Telling The American Story in Pop Music

Popular music is more than just mindless distraction. Sure, it can be fun and purely entertaining. It can make you dance. A sentimental song can even make you cry. Yet some popular music can also tell a story and relate valuable ideas about society. Two contemporary artists you might not think of as similar have achieved both popularity and significance because they are good at communicating social messages through music. Comparing and contrasting *Born in the USA* and *Made in America*, Bruce Springsteen and Jay-Z provide intriguing stories of struggling young men, and through song lyrics, reveal fascinating similarities and differences in characterization, setting, and theme.

Comparing and contrasting the protagonists of their songs paints fascinating human portraits. Bruce Springsteen provides a vivid characterization of a young man destined for hardships. In *Born In the USA*, Springsteen writes, “Born down in a dead man town. The first kick I took was when I hit the ground.” This quote illustrates the image of a baby kicking and screaming his way into the world, and it foreshadows a life of conflict. Meanwhile, Jay-Z offers, “The streets raised me, pardon my bad manners.” This quote explains why Jay-Z lacks conventional moral behaviors. The quotes taken together relate back to my thesis because they reveal profound insights. In comparison, both songs offer portraits of young men who lacked traditional supports from family and must make it on their own in America. Springsteen and Jay-Z also use setting to reveal character. These literary components are basically inseparable in good art. Springsteen’s “dead man town” is both a reference to how bleak the job situation probably is, yet also, given how many of young men were drafted into the Viet Nam War and died young, the town literally becomes a place where dead people return to be buried. *Made in America* provides details about Jay-Z’s hard upbringing. He was brought up without a father, and the “street” gave him his first money making opportunity as a drug dealer. These details regarding setting completely inform who Jay-Z has become. The quotes also provide contrasts. Bruce Springsteen was raised in a working class town himself. He witnessed the struggle of returning Viet Nam veterans to find work and meaning in their lives after war. In this way Springsteen is qualified to provide a characterization of a returning vet. However Jay-Z is even more uniquely qualified in his semi-autobiographical tale. Jay-Z freely admits his prior experience as a drug dealer. Another contrast is character outcome. Springsteen’s young man never comes to terms with who he is, while Jay-Z’s protagonist hints at a future of security and financial success.

The setting of these songs enhance their characterizations. The settings may be compared and contrasted to follow the physical and metaphorical journeys the characters take. Returning to *Born in the USA*, Springsteen writes, “Come back home to the refinery. Hiring man said son if it was up to me.” This quote explains how the young man came back from war and tried to get a job at the local refinery, but was turned away. Jay-Z’s job as a drug dealer produces this quote, presumably from the kitchen of his grandmother, “I got my liberty, chopping grams up.” This excerpt shows how Jay-Z achieved financial success by selling drugs. Again, when the quotes are compared and contrasted, they prove my thesis because they highlight two fascinating American paths taken by struggling young men. They compare nicely because both songs reveal protagonists concerned with earning money to make it in America. They are also similar because the jobs, or lack thereof in the Springsteen song, set the stage for the outcomes of the protagonists. Contrasting the kind of jobs sought and the outcomes the settings provide is easy as well. In the Springsteen song, the young man goes jobless for many years, and his struggle, continues ten years later as he wanders aimlessly through his life. Jay-Z has a job, but it is clearly illegal. However Jay-Z’s struggle results in a successful career as a rapper.

Theme is the final literary component we can compare and contrast for insight into the meanings of each song. Both songs offer portraits of the struggle that young American men go through. Springsteen sings, “Got in a little hometown jam. So they put a rifle in my hand. Sent me off to a foreign land. To go and kill the yellow man.” These lyrics explain how the young man probably got arrested and had a choice to either go to prison, or go fight for his country in the Viet Nam War. These words do a nice job of setting up the rest of the song, which details the sad story of a young man who fights in the war, loses friends in battle, and then returns to a country not necessarily happy for his service. In *Made in America,* Jay-Z relates, ”Street justice, I pray God understand us. I pledge allegiance to all the scramblers. This is the Star Spangled Banner.” Jay-Z explains how he made his living selling drugs on the street, and to him, this was how he literally made it in America. These two quotes pertain back to my thesis once again as we compare and contrast the theme of the struggling young man. These passages compare because they both question the very essence of what it means to be an American. Is it fighting for your country in a war in a jungle half a world away? Or is it the individual’s struggle to make it by any means necessary in the concrete jungles of America’s city streets? These two passages compare by showing how real people in America go through real struggles in their quest for identity. The contrast of the songs pertain to my thesis too, because each song’s individual theme demystifies the American experience distinctively. Springsteen demonstrates how his young man struggles his whole life. Remember, he is given an impossible choice. In this situation, the choice to go to prison or off to fight in a war, is hardly what anyone would call a free choice. Thus, Springsteen has rooted his protagonist’s very existence in struggle. Many people called the Viet Nam war a conflict, not a war, and the word conflict stands as a double meaning for the internal struggle young people go through to find their identity, and the conflict our nation went through when it sent so many young people to fight in an unpopular war. Meanwhile, Jay-Z contemplates what civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X left for future generations of African-Americans. Jay-Z mostly ignored that legacy as a young man. Only after tasting financial success as a drug dealer, did he turn to music, and have reflection. Jay-Z’s rap does an excellent job of illustrating his story, a message about how a young African-American man found his early identity. It relates to the theme of struggle and the search for identity, not because he will fail, like Springsteen’s character, but because Jay-Z writes about what he is most familiar with, his life, and he gives the listener an authentic understanding of his search for what it means to be American. Even though most of the language is coded, Jay-Z takes iconic phrases like “Americana” and “Apple Pie” and flips them on their heads. Instead of a homey, white-picket fence Americana and a loving couple to bring him up, we get urban streets and lawlessness that raise him. Instead of wholesome dessert to make you feel good, we get the ingredients for drugs to make you high. Yet by tracing the hopes and expectations of his Grandma to leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and even the morality of Christianity, Jay-Z is clearly showing his awareness of the struggles that went before his time. In the end, Jay-Z’s conflict may indeed be with God, as he hopes for “understanding” and he continues to struggle with his past.

Bruce Springsteen and Jay-Z could not be more different in many ways. One is a classic rock Icon, the other is married to a R&B soul-stress. One became famous in the 1970’s and had his biggest hits in the 1980’s. The other has become one of the most famous and successful hip-hop artists of his generation. Despite these big differences, Bruce Springsteen and Jay-Z have one great similarity. They both know how to tell stories of struggle and survival in the management of every day life as Americans while re-creating the worlds they know so well through their use of character, setting, and theme.