

Story of The Downward Spiral

I'd like to start with a brief conclusion of this story. And convey my thoughts about this (amazing) record.

Why am I making this analysis of such an album? It's not my most-liked NIN album (but it is very close), but the story. The message from this album moved me so much in life, I'd say. It really has something to it. This isn't a record that you listen to once, and you're immediately like "Yeah, I get it". No, your view on this record mutates with each listen.

So, the story is about a person. This person is basically the "ideal" person. They're religious, he doesn't do drugs. He doesn't have unsafe sex. So I guess you could say that he's "pure", too. And what happens to this person? Something, or someone challenges his beliefs. It shakes with his heavy-grounded rocks. This person was so sure about such things in their life. So sure that he never basically questioned it.

This makes him go in a (downward) spiral. He starts drinking alcohol. Doing drugs. He starts having loads of uncommitted sex. He tries to find some peace, some control in his life through these things. And by the end, he plans to kill himself. But he didn't succeed in doing so. So either he realized that he can still fix those things, and started getting better in his life. Or just lived with him being broken, and self-destructive.

Mr. Self Destruct

This song is where it all started. The [intro](#) to this song is haunting, mysterious. It makes you a bit off-guard. It makes you say “Okay, what’s happening right now? What am I listening to?” And it is amazing. That **BOOM** that happens after the intro is also like getting kicked in the head.

“I am the voice inside your head”

“(and I control you)”

The “I control you” whisper is audible throughout the whole song. And that’s a really nice representation of what the character thinks about religion at that time. He thinks that God is a brain-washing tool. He doesn’t believe in anything, or anyone. Not anymore.

From the lyrics (and the overall energy), it’s obvious that this person is angry. Angry at the world. He just wants to break everything.

But at the same time, throughout the song. You can feel that there are these parts, where he is calmed, and just accepting the truth? These lyrics are the best proof of it, I’d say:

“I speak religions message clear”

“I am denial, guilt and fear”

The end is basically just noise, at this point. The character is down. He’s going crazy. All things that they’ve believed in are now gone. It’s like his whole life was a lie. He lost all his hope and faith.

Piggy

This song perfectly transitions from Mr. Self Destruct. This one has a more “mellow” vibe, at least in the beginning.

This song perfectly represents depression. How easy it can be to fall into it. The character is talking to someone or something called “pig”. In my opinion, it’s someone who left them. Maybe some friend, perhaps a partner. And he’s “talking” to them in a “Wow, you left me, I have nothing or no one. Now.”

“Nothing can stop me now ‘cause I don’t care anymore”

One of my favorite lyrics ever. So hitting. This person is going through so many things. And he’s just going to unravel more and more. Because nothing or no one (in this case a person called ‘piggy’) can stop them now. And he just simply doesn’t care. Because why would he? He lost basically everything.

“What am I supposed to do? I lost my shit because of you” is also proof that this person probably hurt the character. He doesn’t have pleasant memories with them. It feels like the character is at the verge of an emotional breakdown.

The drums in the chorus and in the end are fascinating. They’re so captivating. So pleasing to ears. And again, they perfectly represent the chaos our character is going through.

When I think of it, this song is like a “breather” moment. It unravels slowly. Starts in a mellow and slow-ish way (compared to Mr. Self Destruct) and completely unravels.

At the 2:45 mark. The drums start going. The character can’t hold this “mellow” way. The water’s boiling, and the lid can’t hold it for any longer.

By the end, the character is again going crazy. Nothing can stop him now. He can do whatever. Because there’s no God, right? There’s no one to judge him. How does he tell right from wrong, when all his life, he played by religion’s rules.

The person that probably would’ve helped him, “held” him above the darkness, isn’t here anymore.

Heresy

“He sewed his eyes shut because he was afraid to see”

“He tried to tell me what I put inside of me”

Our character is ravaging into more and more chaos. He tries to find some consolidation in it, but he finds out that religion is just empty words.

There is no God, no prayers that will help him. He realized all the prayers. All the words. Are just one big lie, and one big escapism to ignore what's really happening

The instrumentals are so human. It's like an organism rotting away, and at the same time. The organism is starting to realize what's happening. How “ugly” he is.

It's basically in human nature to think that there's something bigger than us, something controlling us. That there's something above us.

And this “something” has to say how we lead our lives, how we should have our ethics built.

And I think that the character realized this. That religion is nothing more than a bunch of empty words, fake consolidation.

This song sounds very human to me. The instrumentals feel like breaking apart, like a machinery breaking apart.

And it perfectly represents the character's mental state, too. He's breaking apart. It's like someone is smashing him to pieces.

And who is it, that's smashing himself to pieces? It's him, himself. No one else is hurting him.

Maybe you can interpret it as some kind of Frankenstein type of thing. And that he made up some alter-ego, that's starting to eat himself up (definitely plausible, because of the song-title “Mr. Self Destruct”)

March Of The Pigs

“All the pigs are all lined up”
“I give you all that you want”

The song punches you with the incredibly fast tempo. And that punch, really gives to the intensity of the song.
And the message, too.

It's pretty obvious that the song criticizes society, and their need to fill up every bad thing in their lives with materialism. And how society is constructed in such a way, that they want you to keep doing this. They want you to buy, buy and buy things. They just want mindless sheeps that will buy their products.
Also how fake people are

“Step right up!”
“March!”
“Push!”
“Crawl right up on your knees”

This just goes to show how timeless this album is. We're becoming dumber and dumber, because of many, many things (like social media).
And this is just one of many examples of Trent Reznor's geniusness.

And it also perfectly fits within the story's context.
Our character is looking back at all the fake people he met throughout his life. Realizing how superficial everything is. How much people are scared to be themselves.

“Take the skin and peel it back”
“Now doesn't it make you feel better?”

The character is “peeling” back his mask of superficiality and fakeness. Or at least he's trying to. He's realizing how far he (and others) is from

The pre-chorus is incredibly powering.
The character is calling out for destroying the system that makes pigs. That makes them the way they are.
But he's also aware that people (the pigs) don't want to give up the system.
Because the system makes you feel like you're free, you have all the power. But in fact, you're just superficial, shallow. And addicted to the system

Closer

The most famous song by Nine Inch Nails. If you've ever heard of the word Nine Inch Nails, then it was probably because of this song.

Our protagonist is self-loathing through sex. He's trying to escape his depression. It's also explained very well why he wants to have sex

"Help me"

"The only thing that works for me"

"Help me get away from myself"

The "Help me" lyric is repeated quite a few times in the song. That's basically his "non-depressed" side trying to escape these self-destructive behaviours. The side that realizes that this is not okay. That this is messed up

What exactly is the protagonist going through at the moment? He's trying to find an escape from himself, from his depression. He doesn't see sex as giving his love to someone else. He sees it as a way of feeling in control, as a way of running away from his depression.

You could also interpret it as "feeding" his alter-ego, feeding his depression

"My whole existence is flawed"

This lyric in the chorus also explains why the protagonist does these things. There's so much hatred inside of him, so much angst.

He basically thinks that his life is so flawed. Why try to be positive about it? Why try to fix it?

If this "helps" him, or makes him feel "better". Then why bother?

The instrumentals in this song. They are quite weird. Really random. And if you focus on each one of them. They don't make sense. But together, they kind of do.

And that kind of is the protagonist. He's living, he's surviving. But he's just a body without a soul

"Help me"

"I've got no soul to sell"

Ruiner

Who, or what, is the Ruiner? Ruiner (as the title suggests) is something, or someone that ruins someone's life.

In this context. The ruiner is the protagonist's depression, or an alter-ego. Or maybe society in general?

"You had all of them on your side"

"Didn't you, didn't you?"

"You believed in all your lies"

"Didn't you, didn't you?"

These lyrics probably mention society (or the machine). It also reminds me of a victim that was abused. And the abuser tried to seem like they're perfect and kind, but in fact they weren't at all. Everyone sided with the abuser, he tricked everyone.

The pre-chorus suggests that this something, or someone is mentally "infectious" and that the ruiner has got nothing to lose. And that his only purpose is to "rape the innocent" i.e. destroy people's lives.

And that really points to it being depression. A mental disease that eats you alive.

"How'd you get so big?"

"How'd you get so strong?"

"How'd it get so hard?"

"How'd it get so long?"

The character thought that this ruiner would be harmless. That he would be able to control him. But it grew out of his hands. And infected him completely. He can't control this beast. He recognizes that it's bad, and that it's ruining his life. But he can't control it anymore.

The guitar solo is a tug of war. Between the character and the ruiner (depression). It's a chaotic fight, but in the end. The ruiner wins. And the character goes further down the spiral.

He is coping, he's going even further down the spiral. He doesn't want to (or subconsciously) believe that this grew more than he would've liked.

The whole song has this record-like sound. It's like a record loop, and it's replaying the same groove over and over. And I think that it's the process the protagonist finds himself at. Still repeating the same self-destructive cycle

The Becoming

The character is losing a sense of feelings. He's shutting down, because of multiple things: The unbearable pain, drug abuse, and depression

"He's covered with scabs, he is broken and sore"

"The me that you know, he doesn't come around much"

"That part of me.. Isn't here anymore"

He's "replacing" himself, his mind with drugs. And shutting down. He's abusing drugs so much, he just turns off the pain. Blocks it out.

And he has gotten so used to shutting down. The "real" him doesn't come around much. That part of him is decaying.

It's just his body and the machine. And the self-destructive machine.

The drug-powered machine. It's only the bad thoughts, now

No "help me" in the subconscious.

"There's no escape from this"

"My new consciousness"

He's realizing that even if he'd want to, he can't go back. "The machine" already replaced him, replaced his consciousness. He's too used to blocking away the pain with drug abuse. And even if he doesn't want to. He "has" to take drugs.

He basically re-wired his brain to think that way

The whole song is quite... there are so many things happening at once. It's hard to keep track of it. Whether it is the weird screams throughout the song. Or the industrial sounds.

It really showcases how much of a "machine" his insides have become.

There's not an easy way out from this. Especially when you abuse drugs, to soothe the pain. To ease it.

The protagonist is hiding from himself. He doesn't want to feel the gravity of reality. Of how it really is

"It won't give up, it wants me dead"

"Goddamn this noise inside my head..."

To noise that doesn't give up is that little suicidal voice that keeps feeding him the bad thoughts. The one that "tells" him to abuse drugs. The unhealthy one.

I do not want this

The song starts with a sad, depressive tone. The vocals are quiet. The piano is tragic, retrospective.

"I'm losing ground"

"Well, you know how this world can beat you down"

"And I'm made of clay"

"I fear I'm the only one who thinks this way"

This song shows how contradicting depression sometimes may be. The protagonist wants help, he feels alone. But at the same time he feels "entitled" to feel this way. He thinks and believes that he's the only one who feels this way. Thus, if someone tries to help, says things like "I understand you" He starts being violent with them. Because even though he realizes that he's sick and he needs help. He feels like he doesn't deserve it.

He's still making the same mistakes still ***falling down the same hill***
And he realizes it. He realizes what he's doing wrong.

The character is starting to be extremely nihilistic. He thinks that everything is meaningless. That life doesn't have a purpose.

"I stay inside my bed"

"I have lived so many lives all in my head"

The true essence of depression. Feeling hopeless. Bored. Not wanting to do anything, but just rot. And die. And our protagonist is doing that here. Here's also reminiscing about "what if xyz would've gone better" "What if I wouldn't be depressed"

The lines he repeats at the end of the song are very aggressive. What's really important from it are the lines:

"I want to fuck everyone in the world"

"I want to do something that matters"

The protagonist has lost it, completely. He realized that he cannot change anything. He wants to do something that matters. And what could that mean within the context of the album? Probably not anything good. At this point, he's so deep in the spiral. It could only mean one thing, really. And that's making some heinous act against a person. But we'll touch on that in the next song...

Big man with a gun

This is the song, where the protagonist reaches the climax of his madness.

The whole song is quite short, quite chaotic. So you may think that it's not that important. But it's one of the most important songs of the whole album.

In the song before this one (I do not want this). He wanted to do something. He wanted to be remembered, somehow.

In this song, the protagonist decided to let out all the anger, rage, madness, pain that he has bottled up throughout the "spiral"

"Well I can reduce you if I want"

"I can devour"

"I'm hard as fucking steel"

He wants to dominate someone, feel strong. Feel big. Why?

Because his depression has infected his whole sense of living. And we saw in 'Closer' sex empowers him, it gives him a sense of control. He doesn't have sex, because he likes the person. But because it makes him feel "better"

"I'm every inch a man"

"And I'll show you somehow"

"Me and my fucking gun"

"Nothing can stop me now"

He's insecure about his masculinity. Hence the "I'll show you somehow" lyric. He has sex with women, and does sexual things with them to prove his masculinity to himself. And that's because he is insecure about it

A warm place

After the last song. The one, where the character climaxed with his madness.
This is the most calming song from the album

No vocals in the song whatsoever. Just the calm, soothing piano. And it's really complex. Even though it's just an instrumental song.

The song feels like a breather. Like the calm before the storm. And the character is slowly realizing what has happened. What he has done. That he let his evil alter-ego take over. That he acted out of his bottled feelings
That he has hurt someone just to feel control.

He didn't see this person (or people) as a human. He just saw it as an object to take his bottled feelings out on. A person to dominate.

He didn't see flesh, bones, blood. He just saw a tool to help him.

The whole song also has this retrospective/nostalgic vibe. Maybe he's thinking back about how nice, how pure he was.

The title 'A warm place' could mean a womb. Which would explain him reminiscing on the past. How he was a child. Pure, innocent. He didn't have depression. When He didn't have insecurities...

Eraser

A big part of this song is the instrumental buildup. And that's the alter-ego breaking through, again. Rupturing through his skin

"Need you"
"Dream you"
"Find you"

He's thinking back at this person, probably a past lover, that he has lost. He's missing her, and wants her back. He misses the intimacy with her. But as the song progresses, the character goes more and more insane. He's starting to believe that she did this damage to him. That she took the power from him.

And that she caused the depression he's experiencing

"Use you"
"Scar you"
"Break you"

He wants the past lover for himself. And he wants to do all the damage that she did to him. He wants to use her like she did. Scar her. Break her. He wants her to feel the same depression, torture as he does.

"Lose me!"
"Hate me!"
"Smash me!"
"Erase me!"

The protagonist is starting to realize that he is, in fact, the person that's destroying him. It's not his past lover. It's also not the 'pigs'. It's not anyone else, but him. The distorted guitars just represent the turmoil he's feeling even better.

By the end of the song, he's just repeating the lines:

"Kill me! (Help me)"

He's realizing that there's basically no way out, but to kill himself (or be killed). He thinks that it will help me. And that it's the only way to save himself, and others, from more suffering.

Reptile

This song feels incredibly human, but also so sick.

The song starts with the lines:

“She spreads herself to let the insects in”

“She leaves a trail of honey to show me where she’s been”

“She has the blood of reptile just underneath her skin”

And this makes it clear that the protagonist can’t get this woman out of his mind. Everything he sees is connected to her (hence the “she leaves a trail of honey” lyric).

I think that at this moment. The character is so mad at his ex-lover. He just sees her as a whore. As this insect. That just manipulates others. Because that’s what she “did” to him, right? She broke him. From what he’s thinking

“Oh, my beautiful liar”

“Oh, my precious whore”

He sees sex as this tool to soothe himself. Even in a relationship. Yet, he sees this person as precious. He’s also realizing that all this time he was lying to himself. He was lying to himself about how he perceives sex.

“My disease, my infection”

This could mean many things. His depression? His obsession with sex? Given to the nature of the song, I think it’s his ex-lover. He just can’t forget her. He’s still thinking about her. And she’s embedded within him. Hence the names ‘disease’ and ‘infection’

He’s also realizing how impure he is. He’s seeing his flaws. How fucked up he has become, thanks to his obsession with this person. Thanks to his depression.

At the end of the song, his humane side is speaking out again. He wants to break free from the spiral. He’s at his wit’s end. And he just wants out...

The Downward Spiral

The instrumentals of this song are basically a stripped-down version of Hurt's instrumentals

"He couldn't believe how easy it was"

"He put the gun to his face"

"Bang!"

The character has reached the bottom of the spiral. There's nowhere to go, now. And he is preparing to kill himself. The alter-ego is suggesting to do it. Because it's so "easy".

"A lifetime of fucking things up"

"Fixed in one determined flash"

He's fully convinced that he will kill himself. There's no turning back. No one cares for him. No one is trying to help him.

All his problems will go away. All his diseases, all his bad thoughts. Bad impulses. All fixed in one flash. It'll all go away after that. It will just end.

At the end. The song is starting to be loud, overwhelming. And you cannot really make any sound of it. So many things layered on top of each other. That's representing how fuzzy everything is in the protagonist's head. He's determined to kill himself. But at the same time. He's scared. He doesn't know what will happen.

"Everything's blue"

"Everything's blue in this world"

The character thinks that when you strip down. And just leave the barebones. Everything and everyone is indifferent. No one's willing to help. The world is just a sad place pretending to care.

"All fuzzy, spilling out of my head"

He's imagining how much blood will spill out of his head, after he'll shoot himself.

Hurt

The vocals in this song are much calmer. Much more emotional

"I hurt myself today"
"To see if I still feel"
"I focus on the pain"
"The only thing that's real"

By hurting himself. He's referencing the suicide, that he has probably attempted, but survived it. But he's seeing that pain has guided this whole spiral. It has led him to some disgusting, unbelievable places

"The needle tears a hole"
"The old familiar sting"

The protagonist probably tried to kill himself by overdosing on heroin. Hence 'The old familiar sting'

But as I've said before. It didn't work out. He has realized how much of a monster he has become. How many people he hurt. And why so many people distanced from him.

"I wear this crown of shit"
"Upon my liar's chair"
"Full of broken thoughts"
"I cannot repair"

He is starting to realize how much he has lied to others, and himself. And how he made himself think that he's actually okay. And that he's not doing anything wrong.

He also sees why everyone distanced away from him. And why no one talked to him. And tried to help

The song ends with the lyrics:

"If I could start again"
"A million miles away"
"I would keep myself"
"I would find a way"

Which (I think) means. That the character has fixed his life. He has realized how much wrong he has done, but that he cannot do anything about it. But only move on. And live his life better. He got off drugs. And he stopped being self-destructive

Conclusion

As you could've seen. This album is more than an album. It's a message. It's a well-thought out story. About a person. That has been stripped of every comfort thing that he had. A person that started self-destructing on an immense level.

A big part of it. Why it feels so raw. So authentic. Is because Trent Reznor was depressed while writing this. He also abused drugs a lot during this time.

If you read this far, thank you. Thank you for reading this. And I heavily recommend that you listen to this album. It's one of the best albums ever. And the music is just really transcending.

If you choose to listen to this, pay attention to it. Read the lyrics. Focus on the music. Focus on the details.