts, while also suggesting a criminal element to this group of non-conformists (this is further strengthened by the later line "I'm a teenage assassin executing some fun/In the cult of the life of crime"). Later in the song St. Jimmy describes himself as "the son of a bitch and Edgar Allan Poe." The reference to the American gothic writer might relate to a number of things: Poe himself was someone who was not afraid to swim upstream against the established current, getting himself intentionally court-martialed while attending West Point, so he could be dismissed. He purposely disobeyed the system and was charged with "gross neglect of duty' for being absent twenty-three times from a parade or military formation and for being absent 'from all his academic duties between January 15 and 27" (Davidson, 639).

Even more likely, however, St. Jimmy identifies himself with the late American author due to the nature of his writing. A master of the gothic genre, Poe dealt with death, terror and the trembling human psyche. In his piece on Edgar Allan Poe in *American Literature to 1900,* Ian M. Walker claims that the tension in Poe's work often stems from "the dichotomy between the rational tone which the narrator adopts, and the perverse, irrational nature of his unconscious mind which the narrative reveals" (145). In *American Idiot,* a similar irrational nature of the protagonist's

unconsciousness manifests itself through St. Jimmy: he is the physical expression of the protagonist's worst impulses. The dichotomy spoken of by Walker is lost, however, as St. Jimmy narrates his own parts. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that St. Jimmy presents himself almost as a character that could have emerged from Poe's pen.

The final obvious intertextual reference comes during the instrumental section that leads up to the song's final part. As the guitars run havoc to the expeditious drumbeat, St. Jimmy screams: "Are you talking to me?" The line takes prominence in the booklet, as it is written in larger letters than the rest of the text (with the exception of the very last line, which I return to later). The line references the iconic scene from the Martin Scorsese picture *Taxi Driver,* in which the protagonist Travis Bickle acts out an imaginary social encounter while alone in his apartment. Bickle, who earned actor Robert De Niro an Oscar nomination, is a disgruntled Vietnam veteran now earning a living by being a taxi driver in New York City. Unable to form lasting relations and becoming gradually more disgusted by the corruption and miscellaneous creatures he witnesses while working, his thoughts begin to turn violent. He attempts to assassinate a Senator[17], but fails and instead murders three people in a brothel. In the book *Scorsese on Scorsese,* director Martin Scorsese says that he views Travis Bickle as an "avenging angel" who "has the best intentions, he believes he's doing right, just like St. Paul.[18] He wants to clean up life, clean up the mind, clean up the soul" (Thompson & Christie, 62).

[17] Before embarking on the attempted assassination, Travis shaves his head into a Mohawk. In the West End musical adaption of *American Idiot,* which I attended on the 3rd of Nov. 2015, both St. Jimmy and the protagonist, Johnny, sport Mohawks.
[18] Before St. Paul's conversion to Christianity, he vehemently opposed it, and took part in the stoning of St. Stephen. And while Godly men mourned, St. Paul "began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison." (*New International Version*, Acts 7:58, 8 and 8:2-3)

That the introduction to the character of St. Jimmy is so laden with this kind of intertextuality is by no means an accident. St. Jimmy himself has the word when all these allusions occur; they are his frame of reference. He does indeed perceive himself as an "avenging angel," the hero and leader of those who become alienated when their society decay into mass suggestion of hysteria and paranoia: "I'm the patron saint of the denial/With an angel face and a taste for suicidal" and "Welcome to the club and give me some blood/I'm the resident leader of the lost and found."

As we saw when deciphering "Tales of Another Broken Home," Jesus moves away from existing as a being-in-itself to a being-for-itself, only to relapse in "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" and "Are We The Waiting." Sartre sees a being-in-itself as a participant in an almost cat and mouse-like game. Concerned with others' perception of him, a perception then adopted by himself, the being-in-itself will try to transcend this perception, in turn making him objectify those who initially objectified him (Guignon & Pereboom, 265). Jesus similarly feels objectified and boxed in by society and succumbs to its definition of him before gradually trying to transcend it. The last line of the final verse of "Are We The Waiting" proclaims that "the Jesus of Suburbia is a lie," and sees the protagonist denouncing the belief that his being-in-itself was created by Suburbia's invisible, suffocating walls. Having been unable to break the being-in-itself enforced upon him by the ruling power that sculpts society, although he came close in "Dearly Beloved" and "Tales of Another Broken Home," Jesus of Suburbia makes way for St. Jimmy to try his hand at the same mission.

St. Jimmy is well aware that the odds of achieving, and maintaining, a state of "true" individuality in the modern, streamlined society, are stocked against him. He therefore asks, in his first and in his last line of "St. Jimmy," that his constituents do not "wear him out": "My name is Jimmy and you better not wear it out," and "Don't

wear it out," respectively. The last line has been emphasized in the booklet, appearing, together with “Are you talking to me?” in larger letters. In *Understanding Popular Culture,* John Fiske explains how subordinate groups have rebelled against the dominant system by, quite literally, wearing their product out. When people started to rip and wash out their jeans, it was an important event because “the raggedness is the production and choice of the user” (15). However, those who profit from consumerism turned the situation on its head by producing jeans that were already torn: “Incorporation robs subordinate groups of any oppositional language they may produce: it deprives them of the means to speak for their opposition and thus, ultimately, of their opposition itself” (18). This showed manufacturers that they could take elements of counterculture, perceived threats to their existence, and turn it into something profitable.

At the same time, Fiske argues, subordinated groups still have their subcultures as they impose upon the dominant system a constant state of guerilla warfare: “The essence of guerilla warfare, as of popular culture, lies in not being defeatable” (19). As St. Jimmy welcomes us to his club, he is well aware that the existence he preaches must be kept within subcultural limits to remain undefeatable. Therefore he demands that the characteristics of this club of fugitives of modern day America remain out of capitalism’s reach. Operating below the radar of the common folk, St. Jimmy may inject small doses of poison in the dominant system with his metaphorical needle. However, if his efforts ever become the center of public affection, whatever characteristics St. Jimmy’s statements manifest themselves as, will be swallowed up by the dominant system and conflated by capitalism. No wonder then, that St. Jimmy’s first line threatens whoever is listening not to reduce him to the

equivalent of a pair of ragged jeans that suddenly everyone owns: “My name is Jimmy and you better not wear it out.”

What we see above, St. Jimmy’s identification with characters on the fringe of society and his keen awareness of the fragility of his status, is *American Idiot* introducing a more worthy competitor to the leveling process. Fiske’s ragged jeans example is, in essence, a very concrete manifestation of the Kierkegaardian process explored in the previous chapter. Spurred on by passionate rage, St. Jimmy personifies the attempt at transcending the dullness of everyday life by breaking all the norms society evokes, living life in the fast lane, en route to destruction, with a grin on his face: “It’s comedy/And tragedy/It’s St. Jimmy.” St. Jimmy represents the passionate individual Kierkegaard viewed as extinct.

GIVE ME NOVACAINE

Dated June 13th, the protagonist’s affiliation with St. Jimmy as depicted in “Give Me Novacaine” is now firmly established. This song dives deeper into the connection between the protagonist and his alter ego, but its soundscape is far removed from the frenetic chaos of “St. Jimmy.” The song starts off with a slow drumbeat before the entry of the guitar. The clean tone gives the sound an almost feather light, soothing quality, in stark contrast to the rough edges of “St. Jimmy.”

However, what is even more noteworthy and of immense interest is the song’s title. What stands out is the misspelling of “Novocaine.” Novocaine, or procaine, is a local anesthetic formerly used by dentists (*Merriam-Webster)*. Reducing *American Idiot’s* misspelling of Novocaine to an unfortunate mistake is however overlooking

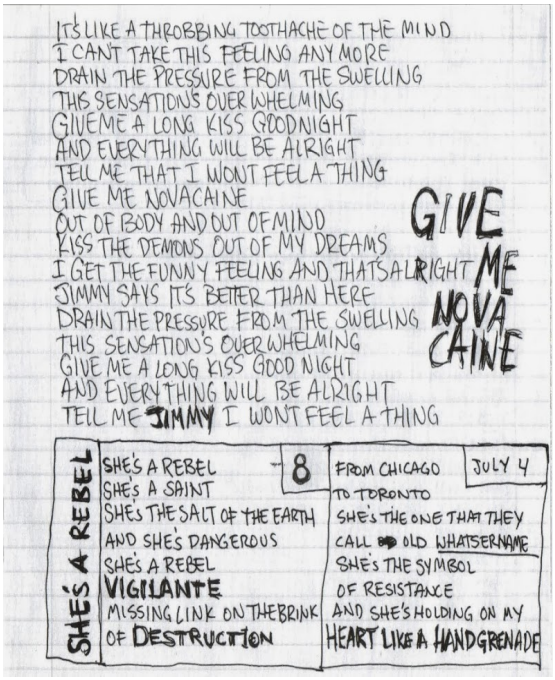
the potential of its content.[19] When replacing the "o" with an "a," the first half of the word carries a meaning on its own. A "nova" is "a type of variable star that suddenly increases in brightness by thousands to hundreds of thousands of times up to 14 magnitudes, and then decreases in brightness over a period of months to years" (*Collins Dictionary).* Thus, "Novacaine" can carry dual meanings (additionally, in the booklet, the title is written so that "nova" and "caine" appear as separate words), and seen as a reference to a number of things: there is the obvious reference to substance abuse, which is to be expected after "St. Jimmy," but there is also the reference to the "nova":

> Drain the pressure from the swelling
> This sensation's overwhelming
> Give me a long kiss goodnight
> And everything will be alright
> Tell me that I wont feel a thing
> Give me Novacaine

The discontentment of the protagonist and his failed attempt at escaping his existential funk through geographical relocation seems vanished in "Give Me Novacaine," its soundscape and lyrics now instead invoking a sense of well-being. The injection of Novacaine, whether literal or metaphorical, anesthetizes the protagonist who time and time again has failed to achieve any sense of self-fulfillment. An injection of Novacaine sedates the protagonist and brings forth St.

[19] If the misspelling indeed was a mistake, Green Day would have had the opportunity to set it right on a number of occasions, for instance on the cast recording of the *American Idiot* musical. However, the spelling is the same as on the original record.

Jimmy. In this state as someone else ("Out of body and out of mind"), the protagonist is able to escape his dire existence ("It's like a throbbing toothache of the mind/I can't take this feeling anymore"). St. Jimmy is the "nova," the sudden clearing in *American Idiot's* darkness, with his non-conformist, hell-raising and self-destructive attitude, the embodiment of the rage the protagonist introduced himself with in the first line of "Jesus of Suburbia": "I'm the son of rage and love."



That the protagonist of *American Idiot* in his search for a meaningful life outside the norms of the herd, takes his greatest refuge yet in a subconscious alter-ego who manifests as a insubordinate criminal on suicidal fast-track might sound like a contradiction. However, in *The Aesthetic Dimension,* Herbert Marcuse writes that art "reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation" (19), before he goes on to explore the emancipatory value of art by writers with a taste for the morbid, among them the before mentioned Edgar Allan Poe: "They express a 'consciousness of crisis' (*Krisenbewusstsein)*: a pleasure in decay, in destruction, in the beauty of evil; a celebration of the asocial, of the anomic" (20-21). The German-American philosopher goes on to write that this kind of esoteric literature "does nothing in the struggle for liberation – except to open the tabooed zones of nature and society in which even death and the devil are allies in the refusal to abide by the law and order of repression" (Ibid). Bearing in mind the intertextuality of St. Jimmy, the explicit mention of Poe is interesting. The

observation that this kind of art does nothing in the struggle for liberation, however, is not a criticism of Poe or the stories of St. Jimmy.

On the contrary, Marcuse disregards the Marxian notion that art's revolutionary potential is in its explicit content and its direct relation to political praxis: "The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change" (xiii). While applying Marcuse's idea of aesthetic transcendence to *American Idiot* as a whole would be a mistake ("American Idiot" and "Holiday" being obvious examples of praxis oriented pieces), it does allude powerfully to the songs that fit in with the more coherent parts of the narrative where the political aspect is largely out of sight. What is however missing from the narrative, if we follow Marcuse, is an Eros to St. Jimmy's Thanatos, for the literature of Poe and his likes reveal the dominion of the two "beyond all social control" (21). But Eros is about to step on the scene as "Give Me Novacaine" fades out with the same soothing sounds that make up its introduction, creating a grim contradiction to the protagonist's ever more increasing dependence on his self-destructive alter ego. This dependence is, however, about to be challenged.

SHE'S A REBEL

Before considering the physical manifestation of *American Idiot's* representation of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, we should define the Freudian concepts. Eros, as explained by Jonathan Lear, is "a basic force for life, love and development," whereas Thanatos, also know as the "death-drive," is part of human nature's "fundamental force for death, destruction and decomposition" (*Freud*, 254, 82). Essentially, the two stand for the will to live versus the pull towards destruction. In

American Idiot this struggle is prominent already in "Jesus of Suburbia," where it is quite explicitly formulated already in the opening line: "I'm the son of rage and love." The protagonist then endures a fruitless escape attempt from the struggle before being introduced and subsequently succumbing to Thanatos in "St. Jimmy" and "Give Me Novacaine." In the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, St. Jimmy has been running unopposed ever since his flamboyant entry, but with "She's a Rebel," *American Idiot* introduces the competition for the protagonist's soul.

Dated July 4th, more than three weeks after the events of "Give Me Novacaine," Whatsername's presence in the *American Idiot* universe has already affected the protagonist when the listeners are made aware of her existence: "And she's holding on my heart like a hand grenade." Albeit similar to "St. Jimmy" in that "She's a Rebel" too engages in a relatively fast-paced and simple guitar structure, none of the chaos or melodic malice of "St. Jimmy" is present. On the contrary, the melody is chipper and for perhaps the first time in *American Idiot* we might sense a hint of optimism based on real emotion (as opposed to the sedated sense of optimism in "Give Me Novacaine"). Whereas St. Jimmy shows all his cards immediately, the protagonist initially struggles to comprehend parts of Whatsername (the character goes by Whatsername throughout *American Idiot.* Her actual name is never revealed and at various points in the booklet even deliberately hidden):

> She sings the revolution
> The dawning of our lives
> She brings this liberation
> That I just can't define

We traced part of Jesus' failure to flourish away from the tic-tac houses of Suburbia to his inability to formulate what it was he went looking for, other than "there must be something more." In Whatsername he encounters for the first time an embodiment of what Nietzsche believed to be inherent in living organisms; "a will to flourish, to thrive … Natural beings strive to go beyond what they have achieved and to be more than what they currently are" (Guignon & Pereboom, 105). The protagonist is thunderstruck by Whatsername's talk of revolution and a "new dawn," but even more so by her resilience. She symbolizes all the personal qualities the protagonist lacks and all that which Kierkegaard calls out for in *The Present Age:* passion, purposefulness and actual action. Kierkegaard uses the example of a jewel out on a frozen lake, safe near land but with thinner ice the further out, to illustrate the individuals of a passionate age versus the present age:

> In a passionate age the crowds would applaud the courage of the man who ventured out… But in an age without passion, in a reflective age, it would be otherwise. People would think each other clever in agreeing that it was unreasonable and not even worth while to venture so far out. (37)

In "Tales of Another Broken Home," Jesus threw reflection out the window and took action by leaving Jingletown. However, he rapidly found himself alone in yet another apathetic wasteland, unable to alter his predicament. Whatsername, on the other hand, would most certainly have ventured out for the jewel. In fact, she is even more ambitious: She calls out for revolution ("She sings the revolution"). In "Jesus of Suburbia," the protagonist laments his condition of suburban suffocation before

fleeing to the city where he compares life to an endless waiting room in "Are We The Waiting," before jumping on the St. Jimmy train of drugs and self-destruction. Having repeatedly rejected, or perhaps found bliss in ignoring the role of free will in the shaping of his own fortune and thus effectively dimming down human potential, it is no wonder that our protagonist finds in Whatsername something refreshing and liberating that he "just can't define."

While the protagonist's quest for an authentic existence not mitigated by the society depicted in the previous chapter seems to have been spurred on by personal reasons, Whatsername enters *American Idiot* with a far greater vision: To bring about change for all. "She's a Rebel" makes out Whatsername to be the leader of a widespread revolutionary movement: "From Chicago to Toronto/She' the one that they call old Whatsername" and "She's the symbol of resistance." Moreover, Whatsername represents a polar opposite to the protagonist, St. Jimmy and the album title. Albeit as disillusioned as the protagonist about the state of the nation, Whatsername's solution is to change the conditions that reduce the individual to an insignificant sheep in the flock rather than succumb to self destruction. If the events leading up to "She's a Rebel" illustrate the serious decline of the American Dream, with the capitalist machine the only one living it, Whatsername enters as the glimmer of hope for a new beginning. Branded a "rebel," and described as "the salt of the earth," *American Idiot* sees Whatsername as a sort of primary force, made of the same material as the Americans who stood up against the English in 1776. Not a coincidence then, perhaps, that "She's a Rebel" is dated the 4th of July.

While the explicit talk of revolution in "She's a Rebel" does not adhere with the subtlety of the aesthetic dimension of art proposed by Marcuse, *American Idiot's* revolutionary potential comes out of the subjectivity of this one character. In Marxist

aesthetics "a major prerequisite of revolution is minimized, namely, the fact that the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals" (Marcuse, 3-4). "She's a Rebel" and, to a great extent *American Idiot* as a whole, seems to exist somewhere in between the Marxian and aesthetic dimension of Marcuse. It is far from as avant-garde as Marcuse would have preferred, but nor does *American Idiot* or its characters claim to be representatives of a certain social class as such. Class struggle is not a part of *American Idiot's* inner structure, nor does it suggest any kind of ultimate solution to the societal imbalance of wealth and power.

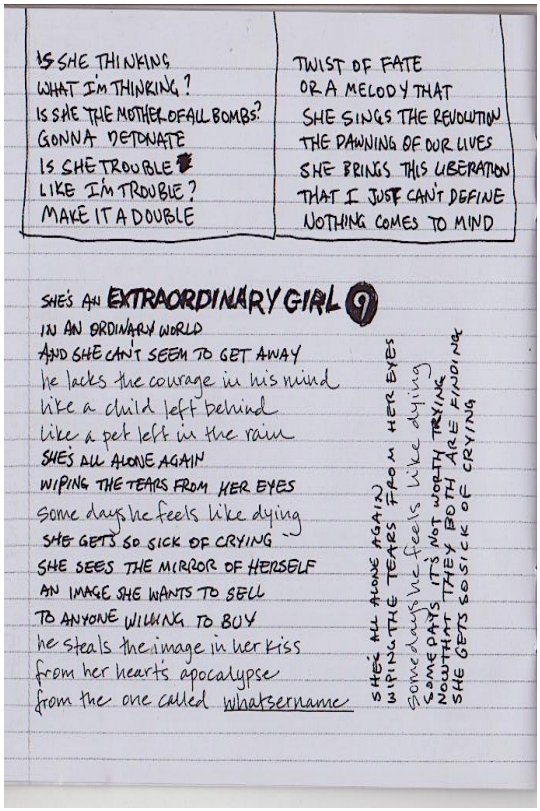
Its search is instead for a coping mechanism. Should one raise one's hands and realize that one is just an insignificant grain of sand on life's infinite beach and embrace Thanatos? Or should one actively try to alter one's condition, to thrive as Eros do? Or should one dwell in apathy as the protagonist did when we first met him in "Jesus of Suburbia?" *American Idiot* explores the possibility of all these responses. Whatsername appears to make a case for Eros. All the personal qualities needed to spur on revolution lined up above by Marcuse are relatable to this rebellious character.

The protagonist, on the other hand, is solidly shaped by the society described in "American Idiot" and his role in it as described in "Jesus of Suburbia." Whatsername's role as a representative of Eros, convincing the protagonist that the individual has the power to correct a dissatisfactory existence without succumbing to destruction, is an extraordinary one, as he has started to slowly self-destruct as an outlet for his apathy. On the surface it is a battle between good and evil. More profoundly, *American Idiot* is now about to explore if the protagonist, and in extension all the other indolent members of the modern public, have the drive, the

passion and the ambition to stand up and take responsibility for their own predicament hidden somewhere inside them. This is yet another test to see if Kierkegaard was right: Will the burst of enthusiasm brought forth by Whatsername sustain or will it relapse into repose?

EXTRAORDINARY GIRL

Already in the following song, Kierkegaard's gloomy assumption about the present age individual's ability to persevere his enthusiasm over time seems to be right. "Extraordinary Girl" is told from the perspective of both the protagonist and Whatsername. This is expressed in the booklet by alternate types of handwriting, with the protagonist's parts appearing in capital letters, as it has throughout, and Whatsername's in italics. The song, the only one not attributed with a date, chronicles the relationship between the two, each of them giving their portrayal of the other. As for further insight to the themes relevant for this thesis, "Extraordinary Girl" is not the cycle's most important piece. This is first and foremost made evident by the lyrical content, but also by its initial soundscape. The songs 34-second intro gravitates toward an Indian or Persian soundscape with bongo drums taking prominence and with a sitar-like sound roaming in the background. When the intro is over the soundscape immediately switches to a style more in line with the rest of the sound of *American Idiot.* The intro, so severely different from anything else on the album, further underlines the song's distance from the narrative theme followed so far. "Extraordinary Girl" does, however, set up the conflict between the two characters that erupt in the following "Letterbomb."



As we have followed the protagonist since "Jesus of Suburbia," it should come as no surprise that his apathy and half-heartedness is incompatible with the individual described in "She's a Rebel." In "Extraordinary Girl," Whatsername echoes these shortcomings already in the first verse: "He lacks the courage in his mind/Like a child left behind/Like a pet left in the rain," as well as noting his pull towards Thanatos: "Some days he feels like dying." The protagonist, on the other hand, keeps putting Whatsername in a quite favorable light: "She's an extraordinary girl/In an ordinary world", but notes dark clouds around her as well: "She's all alone again/Wiping the tears from her eyes." One might have thought that "She's a Rebel" ignited some kind of spark to the gloom of *American Idiot* with these two alienated characters taking comfort in each other. But the relationship with the revolutionary rebel has done nothing in the development of the protagonist, who still appears apathetic and helpless. Perhaps the most daunting suggestion of the character as a member of the modern herd, "Extraordinary Girl" illustrates that even in the company of someone willing to sacrifice and fight for something "more," apathy and pusillanimity still prevails. This ultimately spurs Whatsername into the Kierkegaardian rant of "Letterbomb."

In comparison to the first part of the album as treated in the previous chapter, *American Idiot's* middle section strays a bit from the path of its protagonist. We lose sight of him in "St. Jimmy" (only to later understand that we actually did not), and "Give Me Novacaine" and "She's a Rebel" drag the protagonist in two very different directions. The first two songs treated in this chapter construct and develop the relationship between the protagonist and St. Jimmy (Thanatos), while the two final songs do the same with the protagonist and Whatsername (Eros). So, if a bit chaotic and not quite as linear as the first part of the album, the middle part of the *American Idiot* cycle sets up the conflict that drives its final part. The protagonist's handling of that conflict and its inevitable aftermath will eventually reveal whether *American Idiot* sees a way out of the modern day spectacle, or if we do indeed lack the passion and the heart to alter our condition into something more than indolent consumers.

"I Am Standing All Alone" – Unrecognizability and Suffering

LETTERBOMB

The seeds of conflict between the protagonist and Whatsername planted in "Extraordinary Girl" are in full bloom in "Letterbomb," one of the pivotal pieces of the cycle. The title itself is quite revealing: In the booklet, the lyrics are written on a piece of paper different from the one in the diary. It is a letter that has been written by Whatsername, as made evident by the italicized handwriting, and pasted into the diary by the protagonist. Addressed "Dear J" and penned on August the 18th, the letter does not contain a bomb in the literal sense, but is in fact a break-up letter. Even more interesting than the letter's actual consequence, the dissolution of the protagonist's relationship with the ambitious rebel, is the complete character assassination of the protagonist by Whatsername in her goodbye note.

Determined, angry and with precision, she rips into the flaws of the protagonist and society at large. Her adamancy is supported by the soundscape: "Letterbomb" is a guitar driven song that holds a high but steady pace throughout. As opposed to other songs of a similar nature, like "St. Jimmy," there is no fluctuation in its soundscape. It does not stray off into different soundscapes (like the outro of "St. Jimmy does), but remains focused and intensely present in its own reality. Before venturing into this soundscape, however, a female voice[20] sings without any instrumentation except a screeching guitar in the background:

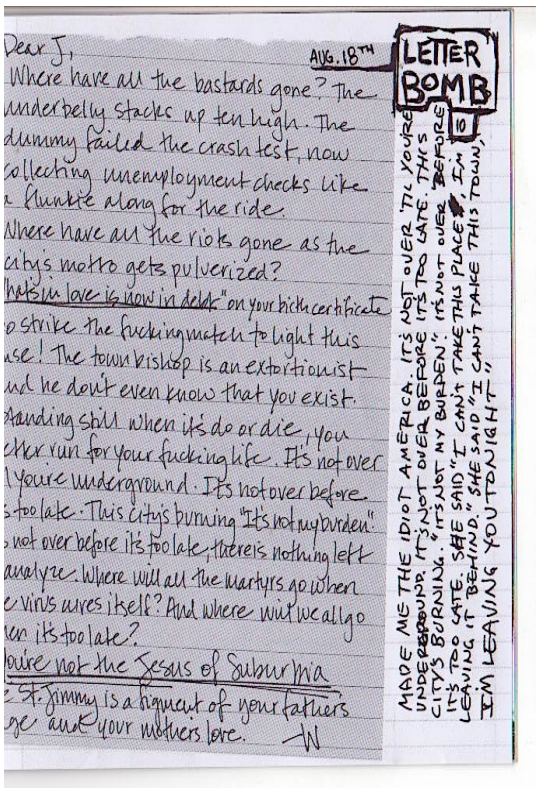
[20] Vocals provided by Kathleen Hanna, most notably of Bikini Kill.

Nobody likes you

Everyone left you

They're all out without you

Having fun



These lyrics are not part of the letter, but is the first instance of a verse that recurs in multiple parts of the five-parter "Homecoming," and seem here to foreshadow the feelings of the protagonist in the aftermath of the break-up.

In "Letterbomb," Whatsername describes a society where people have substituted resistance and commitment ("Where have all the riots gone/As the city's motto gets pulverized?") with state-funded indolence ("collecting unemployment checks/Like a flunkie along for the ride"). She sees all these symptoms of the modern day individual in the protagonist, who has now strayed far off his alter ego's mantra of being "the needle in the vein of the establishment," now financing his slow demise through government money. The contrast between the protagonist and Whatsername that was suggested in "Extraordinary Girl" is now made explicitly evident. While the protagonist on a few occasions has appeared optimistic, focused and driven ("Tales of Another Broken Home" and "She's a Rebel," for instance), he time and time again falls back into apathy. This stands in stark contrast to Whatsername who endures hardship ("Extraordinary Girl") without losing sight of her conviction. She still believes in the human potential to instigate change and reaffirms

in the letter that it cannot be achieved without firm action: “So strike the fucking match to light this fuse!”

The main difference in their motivation seems to be that while Whatsername works toward altering society at large, to what she believes would be beneficial to the majority, the protagonist seeks alterations that would benefit him specifically. In her *Too Much of Nothing: Modern Culture, the Self and Salvation in Kierkegaard’s Thought,* Jane Rubin writes that Kierkegaard’s critique of our modern age was a critique of a certain individual:

> … this self-interested, egalitarian individualism is intimately related to what Kierkegaard calls the “leveling” tendencies of modern culture and that the most destructive result of leveling, from Kierkegaard’s perspective, is that people “are unable to make a real commitment.” (19)

Quite ironically, the protagonist who left Suburbia to escape the results of the leveling process is again merely a function of it. That should come as no surprise, however, as he has not actively pursued change himself by altering his behavioral patterns (except for the emergence of St. Jimmy, but he must be viewed and analyzed as a separate character), but is instead waiting for external circumstances to do the trick. Thus, he rejects what Sartre defines as the first principle of existentialism, namely that “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (*The Humanism of Existentialism* in Guignon & Pereboom, 271).

Waiting around in the belief that some inherent determinism will ultimately reveal itself and instill fundamental meaning into his life, it is no wonder that the

protagonist, like the selfish individual described by Kierkegaard and Rubin, is "unable to make a real commitment." Waiting for external conditions to release him from his prison of apathy will not yield any results, Kierkegaard claims:

> Nor do his surroundings supply the events or produce the general enthusiasm necessary in order to free him. Instead of coming to his help, his *milieu* forms around him a negative intellectual opposition, which juggles for a moment with a deceptive prospect, only to deceive him in the end by pointing to a brilliant way out of the difficulty – by showing him that the shrewdest thing of all is to do nothing. (*The Present Age,* 34)

The protagonist's unwillingness to assume any action leads Whatsername to accusing him of "Standing still when it's do or die," and in the next line warning "You better run for your fucking life." His sense of universal entitlement to a fulfilling existence leaves him unwilling to partake in any kind of direct action, feeling no sense of responsibility. If his surroundings are holding him back he will rather wait for them to change than attempt to change them himself. Whatsername echoes this egocentric train of thought in the song's chorus:

> It's not over till you're underground
> It's not over before it's too late
> This city's burning
> "It's not my burden"
> It's not over before it's too late

There is nothing left to analyze

Apathetic and self-indulgent, the protagonist renounces his role as a contributor to the attempted change of a morally corrupt society ("It's not my burden"). The first two lines of the chorus solidify Whatsername as a character who steadfastly believes in a different ideology than the one induced by the governing power. She has that in common with the protagonist, albeit their approach to dealing with it is severely different. While we have firmly established that the protagonist's preferred way to resist social control is through *jouissance,* evasion through the body, Whatsername's approach is another form of resistance which Fiske describes as follows: "The pleasures of evasion tend to center on the body; those of the production of contrary meanings center on the mind" (Fiske, 69). While both approaches "terrify the forces of order, for they constitute a constant reminder of both how fragile social control is and how it is resented" (Ibid), Whatsername sees resistance through evasion as ultimately ineffective. For like the bursts of enthusiasm that, according to Kierkegaard, curse our age, temporary evasion through the body will, in its effort to incite permanent change, fail due to its inherent temporariness.

The chorus ends with Whatsername declaring: "There is nothing left to analyze." This is perhaps the line in *American Idiot* that, despite its brevity, most directly speaks to what Kierkegaard attempts to say to the present age individual. Whatsername sees a society that should be standing on the precipice of revolution; where the only option to reverse the leveling is to directly oppose it. The time for action has come, there is nothing left to "analyze." The hope that the protagonist would be beside her as she makes the leap vanished sometime between

"Extraordinary Girl" and "Letterbomb." She looks at the people who remain immobile when "it's do or die," the same way Kierkegaard views those who congratulated themselves for not venturing out for the jewel on the frozen lake as the symbol of reflection's triumph over action.

Up until now the letter has been very direct and to the point, as is to be expected when perhaps bottled up emotions are finally let loose. But right after the first chorus, the vocals take a small step back from the determined presentation of the lyrics so far and venture into a calmer and more reflective temper, which serves to underline the rhetorical nature of the questions asked in the following two lines: "Where will all the martyrs go when the virus cures itself?/And where will we all go when it's too late?" The rhetorical questions are highly ambiguous and thus open up for a vast number of interpretations. In the context of the narrative, however, it is a quite clever instance of foreshadowing.

To understand this we need to think back to "City of the Damned," where we entertained the thought that Jesus in Jingletown belonged to a larger group of alienated youths. I suggested in footnote nine that this group might be referred to as "the underbelly." This word first occurs at the very beginning of "Letterbomb": "Where have all the bastards gone?/The underbelly stacks up ten high," and later appears in "East 12th St.": "He'd rather be doing something else now/Like cigarettes and coffee with the underbelly." According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary,* the word "underbelly" is commonly used euphemistically as the "seamy or sordid part" of something. We were never given the name of the club St. Jimmy claims to be the leader of in "St. Jimmy." What we did get to know, however, was that it consists of people who object to the inherent norms of society and who take on a role as outsiders and dissenters and escape and oppose social control through drugs and crime. These

sorts of people, societal deviants, are frowned upon by mainstream society as, indeed, the "seamy or sordid" part of society. "The underbelly," then, rather than Jesus' friends back home, references the ones who follow the self-appointed "patron saint of the denial," St. Jimmy.

St. Jimmy's constant reference to suicide in "St. Jimmy" suggests only one outcome for himself: death. He sees self-destruction as the ultimate act of resistance against modern society. This stands in contrast to Whatsername's mission to change society through revolution. In this struggle between Eros and Thanatos, where the protagonist is stuck in the middle, Whatsername sees St. Jimmy as a "virus" which infects others who oppose the system, the symptoms being self-destructive tendencies without the potential to instigate lasting change. Thus, what Whatsername rhetorically asks the protagonist in the letter is what happens to the underbelly ("the martyrs") when St. Jimmy ("the virus") kills himself, but the apathy, indolence and conformism of the modern age still prevails: "Where will all the martyrs go when the virus cures itself?"

Whatsername foreshadows St. Jimmy's suicide ("the virus cures itself") and wonders if the underbelly, who are engaged in a faulty cause, will slide back into apathy and unproductiveness. And when even those who oppose the system end up doing nothing to change it, there comes a time when what Whatsername sets out to achieve seems impossible, and then, she asks, what do we do: "And where will we all go when its to late?" The enthusiasm of the underbelly will, Kierkegaard would have said, as with everything in our passionless age of reflection, "shrewdly relapse into repose" (*The Present Age,* 33).

Following the rhetorical questions comes a scream that with it pulls the soundscape back to the intensity that characterizes "Letterbomb." The last lines of the

letter contain the first suggestion that St. Jimmy is a figment of the protagonist's imagination as well as being a scathing attack upon the protagonist's concealment behind his constructions Jesus of Suburbia and St. Jimmy:

> You're not the Jesus of Suburbia
> The St. Jimmy is a figment of
> Your father's rage and your mother's love
> Made me the idiot America

Before diving into the meaning of the words it is necessary to point out that Whatsername's letter actually ends after "Your father's rage and your mother's love," and that "Made me the idiot America" (and all the subsequent lyrics) in the booklet are penned by the protagonist. His contribution to "Letterbomb" appears in the margin to the right of the letter, as made evident by the distinct change of handwriting.

Jesus and St. Jimmy emerge throughout the cycle to try and solve the conflicts the protagonist faces in his encounter with the society described in "American Idiot," a society he despises. Yet, by surrendering to alternate versions of himself, the protagonist takes on "roles." Jesus is the pot-smoking suburban youngster without any aspirations initially, before embarking upon an adventure towards achieving the American dream as in a classic coming-of-age tale. St. Jimmy is the anarchistic rebel, a character so far removed from what is considered normal that he has the audience at the edge of their seats or with their heads buried in their hands. However, by assuming other roles than being himself, the protagonist contradicts much of the criticism he presents in "Jesus of Suburbia," namely that modern society deprives man of the means to be himself. By trying to escape this predicament by assuming

other roles, Jesus of Suburbia and St. Jimmy thus end up as societally constructed creatures. The protagonist's first line in "Letterbomb," "Made me the idiot America," comes immediately after the accusations of the non-reality of these characters, and sees the protagonist realizing for the first time that these attempts at escape accomplishes nothing.

Judging by Whatsername's last lines in the letter ("You're not the Jesus of Suburbia/The St. Jimmy is a figment of/You father's rage and your mother's love"), the protagonist's lack of authenticity and escapes into non-reality is a major factor in her decision to leave. These escapes stem from the protagonist's dissatisfaction or lack of belief in his own ability to transcend the predicament of the modern age. But the escape has, at least so far, proven to be highly ineffective with the protagonist now being left behind by *American Idiot's* most genuine character. Nietzsche writes:

> For one thing is needful: that human beings *attain* satisfaction with themselves – be it through this or that poetry and art – for only then can one stand to look at human beings! Those who are dissatisfied with themselves are constantly ready to take revenge for this; the rest of us will be their victims, if only by always having to stand the ugly sight of them. (*The Gay Science* in Guignon & Pereboom, 137)

Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard, puts emphasis on commitment. In order to attain satisfaction, one must have something to attain satisfaction from. Throughout this thesis we have seen, through his adopted Jesus personae, the protagonist's project of wanting to obtain some kind of knowledge of how to live "truthfully" in a society increasingly streamlined. However, he does not really have a plan as to how he will

obtain this other than through geographical relocation, and, judging by how fast he gives up, he is probably not that committed in the first place. He then succumbs to a self-destructive alter ego, who undoubtedly is committed, even if that commitment is to a place six feet under. However, St. Jimmy is merely the protagonist overcompensating for the inability to transcend his indolent existence on his own, and, as Nietzsche claims in the quote above, seeks revenge for his dissatisfaction with himself. And as predicted by the philosopher, others, in this case Whatsername, cannot stand the sight of him anymore and instead of remaining a victim severs all bonds.

The optimism sensed in "She's a Rebel," singlehandedly brought forth by the appearance of the female rebel, disappears firmly out the door with her departure. Thus, "Letterbomb" signals the beginning of *American Idiot's* disconsolate conclusion.

WAKE ME UP WHEN SEPTEMBER ENDS

The picking of the sole acoustic guitar that starts and accompanies the vocals through the first verse of "Wake Me Up When September Ends," reflects the protagonist's sense of complete loneliness in the aftermath of "Letterbomb." Within the cycle the song does not contribute much to the progression of the overall story[21] and functions more as a cushion between the eventful "Letterbomb" and the following

[21] The song marks Billie Joe Armstrong's effort to write a song about the death of his father who passed away in 1982 after battling cancer (*Rolling Stone*). However, the song took on a completely different meaning in American popular culture. After an online blogger paired the song with video footage of the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, with dead bodies floating in the streets, looting and malnourished children, the song became the soundtrack of a nation's feelings in the midst of a national trauma (*The New York Times)*.

"Homecoming." "Wake Me Up When September Ends" thus seems to be *American Idiot's* clearest instance of what Rolf Lundén calls the "fringe story": "In many composites … there are stories that strongly resist integration: there seems to be no explicit or direct link to the rest of the book" (*Centrifugal and Centripetal Narrative Strategies in the Short Story Composite and the Episode Film*, 60). This thesis claims that, as made evident in earlier chapters, "American Idiot" and "Holiday" have little to do with the story of *American Idiot's* protagonist. They do, however, fit in thematically with their depiction and critique of the social and political landscape the protagonist navigates through. The fringe story, on the other hand, "challenges the *thematic* coherence of the short story composite by seeming not to belong at all" (Ibid). The fringe story has been a stumbling block for critics, according to Lundén, but we should not attempt to overanalyze it: "I am not implying that there are *no* links between the fringe story and the rest of the composite, only that it is intended to be only tangentially connected and that … texts should be allowed to remain marginal" (*The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composites,* 125).

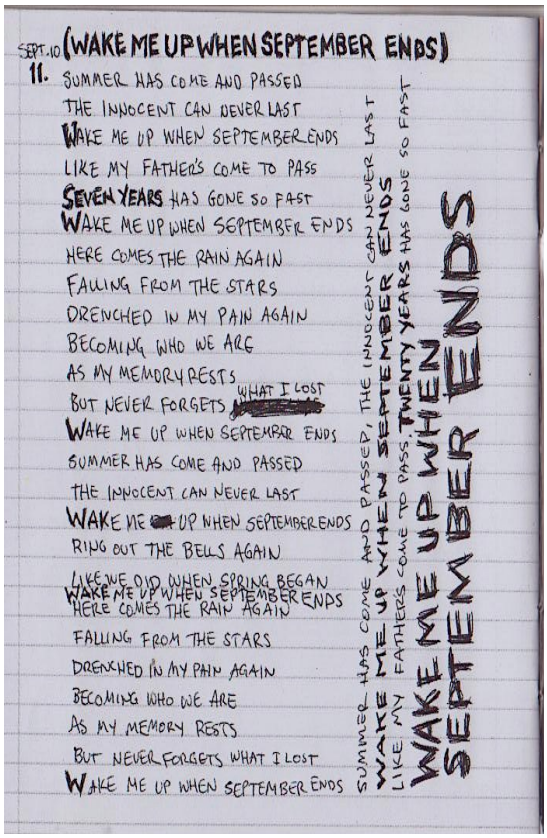
"Wake Me Up When September Ends" is the clearest instance of a fringe story in *American Idiot.* But even if the song is on the fringe of the cycle's universe, there are some lyrics in the most poetic piece of the album that deserves to be examined:

> Here comes the rain again
> Falling from the stars
> Drenched in my pain again
> Becoming who we are

In the immediate context of the song the line "Becoming who we are" seems to suggest that the shaping of oneself comes through the endurance of hardship ("Drenched in my pain again") and with time ("Seven years has gone so fast" and later "Twenty years has gone so fast"). More profoundly, the line echoes Nietzsche's book *Ecce Homo: How One Become What One Is,* in which he writes:

> That one becomes what one is presupposes that one does not have the remotest idea *what* one is. From this point of view even life's *blunders* have their own meaning and value, the temporary by-ways and wrong ways, the delays, the "modesties," the seriousness wasted on tasks which lie outside *the* task. Therein a great prudence, perhaps the highest prudence, comes to be expressed: where *nosce te ipsum* would be the recipe for disaster, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself, reducing oneself, narrowing oneself, mediocratizing oneself becomes good sense itself. (36)

In other words, Nietzsche sees not knowing oneself, even misunderstanding oneself, as good sense. The first sentence of the quote is certainly descriptive of the protagonist at this point in time. Having had his illusions shattered in "Letterbomb," the protagonist is left all to himself in the fringe story, back to an existential square one. One may argue that there is little difference between the place the protagonist finds himself now and where he found himself at the beginning of "Jesus of Suburbia," in utter bewilderment as to where one fits in with the spectacle. There are, however, major differences in the protagonist's own perception of himself due to the duality of Jesus and St. Jimmy.

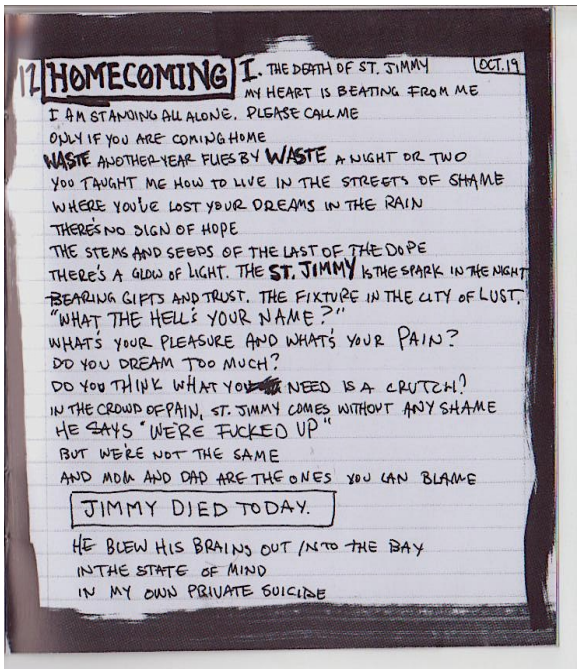


The initial character, Jesus of Suburbia, although embarking on a trip to discover a greater sense of self, takes on a role as the savior of alienated suburban youth and thus has an idea himself of who he is supposed to be. When this idea fails to serve its purpose, the manifestation of another idea, St. Jimmy, takes hold. By "Wake Me Up When September Ends," both ideas have been exhausted. Now wallowing in desolation, the protagonist sees his continuous missteps and the subsequent pain it has brought as part of the process of "Becoming who we are."

Nothing illustrates the protagonist's lack of idea of what he actually is more lucidly than his embracement of self-constructed roles. For what are they, if not exactly forgetting, misunderstanding, reducing and narrowing of the self? If indeed Nietzsche is right, and all the failures of the protagonist culminates in him becoming who he is, a realization the protagonist seems to have reached in "Wake Me Up When September Ends," that would surely bring him closer to some sort of answer to the questions he left Suburbia with. Integral to the process of becoming who he is, then, must be a return to himself and abandonment of his destructive alter ego.

HOMECOMING

"Homecoming" marks the second and last song of *American Idiot* to contain multiple parts. Like "Jesus of Suburbia," the soundscape of the song fluctuates with the life of each of the five parts.[22]



"The Death of St. Jimmy" starts off with an electric guitar, its sound and chord progression unrivaled in the soundscape until the vocals join in after nine seconds. No other elements are added, however, and the two go through the entirety of the first verse together, making it into more of an introduction to the remainder of the part:

My heart is beating from me

I am standing all alone

Please call me only

If you are coming home

Waste another year flies by

Waste a night or two

You taught me how to live

[22] The five parts are entitled "I.The Death of St. Jimmy," "II. East 12th St.," "III. Nobody Likes You," "IV. Rock and Roll Girlfriend" and "V. We're Coming Home Again." As with "Jesus of Suburbia," numerals have been omitted from the text.

While the Jesus of Suburbia personae is a role the protagonist takes upon himself knowingly and consciously, *American Idiot* never really reveals if the protagonist knows that St. Jimmy is his own alter ego (until it is spelled out in "Letterbomb"), or if he sees him as a character completely emancipated from himself ("Give Me Novacaine" suggests this with the protagonist saying "Jimmy says it's better than here" and "Tell me Jimmy I won't fell a thing," without Jimmy's actual presence in the song ever being made clear to the listener). When seen together with what happens later in the song, St. Jimmy's suicide, the verse above clearly indicates that the protagonist is in fact unable to separate himself and the character of St. Jimmy, at least on a conscious level. In the protagonist's subconscious, however, "Letterbomb" seems to have triggered the notion that the self-declared saint is a destructive force that will always halt his progression. Therefore, in the verses that follow and culminate in St. Jimmy's suicide, there is no trace of the protagonist at all. The verse above, then, sees the protagonist calling out to his lost friend, who he is subconsciously about to rid himself of.

After "You taught me how to live," the last chord rings out as the drums introduce the rest of the part, keeping within the same soundscape but with an increase in tempo and intensity. The remainder of the part chronicles the death of St. Jimmy. Much like in "St. Jimmy," the alter ego is portrayed as somewhat of a hero of the outcast: "There's a glow of light/The St. Jimmy is the spark in the night." At the same time, like Jesus, he largely neglects his own role in the outcome of his life:

> In the crowd of pain
>
> St. Jimmy comes without any shame
>
> He says "we're fucked up"

But we're not the same

And mom and dad are the ones you can blame

Those are his very last words before his death. While Jesus searched for transcendence in a society where he felt increasingly alienated, his failure at this mission brought forth St. Jimmy: a character hell-bent on revenge on society by deviating from its norms as drastically as possible. And in a final act of social defiance, St. Jimmy self-destructs:

Jimmy died today

He blew his brains out into the bay

In the state of mind

In my own private suicide

These are the lines that most glaringly demonstrate the interrelation between the protagonist and St. Jimmy ("In my own private suicide"). While St. Jimmy's suicide has appeared inevitable ever since "St. Jimmy," the question remains why he chose that path. Nietzsche writes that this kind of longing for destruction and change can stem from "the hatred of the misfits, the destitute, and the hapless, who destroy, *must* destroy, because what endures, in fact all endurance, all being itself, irritates and incites them – in order to understand this emotion, take a close look at our anarchists" (*The Gay Science* in Guignon & Pereboom, 157). In "American Idiot" we noted the "anarchistic a" in the headline and later identified the lyrics in "St. Jimmy" to support those of "American Idiot." The embodiment of the rage introduced already in "Jesus of Suburbia," the anarchistic rebel represents the utter disgust with government and

authority. His anti-authoritarianism is so cemented in his ideology that he kills himself rather than succumbing to the system. The question remains, however, what exactly is St. Jimmy's role in *American Idiot*, is he a hero or a villain?

In her work on *American Idiot,* Lacey B. Long, throughout her thesis, refers to St. Jimmy as a "hero" and a "revolutionary figure" (28). I find it hard to soundly conclude that the alter ego is a hero, nor can I steadfastly conclude that he is a villain. Long writes that Jimmy's victimization of himself and his followers ("The product of war and fear that we've been victimized" and "Mom and dad are the ones you can blame") serves to draw in the listener, "themselves flawed and frustrated young people" and thus relate to St. Jimmy (Ibid). The present thesis, on the other hand, has seen these instances of rejecting one's own responsibility in the shaping of one's fortunes as an indolent way of escaping the duty we all bear in making the most of our condition.

Long does not view St. Jimmy's endgame as inspirational, however: "He stands as a nonviable option for the audience: we are encouraged to admire Jimmy but not become him" (28). There is some truth to this claim. There is little to admire about his criminal endeavors and drug use, but there is a certain attraction in his complete rejection of what is considered normal and accepted. Although we can, to an extent, admire this quality, in the grand scheme of things St. Jimmy has been a selfish attempt by the protagonist's subconscious at a transcendence that is temporary and unsustainable against the tests of time. In defining this kind of superficiality, Rubin writes that it is:

> The attempt to attract attention to oneself through the establishment of direct differences between oneself and others. Because direct

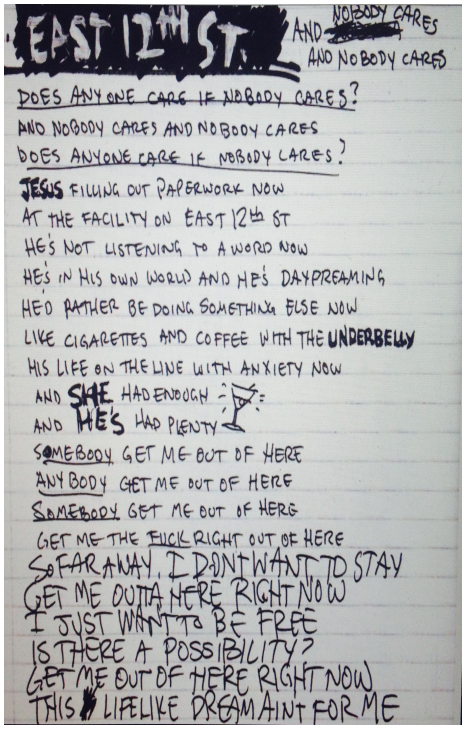
> differences are inherently self-destructive, superficiality results not in differentiated individuals but in undifferentiated members of the public. (*Too Much of Nothing,* 71)

In other words, Rubin claims that in an effort to escape the norms of society, even St. Jimmy only really remains more firmly within its boundaries. He does not stand out from the public because of what Rubin calls "real differences." A talent, for instance in music or art, is a real difference. An adopted direct difference to stand out, fundamentally opposed to what is considered "normal," on the other hand, is not a real difference: "Below the surface, real people are all the same" (*Too Much of Nothing,* 72). Below the surface, St. Jimmy is really only the protagonist's Thanatos, a manifestation of his destructive thoughts that exist, in some form or another, in all of us.

"East 12th St." follows largely in the same soundscape as its preceding part, but sees an initial increase in tempo and intensity, before returning to roughly the same tempo as in "The Death of St. Jimmy." During the high paced bridging between the two parts the lyrics echo back to the apathy of "I Don't Care" from "Jesus of Suburbia": "And nobody cares/Does anyone care/If nobody cares?" Following directly after St. Jimmy's suicide, this section proves Whatsername right, who in "Letterbomb" rhetorically asked "Where do all the martyrs go when the virus cures itself?" St. Jimmy, the supposed savior of those lost and found, is gone, and apathy again prevails.

More than anything, this part sees Jesus as being pulled in two different directions, towards getting his life back in order and the feeling that he has no motivation to do so. "Jesus filling out paperwork now/At the facility on East 12th St."

can refer to a number of things, the word "facility" being ambiguous.[23] Perhaps it is a rehabilitation center for alcohol or substance abuse (in the booklet the lines "And she had enough/And he's had plenty" are accompanied by a drawing of a drink), perhaps it is a police station or maybe Jesus has resigned and gotten a boring office job. The first and latter suggestions seem most viable, as "East 12th St." describes Jesus' longing to get out:


EAST 12TH ST.
AND NOBODY CARES
AND NOBODY CARES
DOES ANYONE CARE IF NOBODY CARES?
AND NOBODY CARES AND NOBODY CARES
DOES ANYONE CARE IF NOBODY CARES?
JESUS FILLING OUT PAPERWORK NOW
AT THE FACILITY ON EAST 12TH ST
HE'S NOT LISTENING TO A WORD NOW
HE'S IN HIS OWN WORLD AND HE'S DAYDREAMING
HE'D RATHER BE DOING SOMETHING ELSE NOW
LIKE CIGARETTES AND COFFEE WITH THE UNDERBELLY
HIS LIFE ON THE LINE WITH ANXIETY NOW
AND SHE HAD ENOUGH
AND HE'S HAD PLENTY
SOMEBODY GET ME OUT OF HERE
ANYBODY GET ME OUT OF HERE
SOMEBODY GET ME OUT OF HERE
GET ME THE FUCK RIGHT OUT OF HERE
SO FAR AWAY, I DON'T WANT TO STAY
GET ME OUTTA HERE RIGHT NOW
I JUST WANT TO BE FREE
IS THERE A POSSIBILITY?
GET ME OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW
THIS LIFELIKE DREAM AIN'T FOR ME

He's not listening to a word now

He's in his own world and he's daydreaming

He'd rather be doing something else now

Like cigarettes and coffee with the underbelly

His life on the line with anxiety now

And she had enough

And he's had plenty

The most logical, or perhaps the explanation that makes most sense, is that the protagonist, who again goes by Jesus in the place he is currently at, checked himself in to rehab once he had lost both Whatsername and St. Jimmy. Once there, he longs to get out. While the first half of the song is told from the perspective of an apparent onlooker, Jesus' perspective comes into play as the song changes slightly with only an acoustic guitar playing in between Jesus' lines:

Somebody get me out of here

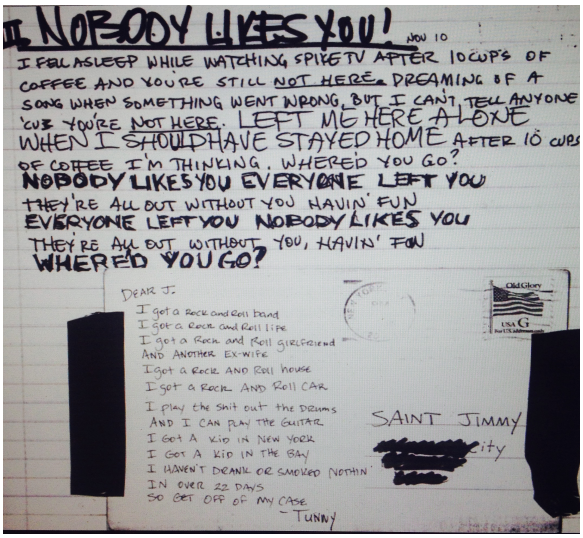
[23] On a side note, interestingly, if you type "East 12th St." into Google Maps and use Street View on East 12th St. in Oakland, California, you will find the County Sheriff's Office to be on this street. Billie Joe Armstrong was arrested for driving under the influence in 2003 in Berkeley, California, just north of Oakland (MTV).

Anybody get me out of here

Somebody get me out here

Get me the fuck right out of here

This part is followed up by the instruments again picking up pace. The writing in the booklet in these final lines of "East 12th St." appears different than in the rest of the part. It is the same handwriting, but it is larger and unstructured, giving the effect of urgency. The lines reiterate Jesus' need to escape with him asking: "I just want to be free/Is there a possibility?" and finishes off with "This lifelike dream ain't for me." The rhetoric of this song echoes back to "Jesus of Suburbia" and the need to escape. It seems as though the adventure he embarked upon became a little *too* real ("This lifelike dream ain't for me) and his outcry "I just want to be free/Is there a possibility?" confirms somehow, when regarding how his adventure has unfolded and where he finds himself now, that it is in fact not possible to be free in the way he imagined.



A marked change in the soundscape occurs as part two drifts into part three, "Nobody Likes You."[24] The intensity drops drastically as the guitars only strike one note, while the drums are quiet for a few seconds before gradually emerging with a military march type of rhythm. On top of this, what

[24] Bass player Mike Dirnt penned the lyrics to this part. Along with the next part, "Rock and Roll Girlfriend," penned by drummer Tré Cool, they mark the only instances of lyrics in *American Idiot* not penned by Billie Joe Armstrong. They both provide vocals for their respective parts.

sounds like a glockenspiel repeats the vocal melody from the intro to "Letterbomb" ("Nobody likes you…"). The part marks the only instance of any part in the two multi-part songs to be attributed with a date other than the one listed at the beginning of the song. "Nobody Likes You" takes place on November 10th, almost a month after the death of St. Jimmy on October 19th.

Most likely still at the rehab facility, the protagonist now drinking large amounts of coffee ("After 10 cups of coffee" is sung twice), "Nobody Likes You" sees him wondering, "Where'd you go?" It is hard to determine whether he is referencing Whatsername or St. Jimmy at this point. The self-reflective "Everyone left you/They're all out without you/Having fun" suggests the latter with its use of the plural "they," as he was part of a larger whole as St. Jimmy. "Nobody Likes You" thus sees the protagonist in denial, puzzled as to where his Thanatos went.

As soon as "Nobody Likes You" comes to an end, "Rock and Roll Girlfriend" takes "Homecoming" into a far lighter soundscape. Played at a high pace, with both saxophone and piano joining in with the staple instruments of *American Idiot,* the 46 second long part comes in the form a postcard. Taped into the diary with what appears to be black tape, the letter is post marked in New York City and addressed to Saint Jimmy, but his address has been obscured with a black marker, the word "city" the only visible part. Signed Tunny, most likely a former acquaintance of Jimmy and the underbelly, the letter tells of his rock and roll lifestyle. Unaware of St. Jimmy's death, Tunny probably left the underbelly, like the protagonist, to rehabilitate himself: "I haven't drank or smoked nothin' in over 22 days/So get off of my case." Interestingly, when going by the dates in the booklet and assuming that the letter was taped in at the day of its arrival, the letter reached the protagonist 22 days after St. Jimmy's death.

Albeit unaware of St. Jimmy's demise, Tunny has been sober since the day the prophet of ruin self-destructed.

As for its function in the overall construction, "Rock and Roll Girlfriend," both lyrically and musically, serves as a welcome breath of fresh air, its joyfulness giving both the listener and the story a short break from the despondency that has taken prominence in the aftermath of "Letterbomb." In other words the part is somewhat of a fringe story, keeping with the story's narrative by Tunny's direct relation to St. Jimmy.

Although the soundscape changes slightly as "Homecoming" enters its final part, "We're Coming Home Again" is too, during its first half, an upbeat affair as it chronicles the prodigal son's return to his old stomping ground:

> The world is spinning around and around
> Out of control again
> From the 7-11 to the fear of breaking down
> So send my love a letterbomb
> And visit me in hell
> We're the ones going home
> We're coming home again

Just before the word "home," in the second to last line, a notable drop in tempo occurs, as to remind the listener and the protagonist that there is a need to slow down and note what is really going on here: the story of *American Idiot* has come full circle. And just like in "Jesus of Suburbia," the protagonist views it as hell. A story that started with the intent of gaining something has ended up as a story of total loss. He

now faces a life in the environment he despises, as described in "Jesus of Suburbia," his own private hell. His journey has deprived him of his primal instincts, Eros disappeared with Whatsername and Thanatos evaporated with St. Jimmy. A life in the uneventful, conformed and inflexible suburb means a return to absolute rationality in place of the instincts. The protagonist juxtaposition with hell is quite understandable, as Nietzsche writes:

> The most glaring daylight, rationality at all costs, a life bright, cold, careful, aware, without instinct, in resistance to the instincts, was itself just a sickness, another sickness – and not at all a way back to "virtue," to "health," to happiness. To *have* to fight the instincts – that is the formula for *decadence.* (*Twilight of the Idols* in Guignon & Pereboom, 168).

Returning home with his tail between his legs, the protagonist's return to Jingletown reads as the present age's ultimate triumph. His effort at transcendence through directly opposing the present age has done nothing in his struggle for liberation from it. Eros and Thanatos hold no place in the present age, the instincts drowned by rationality. According to Kierkegaard, this outcome is inevitable, for to escape the present age one must be living *in* it. One must exist in its decadence to avoid it. Kierkegaard concludes that in order to elude rationality and a life without instinct, as lined up by Nietzsche above, one must hide in plain sight. This stems from his belief that the individual who escapes the herd in the present age is an individual who in order to do so embraces the concepts of unrecognizability and suffering. It is the very opposite of adopting a direct difference, as St. Jimmy does. To understand the

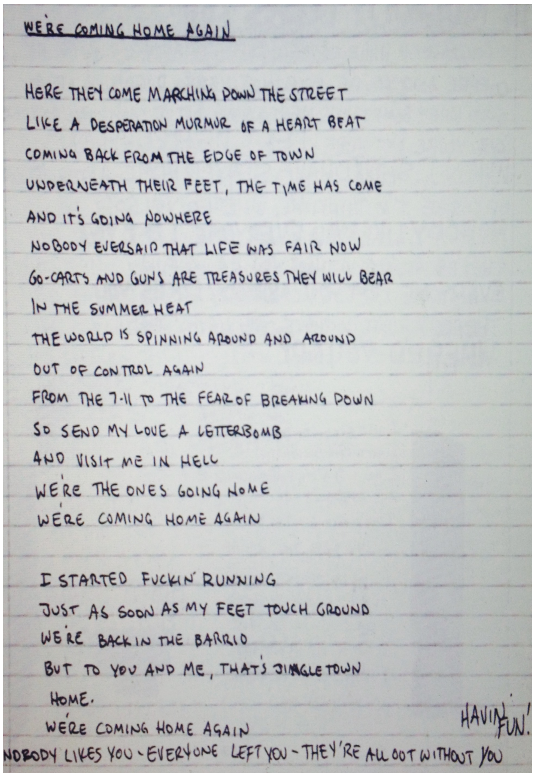
concepts of unrecognizability and suffering, we must again return to the process that plagues our age.

As the leveling process reduces everything that is extraordinary to something ordinary, the present age, as opposed to its preceding ages, no longer has great, recognizable individuals to set a standard:

> In the old order (which sprang from the relation between the individual and the generation) the officers, generals, heroes (i.e. the man of distinction, the leader within his own sphere) were recognizable, and every one (in proportion to his authority), with his little detachment, fitted picturesquely and organically into the whole, both supporting and supported by the whole. (*The Present Age,* 80)

In an age of leveling, the distinction between spheres is wiped out; the members of the herd are without leaders to exemplify a common set of standards. Rubin writes that the leader could be recognized "because everyone knew both what the different spheres were and what the standards were that were appropriate for each sphere" (*Too Much of Nothing,* 90). But in our present age, in an age of leveling, there are no leaders to exemplify these standards, because the standards no longer exist. In *American Idiot,* both St. Jimmy and Whatsername try to be representatives of spheres attempting to exist outside the clutches of the present age, but in their encounters with it, specifically through their relationship with Jesus/the protagonist (the representative of the present age), they achieve nothing: in the present age "the distinctive individual cannot be the individual who represents these standards because there are no standards to represent" (Ibid). In other words, an individual in the present age cannot

be an authority, for there is nothing for him or her to be an authority on. Rubin adds that, because there are no standards in the present age, the distinctive individual will "not even be recognizable. For in order to be recognizable, she would have to represent common standards in terms of which she could be recognized as exemplary. But common standards, again, is exactly what the present age lacks" (91).


WE'RE COMING HOME AGAIN

HERE THEY COME MARCHING DOWN THE STREET
LIKE A DESPERATION MURMUR OF A HEART BEAT
COMING BACK FROM THE EDGE OF TOWN
UNDERNEATH THEIR FEET, THE TIME HAS COME
AND IT'S GOING NOWHERE
NOBODY EVER SAID THAT LIFE WAS FAIR NOW
GO-CART'S AND GUN'S ARE TREASURES THEY WILL BEAR
IN THE SUMMER HEAT
THE WORLD IS SPINNING AROUND AND AROUND
OUT OF CONTROL AGAIN
FROM THE 7-11 TO THE FEAR OF BREAKING DOWN
SO SEND MY LOVE A LETTERBOMB
AND VISIT ME IN HELL
WE'RE THE ONES GOING NOME
WERE COMING HOME AGAIN

I STARTED FUCKIN' RUNNING
JUST AS SOON AS MY FEET TOUCH GROUND
WE'RE BACK IN THE BARRIO
BUT TO YOU AND ME, THAT'S JINGLETOWN
HOME.
WE'RE COMING HOME AGAIN
HAVIN' FUN!
NOBODY LIKES YOU - EVERYONE LEFT YOU - THEY'RE ALL OUT WITHOUT YOU

The protagonist returns to Jingletown having failed to escape the grasp of the present age and become a distinctive individual. In the process he brought down two seemingly good candidates (although one might argue that St. Jimmy in fact got the last laugh, as Kierkegaard claims in *The Present Age* that, "Nowadays not even a suicide kills himself in desperation" (33)). If the protagonist still wishes to escape the present age, he must become unrecognizable. Herein lies the cruel paradox: If you want to escape the present age you must live in it, but you cannot oppose it directly, for that would be to exert authority. It reminds us of the idiom "to suffer in silence," which Kierkegaard describes as follows:

> Only by suffering can the unrecognizable dare to help on the leveling process and, by the same suffering action, judge the instruments. He dare not overcome the leveling process directly, that would be his end, for it would be the same as acting with authority. But he will overcome it in suffering, and in that way express once more the law of his

> existence, which is not to dominate, to guide, to lead, but to serve in suffering and help indirectly. (*The Present Age,* 83)

This idea contradicts the ideas held by the characters of *American Idiot* who, through different means, set out to guide and lead the alienated in opposition to the present age. Although the fate of Whatsername remains unknown, neither St. Jimmy nor Jesus manages to lead the oppressed to a promised land where the indolence and leveling of the present age is non-existent. The question then becomes, as the protagonist returns to Jingletown in "We're Coming Home Again," if he has realized that unrecognizability and suffering are the keys to oppose the present age. Rubin writes that, "it is important to recognize that, for Kierkegaard, what looks like a surrender to the present age is really a victory over it" (*Too Much of Nothing,* 93). The protagonist's return to square one might in fact be a change of strategy. Whether or not it is will be explored later.

The concept of unrecognizability occurs in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* as well: "In a society where no one is any longer recognizable by anyone else, each individual is necessarily unable to recognize his own reality" (152). Unrecognizability then, according to Debord, shields the public from the truth of our age that Kierkegaard claims one can fight only through unrecognizability and suffering. Debord does not see the grueling solution of unrecognizability and suffering as the cure for our age:

> Self-emancipation in our time is emancipation from the material bases of an inverted truth. This "historic mission to establish truth in the world" can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by

> atomized and manipulated masses, but – only and always – by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of realized democracy … It cannot be carried out … until dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world. (*The Society of the Spectacle,* 154)

Debord puts no faith in the individual and sees self-emancipation as possible only through revolution by a united class. Combined with his view of the present age individual, who no longer lives directly but lives in a mediated, sheltered existence, coupled with Kierkegaard's quite similar view, namely that of the present age individual as an indolent member of the herd who would rather choke with reflection than turn to action, the possibility of self-emancipation in our time seems rather bleak.

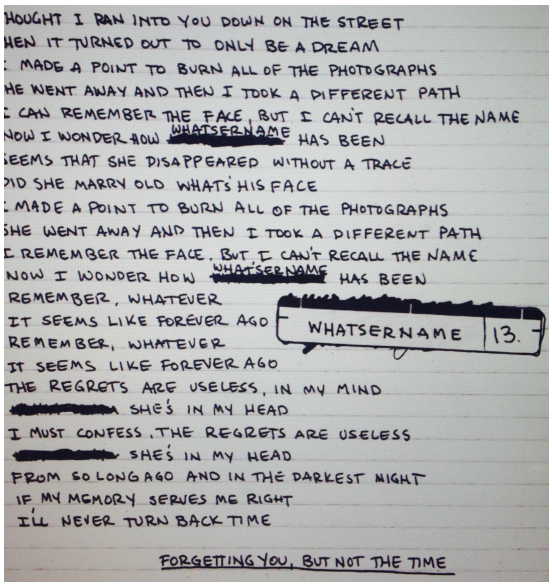
The protagonist's return to "hell" seems to be just that, an announcement of complete surrender to the forces of the present age. And even if the protagonist has reached the same conclusion as Kierkegaard, that unrecognizability and suffering is the only option to escape the present age, a life in anonymity and pain is hardly what he envisioned when he embarked upon a trip enthused to see what constitutes the modern American dream. At the end of the rainbow was only self-pity.

WHATSERNAME

Dated January 1st, "Whatsername" functions almost as an epilogue. Now firmly back in his suburban wasteland, the protagonist looks back on the time he spent in the city, mostly focusing on his relationship with Whatsername. The female character's real name has been written in the booklet, but obscured and replaced with either

"Whatsername" or "she." The song starts and finishes with a sober and calm soundscape, and even the middle section's increase in intensity does not lessen the song's overall sentiment of reflective solitude.

As common for claims made on the first day of the new year, the protagonist's determination to try to erase Whatsername from his memory reads almost like a resolution: "I made a point to burn all of the photographs" he claims in the chorus of *American Idiot's* swan song. However, this destruction of physical memories does not strike the memory of her face from the protagonist's mind: "I remember the face/But I can't recall the name/Now I wonder how Whatsername has been." This consistent concealment of the name of the heroic fighter of the present age serves many purposes. It first and foremost adds an aura of mystery to the character. The fact that her name is never revealed suggests that the cycle is somehow unable to get a hold of the female rebel. That is the strongest endorsement the album can give.



The ability and determination showed by Whatsername when the time calls for her to escape the protagonist signals a refusal to be dragged down by the self-involvement of the modern age individual. This illustrates an observation made by Herbert Marcuse at the end of *The Aesthetic Dimension:*

> Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goals that failed, it can enter, as a "regulative idea," the desperate struggle for changing the world. Against all fetishism of the productive forces, against the continued enslavement of individuals by

> the objective conditions (which remain those of domination), art represents the ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom and happiness of the individual. (69)

The memories of the goals that failed, namely the time the protagonist spent away from Suburbia, remain intact in his memory as the final lines of *American Idiot* read: "I'll never turn back time/Forgetting you but not the time." Despite his failure to reach any of the vague goals he sat out to achieve, driven by disgust for what Marcuse calls the "fetishism of the productive forces," the protagonist recognizes the time as somehow vital to him ("I'll never turn back time"). But it is the ambiguous fate of Whatsername that leaves the listener of *American Idiot* with just the slightest glimmer of hope. For if *American Idiot*, and in extension the present age, cannot fully know and recognize her, there is still a chance she will be part of the force that tears sunder the "fetishism of the productive forces."

In "She's a Rebel," the protagonist called the female rebel a "symbol of resistance," "the salt of the earth," and confessed, "she's holding on my heart like a hand grenade." Only six months later he is unable to remember her name ("I can't recall the name"). Kierkegaard argues in the very first paragraph of *The Present Age:* "Our age is … momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose" (33). The protagonist's relationship with Whatsername can be read as yet another instance of temporary enthusiasm, the very trademark of the present age. Indeed, the protagonist's journey through *American Idiot* is full of them: the enthusiasm of Jesus as he decides to leave the symmetric lawns of Suburbia behind, the enthusiasm for destruction embodied by St. Jimmy and the enthusiasm felt upon the entrance of Whatsername. Eventually, however, the protagonist finds himself back

where it all started, relapsed into repose. And upon his reflective hour in "Whatsername," he realizes which of these bursts of enthusiasm that should have sustained. For even in the company of someone made out to be extraordinary, the individual of the present age cannot hold his attention for long.

Conclusion

Around the same time as *American Idiot* came out, the American music scene was already full of bands and artists taking a stand against or for the current political regime. Native New Yorkers and acclaimed rap group Beastie Boys released their album *To the 5 Boroughs* in the summer of 2004 with songs containing lyrics such as "I'm getting kind of tired of this situation/The U.S. attacking other nations" ("Right Right Now Now"), "George W's got nothing on we/We got to take the power from he" ("That's It That's All") and most explicitly:

> We've got a president we didn't elect
> The Kyoto treaty he decided to neglect
> And the still the U.S. just wants to flex
> … So let's calibrate and check our specs
> We need a little shift on towards the left
> … Is the U.S. gonna keep breaking necks?
> Maybe it's time that we impeach Tex
> And the military muscle that he wants to flex
> By the time Bush is done, what will be left?
> Selling votes like E-pills at the discotheque
> Environmental destruction and the national debt
> But plenty of dollars left in the fat war chest ("It Takes Time to Build")

Already in 2002 Pearl Jam sang "He's not a leader, he's a Texas leaguer/Swinging for the fence, got lucky with a strike/Drilling for fear, makes the job simple"

("Bu$hleaguer"), while one of the grand old men of rock and roll, Neil Young, released a song with the unambiguous title "Let's Impeach the President." Two compilation albums entitled *Rock Against Bush* were released in 2004,[25] containing tracks with titles such as "Idiot Son of an Asshole" by NOFX. Yet, for all the anti-Bush attitude *American Idiot* has been credited with, there is only one reference to Bush even remotely as overt as the album's contemporaries ("Zieg Heil to the President Gasman" from "Holiday"). Solely by considering the company above, it becomes apparent that to place *American Idiot* exclusively within the realm of political protest is completely unreasonable.

Our time's stamp on *American Idiot* as a massive anti-Bush manifesto is inaccurate and unfortunate. Certainly, the political climate of the day and the mishaps of the Bush administration make for a relevant backdrop against which the protagonist of *American Idiot* navigates in an effort to find himself. Some songs are also clearly political in nature, most notably "American Idiot" and "Holiday." However, due to the album's structure as a collection of more or less coherent short stories, it can afford a detour into direct political debate. At the end of the day, however, they only make up two songs from an album of thirteen. Much more than the exact politics of George W. Bush, *American Idiot* examines the failings of the modern individual and of modern society in a much broader context.

That those in power are eager to capitalize on this indolence, as illustrated in "American Idiot," seems an inevitable consequence. Interestingly, at the beginning of the writing process of this thesis, billionaire and reality-TV star Donald Trump launched what seemed to be a ludicrous attempt at becoming the Republican Party's next Presidential candidate. But political commentator's laughs soundly died out as

[25] Green Day contributed with the song "Favorite Son." The song is included in the musical adaption of *American Idiot.*

Trump, on promises of building a wall on the Mexican border and have Mexico pay for it, as well as denying Muslims access to the U.S., gained more support than experts thought possible. The surprisingly buoyed attempt by Trump at reaching the Oval Office on a platform of bigotry and fear, what Long refers to in the introductory chapter of this thesis as the foundation of Bush's re-election, is another example of people's knee-jerk reaction to something that, regardless of its content, craves massive amounts of attention. These individuals, these "American idiots," are the ones under scrutiny in Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*, and, as seen throughout this thesis, subsequently in *American Idiot.*

I have made an effort in this thesis to look at who the modern age "herd individual" is, and what *American Idiot* as a piece of art tries to convey by examining parts of its totality that have so far been neglected. Through an analysis of the lyrics, the music and the album's booklet I find *American Idiot* to be a work dealing with a heavier subject material than it has been given credit for. By closely following the characters' respective journeys we have seen how society levels both concepts and individuals, so that nothing stands out from a mitigated norm. We have seen, mainly through *American Idiot's* central character, how the modern day individual strays from one thing to the next, spurred on by bursts of enthusiasm, before again becoming indifferent. By not relinquishing to the instincts, whether good or bad, Eros or Thanatos, the present age individual ends up doing nothing and in turn becomes nothing. The album's authentic, passionate characters either die or disappear, signifying the impossibility of their existence in an age of leveling. In essence, *American Idiot* paints a picture of the modern man as unwilling to commit and suffer for whatever he believes in; he assumes no responsibility. He is in turn surrounded by a society that provides him with a spectacular smoke screen from reality, screens to

replace social relations, and media to decide what is worth caring about, at least for the next day or two. And even admittedly aware of society's part in the formation of the grey, indolent public he is part of, the individual of the present age fails to transcend it.

In other words, this thesis claims that Green Day's album is not anti-Bush propaganda, but the depiction of an individual's rather grim search for self in a modern day American dystopia. *American Idiot's* overt dark conclusion, however, does not necessarily mean that it represents a view of utter hopelessness for the future. Even if the protagonist fails miserably in his quest to transcend the self-centered, façade-focused spectacle of his time, this does not mean that *American Idiot* as a piece of art does not represent what Marcuse calls the "ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom and happiness of the individual" (*The Aesthetic Dimension,* 69). For even if the protagonist steps into every trap set out by the modern age along the way, the mere idea of opposing the machinery that is modernity is revolutionary. While the story of the protagonist of *American Idiot* eventually comes full circle, the change longed for not obtained, it is, if we follow Marcuse, not necessary for *American Idiot* to solve the conflict it portrays in order to advocate for change:

> The autonomy of art contains the categorical imperative: "things must change." If the liberation of human beings and nature is possible at all, then the social nexus of destruction and submission must be broken. This does not mean that the revolution becomes thematic; on the contrary, in the aesthetically most perfect works, it does not. (*The Aesthetic Dimension,* 13)

American Idiot is not, by this definition, a perfect aesthetic work. In fact, revolution is part of its thematic body. But revolution's part in it, a concept that in the modern day spectacle holds the protagonist's attention for only as long as all other tempting concepts before eventually becoming common, only serves to underline the story's deconstruction of the indolent individual. But its seemingly dark conclusion that the categorical imperative spoken of by Marcuse is impossible, and that we must live in unrecognizability and suffering to resist the characteristics of our time, as proposed by Kierkegaard, is not the right assumption to make. For even though the protagonist's struggle for liberation ends at square one, the picture painted by the album of the shortcomings of the modern day individual, the public, the media, capitalism, drugs and the death and destruction of our times surely suggests that below the surface of *American Idiot* lurks art's categorical imperative; things must change.

American Idiot as a piece of art is hardly avant-garde, as Marcuse called for art to be in its effort to promote art's categorical imperative. However, it does not have to be. Part of the reason why *American Idiot* has largely been reduced to political protest is due to its popularity, accessibility and, as briefly mentioned in the preface, Green Day's lack of academic credibility. However, if we are to overlook works because of these factors, we run the risk of missing out on art's categorical imperative all together and, at the same time, reducing art's ability to convey certain "truths" about life that, say, the media, cannot. A lot of accessible and popular art, whether they come in the form of music, books or paintings, probably do not relate to the categorical imperative at all. A lot of avant-garde art probably does not, either. But to find out whether or not it is there, one must first really look and know how to do so, because answers are rarely provided if you do not look for them. Through a lens consisting of lyrics, music and album art, this thesis looked, and I argue that I

found in *American Idiot* the categorical imperative and a work that tells us something valuable about individualism in a society increasingly streamlined.

The fact of the matter remains, however, that despite my best efforts to closely analyze *American Idiot* outside the realm of politics where it even up until now has been treated, the album is still a highly ambiguous work. Such ambiguity is brought out by the analysis and placement of *American Idiot* in non-political spheres. This serves to demonstrate Marcuse's point about art: its revolutionary potential exists in its own autonomy, in its aesthetic form as such. Multiple layers of meaning exist within the realm of a (good) work of art's own aesthetic dimension, these meanings even varying depending on its audience or the given moment someone explores it. No greater compliment can be paid to a work of art than its ability to not only sustain the tests of time, but to remain relevant as the world around it changes. That the claim Kierkegaard made in 1846, "ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere" (35), is highly relevant in our own time is obvious to us now, but *American Idiot* too seems to still hold up as a work accurately taking the pulse on contemporary modern society, transcending specific periods. The work's depiction of the "Idiot America" is therefore not restricted geographically, but stands as a symbol of a much wider critique of the times that we live in: "Information age of hysteria/Calling out to idiot America."

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