

Path's Gen Notes

I'm not sure how to go about this in a way that saves the plot twist for the final track, so I'm going to assume you have already listened to the album at this point and want to gain a deeper appreciation for it. The use of foreshadowing is phenomenal throughout. The storytelling is beautiful.

Refresher of context:

*"No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."
- [John Donne](#)*

All you really need to know about John Donne in the context of this album is that he was an English poet who spent much of his younger years as a bit of a womanizer, constantly travelling and spending lavishly. But that all changed when he fell in love with Anne Moore and settled down to focus on a better life.

In his last days, he was deathly ill. He wrote this prose, among others, reflecting on the frequent church bells ringing for others while facing his own mortality. Because we are all humans, we will all suffer the same fate. We can connect on that level of humanity.

For Whom The Bell Tolls

So with that in mind, we can start to draw parallels throughout the rest of the album.

From the opening track, we know that death and suffering will be a constant preoccupation of The Narrator's mind. The highest stakes are set; we know what's coming for us, but we're not sure if it's worth it to quit now or continue.

Instead of solemn funeral bells, we hear bright, rhythmic, fantastical jingles. The angelic horn arrangement and soft, feminine vocalisation show their wings. They're almost welcoming me, inviting me, pulling me to the pearly gates of heaven.

I can feel his distress in his voice. It's strained—a fight between the human will to live and the inevitability of death. He wonders: Is it all worth it?

Immortal

We're pulled out of the clouds to a much more ominous instrumental. To me, it sounds like a montage of the fast life, constantly moving. Drug deals, close calls with the cops, and losing some friends along the way.

When you know you're going to be targetted regardless of what you do, even the better choices can seem pointless. When the odds are stacked against you as a Black man in America, you might as well "live fast, die young," since that's how the story always seems to end.

Sometimes, it feels like the only way to be heard is to connect with others through your mortality. As the bell tolls, your life rings for those around you. You don't simply cease to exist at death; you live on through those who knew you.

The tone and voice of this track is emphatic, with J. Cole asking a lot of rhetorical questions to provoke thought. The instrumental break feels like a realisation. It's a statement, doubling down and furthering justification in the cycle of thinking that keeps Black people "chained at the bottom and hanged."

Deja Vu

At this point in my listening, I couldn't tell that this was written from someone else's perspective, so I'm going to continue to keep it vague and call him The Narrator.

The Narrator knows this woman well and has had feelings for her since they first met. This song recounts that story. At the time, she was in a relationship with a mutual friend of theirs and was therefore off limits.

I love that the chorus sticks to the imagery from their first meeting at a party. It draws parallels between the night and the rest of your life. It won't last forever, so make your move now. Find what makes it worth it before you lose it.

The Narrator foresaw that they would end up together, so when they eventually did, it felt like *Deja Vu*.

And I am trying so hard to figure out what Cole is singing behind the bridge. The lyrics aren't on Spotify or Genius, so if you have any ideas of what they could be, let me know.

Ville Mentality

Every song so far has had such smooth beats, i love these drums and their walking rhythm. This one in particular feels perfect for a small jazz bar, lounge, or something.

I assume the association with the 'Ville can be extended to any small 'ville that has a rough, inescapable cycle. And The Narrator is really starting to feel like there's no end in sight and that

his past will inevitably catch up to him, so he feels the need to run from the consequences of his own actions.

But the song underlines more than that. You have a stark juxtaposition of The Narrator's inner thoughts, keeping up tough appearances and questioning longevity, and the emotional response of the child who lost her father to the *Ville Mentality*. We're shown, in her own words, the power of loss. It's so powerful that it can be used as an emotional weapon against her mother.

*I get mad and I slam my door and go in my room—
And then, I get mad and I say, "I wish my dad was here"*

She's only a child, and she understands that it's hurtful. It's a cry for attention, the lowest blow, and the path of least resistance to venting her frustrations with her mother.

She's Mine Pt. 1

We witness The Narrator's new love for love—and love for life. For the first time, he can let his guard down; he can be himself around this woman he trusts; and for the first time, he's found something that's worth living for. Something that's worth changing for.

For the first time on the album, he isn't thinking about death. He has a future to look forward to.

God, even on my thirdfourthfifth listen, this song makes me tear up. Building that kind of trust and understanding between two people is so rare and sacred. You *know*, with everything in your being, when you have it. You're at peace with real, genuine love and care.

The instrumental is so gentle, offering the same vulnerability The Narrator feels he hasn't been able to express himself well through words. The strings, the soft pickup of the drums, and the set up for the next three tracks. I love it.

It sounds bittersweet, because with love, there is also fear—fear of loss, fear of change, fear of opening up. The minor key draws a sense of longing and attachment; its slow tempo is reflective.

You can see in my reaction that the song triggered personal recollections for me. To have someone truly *get* you in the same way you *get* them is such a unique experience. I might have only ever had that connection with one other person, and listening to this song really made me mourn that relationship. To feel so comfortable and understood, to feel seen, and to want to do everything in your power to make them feel the same.

Don't ever take those feelings for granted.

Change

The sudden pickup is like a burst of energy; it feels like a desire to be optimistic because, for the first time, you feel like things will be okay in the end. This is the true centrepiece of the album.

We can see The Narrator taking steps to better himself, growing, maturing, and taking care of his mental health with meditation. His whole perspective on life has shifted. A mindset is a powerful thing. There's a guy dubbed the "father of positive thinking" who said, "Change your thoughts, and you change your world" ([Norman Vincent Peale](#)). The Narrator goes on to say you can think about, or hope for, change all you want, but you have to act on it.

The song has such a good beat. I love the simplistic repetition of the chorus; it's like a mantra you repeat in front of the mirror before the day begins.

The song preaches reflection, not only on yourself but on your environment as well. The Narrator offers some social commentary on his *Ville*, condemning crime, gun violence, and all the senselessness that comes with it. To him, they're now seen as acts of cowardice. True bravery is to rise above the status quo. True growth is recognizing that there are other options.

Because when the cycle continues, it can rob that opportunity of growth from anyone—as it did in this case, for James McMillan Jr. It's tragic to know that, dead at age 22, he didn't have the chance to live a better life.

Neighbors

The entire track sounds tired, worn out, and unsurprised at the prejudice of the world. The instrumental is low and heavy, reflecting the weight of the situation. I love this beat so much.

The neighbours of The Narrator assume he's involved in illegal activities because that's the only way they can justify a Black man's ability to pay to live in their prestigious neighborhood. They even call the cops on him:

*Cops bust in with the army guns
No evidence of the harm we done
Just a couple neighbors that assume we slang
Only time they see us we be on the news, in chains, damn*

He wanted to move away from The Ville and change his life's trajectory, but he continues to face racial profiling. He expected that it was only wealth inequality keeping him down, but he learned abruptly that it's much deeper than that. It's unfortunate that at the end of this encounter with the police, The Narrator feels the need to move back "south side" to The Ville if he's going to be profiled anyway.

It's a "pick your poison" mentality. If racial profiling is inevitable, then he might as well return to The Ville and embrace it, much like his earlier reasoning for choosing the fast life: if death is inevitable, you might as well do what benefits you, no matter the consequences.

*I guess the neighbors think I'm sellin' dope, sellin' dope
Sellin' dope, sellin' dope, sellin' dope
Well, motherfucker, I am*

I can only take this as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on his neighbours' assumptions—he sarcastically agrees, yes, his music is "dope," and he's making a fortune from it.

Foldin Clothes

Fast forward, the woman is now 9 months pregnant, and their relationship is in a really good place. It's such a fun beat about a topic you don't hear often: caring for someone so much that you want to offer acts of service. When you sense that energetic love, sometimes you just want to burst out in song, and the oxytocin feels a lot like this track.

And I love that he explores different ways to show love outside of what we usually hear relating to admiration in the media (such as sex and excessive gift-giving). We rarely hear about the simple things.

It's an extremely different mindset from the first half of the album. Idealistic, even. He wants to live completely opposite of how he lived in *The Ville*, and he finds meaning in domesticity with someone he loves.

The track might sound a little out of place, fantastical, and over the top, but I think it's a pretty accurate representation of how much love he feels. It reminds me of the flash mob scene in the movie [500 Days of Summer](#). Love encourages The Narrator to change not only his pessimistic outlook but his goals and entire lifestyle.

Despite this newfound enthusiasm, by the end of the song, he comes back to reality. He feels like in order to get to where he wants to be, he still has a lot of work to do and a lot of different masks to wear. The only thing really keeping him going is seeing this woman—she makes him feel like it's worth it to continue.

It's a "meditation of being present," and I love that mentality.

She's Mine Pt. 2

Such a brilliant connection to *She's Mine Pt. 1*. Both tracks use the same motifs and melodies to introduce his love for the two most important girls in his life.

The woman in *She's Mine Pt. 1* was his motivation to change, but their new daughter is The Narrator's purpose. For the first time, through the responsibilities of fatherhood, he finally feels like he has a role to fill.

But of course, he has anxieties about raising his new daughter in such a corrupt world. He worries about his abilities to do it right and provide the best for her, especially since he wasn't the greatest example growing up.

Am I worthy of this gift?

Am I strong enough to lift? (Am I strong enough to lift?)

Into a place that I can see (Into a place that I can see)
Someone more important than me? (Someone more important than me?)

I have a lot of these anxieties, too. It's a conflict I go back and forth on regularly. The Narrator is saying that despite these insecurities and uncertainties, life is worth it. I guess we'll see. Don't let me listen to this track too much in the next few years.

The baby's heartbeat in the second half of the song is such an intimate touch to add. There were two miracles of life: the birth of his daughter and the rebirth of his purpose in life. The beat pickup at the end of the track tells me that this is just the beginning of a new chapter.

4 Your Eyez Only

This is the song that kind of ties the entire album together.

"Do you understand me?" sounds like how you would scold a child. *You do not hit other people; do you understand me? You do not take what's not yours; do you understand me?*

But The Narrator is instead desperately asking his daughter if she understands him in his humanity. *Do you understand that I was a person who had highs and lows, love and fear, doubts and trust? Do you understand that I had good intentions?*

We revisit the earlier theme of connecting through mortality—this time, bonding in the fact that The Narrator grew up without a father and now suspects the same will happen to his daughter. He knows that it leaves a lot of questions unanswered, and he understands that she will go through a lot from this experience alone.

He wants to use the project as an opportunity to give his daughter closure and understanding, as he still feels death looming over him. His past is catching up to him, despite his desire to change. The Narrator feels like he doesn't have enough time to fix his mistakes in order to fully raise his daughter or to be there for his new family.

Ultimately, he feels he was lucky he lived as long as he did because of how much the odds were stacked against him. His love for his new family has changed his whole perspective. And now he fears being seen as a bad person by his daughter without the chance or ability to explain himself. It's hard for children to understand why their parents are locked up or die early—they only feel hurt without explanation, as we saw in *Ville Mentality*.

The instrumental section is a point of reflection and meditation and is used to transition from The Narrator to J. Cole. This revelation is a lot to take in. The perspective was vague enough to tell the stories of both J. Cole and his friend, James McMillan Jr., the character we saw tragically pass at the end of track 6, *Change*. Their lives paralleled each other, except James had an unfortunate ending.

It's a brilliant yet depressing realisation that these stories can apply to not just these two men but to many other men who deal with the environmental cycles of The Ville, racial profilation, injustice, and mass incarceration, especially in the United States.

In the last 50 years, the U.S. prison population [has surged from 300,000 to 2.3 million](#). Half of that population is incarcerated in federal prisons for drug offences, and $\frac{2}{3}$ of them are people of colour. An advisor on "the war on drugs" admits [it was designed](#) to criminalise Black people. 4 *Your Eyez Only* is an unfortunately all-too-common story about a desire, but systemic inability, to escape the cycle.

We don't have all the answers, but love is a driving solution. Love is important for those who want to change themselves. Love, understanding, and empathy are needed to change the system.

J. Cole shared in [an interview](#) that James was actually a blend of two men he grew up with and still keeps in touch with today (or at least, at the time of the interview). He wanted the album to "humanize the people that have been villainized in the media... They have multiple sides, and the strongest is love."