

Dissertação apresentada para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas – Estudos Ingleses e Norte-Americanos realizada sob a orientação científica da Professora Doutora Isabel Oliveira Martins.

ON THE RUN AND ON THE ROAD. A STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ROAD IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND MOVIES

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RESUMO

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: viagem na estrada, herói, filme de estrada, cinema, viagem, jornada.

Esta dissertação tem como intuito analisar a importância da viagem na estrada e como esta se torna icónica durante o início dos anos sessenta nos Estados Unidos da América. Através de exemplos significativos presentes na literatura norte-americana, como *On the Road* (1957), *Travels With Charley* (1962) e *Rules of the Road* (1998), esta dissertação tentará demonstrar quão relevante a viagem é e como esta pode influenciar as pessoas que a experienciam. Filmes também farão parte desta análise. Em particular, a importância da estrada no cinema será analisada através de *Easy Rider* (1969), *Thelma & Louise* (1991) e *The Straight Story* (1999). A análise inclui a contextualização destas obras e algumas noções referentes a técnicas cinematográficas e como estas podem influenciar o espectador. A abordagem de obras literárias e cinematográficas servirá para fundamentar um dos principais objectivos desta dissertação: o de demonstrar como a viagem na estrada poderá ser muito mais que uma comum viagem e como a jornada muitas das vezes corresponde a uma mudança do foro íntimo.

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: road trip, hero, road movie, cinema, on the road, quest.

This dissertation intends to analyze the importance of the road trip and how it became iconic during the early 1960s in the United States of America. Through significant examples in American literature, such as *On the Road* (1957), *Travels With Charley* (1962) and *Rules of the Road* (1998), this dissertation attempts to show how meaningful the road may be and how it can shape people who embrace it. Films are also part of this analysis. In particular, through *Easy Rider* (1969), *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *The Straight Story* (1999) the importance of the road on screen will be examined. The analysis includes the contextualization of these films and some notions concerning cinematographic techniques and how they can influence the audience. Focusing on books and movies, one of the main objectives of this dissertation will be to demonstrate how road trips may be much more than regular trips and how the physical journey often corresponds to an inner change.

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Introduction

Travelling is perhaps as ancient as telling the story – either written or oral – about the action of moving, as tales of epic journeys, such as the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, are there to prove it. The journey, and then writing about it, helped people learning something about themselves, as well as about the places where they had been and in the end allowed them to achieve some kind of personal fulfillment. On the other hand, travel writing has always interested all kind of readers and audiences, and may appear under various formats. Among them we find travelogues, diaries, and even novels and short stories.

The other area of interest involved in this analysis is cinema, and particularly the Hollywood industry, which has responded to the possibilities of the road. Different movies from different periods tell a story using a journey. In fact, the so-called *road trip* appears both in literature and cinema. The term may include all those trips, which imply a movement from a place to another mainly using the road. It does not matter if the protagonist(s) uses a car, a bus, a bike or his own feet, what matters is the deep meaning of the road and how it can shape people.

As we know, travelling or moving from one place to another in order to achieve something, either spiritual or material, or both, has always been present in the history of humanity, but it has been particularly important for the construction of the United States of America. Thus, this dissertation will focus on the American road trip both in literature and cinema. In the literary field, the analysis focuses on three literary works: *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, *Travels with Charley* (1962) by John Steinbeck and *Rules of the Road* (1998) by Joan Bauer. Each work is studied for what it represented at the time of publication and what still represents. Furthermore, information on the social and culture context will be provided in order to have a better understanding of the topic.

The cinematographic part involves a general introduction on the road genre, the innovative elements and the similarities with other existing genres with a focus on *Easy Rider* (1969) by Dennis Hopper, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) by Ridley Scott and *The Straight Story* (1999) by David Lynch. We decided to include movies from different years and with different features in order to obtain a diverse overview.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to look at the road trip as a process, something valuable that shapes whoever is brave enough to embrace the road. We can even argue that, the road itself is one of the characters of every book and movie which will be taken into consideration. Our analysis wants to look at landscapes, events and feelings as part of the trip, entities able to shape, reinforce or undermine the identity of the protagonist(s) and even that of the country, in this case the United States of America. Again, it is important to underline the importance that the road trip has in the American collective memory as a tool to face Otherness as well as the self. The term “Otherness” conveys different meanings, in fact it can include the Other, as in what is different from us (the Self), but it also includes the other part of us – the one that is lost and found along the way. Hopefully, this dissertation will make the reader experience a journey through time, places and different points of view. In order to have a thorough approach, the feminine point of view will be used, since the road trip may also lead to confrontation and representation issues of nationhood, sexuality, gender, class, and race.

Chapter 1.

“You can learn a lot from books, maps and statistics,
but the road is a better – and sterner – teacher”

- D. Duncan, *Out West* (2000)

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Different cultures have shared the interest for cars, highways and road trips over the years. Our focus is on American literature. In fact, as Ronald Primeau claims:

For most of this century, Americans have treated the highway as sacred space. Roads and cars have long gone beyond simple transportation to become places of exhilarating motion, speed and solitude. Getting away is a chance at a new start, a special time to discover self and country, glide through vast empty spaces and then come home to write or sing about the adventures¹.

¹ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p.1.

Our analysis includes works produced after World War II, from the 1950s on. This span of time is very important for two reasons. The first one is that some of the most relevant works that became the symbol of the road literature appeared in this period. The second reason is that during this period of time the interest around writers that go on the road has dramatically increased. On the other hand, this interest seems to have changed the way the common reader experiences the highway on his own.

American travel writing - like travel itself – is constitutive, which means that it constructs its object as it describes it². It is difficult to identify a real start for travel literature because since the beginning of literature every story has been permeated by travel to a certain extent, no matter the genre they belonged to. For this reason – among others – it is complicated to define the travel genre. Rules are constantly broken and new meanings are given, therefore it would be too reducing to trap different works into a single category. Moreover, this genre is not closed, as it keeps adapting to the changing cultural desires of Americans, of the reader and of the writer³.

Having said that, we refer to the American road genre to define a field in literature where the hero of the road keeps growing both socially and culturally according to his beliefs.⁴

A common difficulty for American and non-American travel books is categorizing them in one genre only. In fact, they may present elements, which typically belong to other categories, such as biography when it is a true story and the focus is on the writer or they can be labelled as historical books if the focus is on the context. They may also fit into different genres if nature plays an important role.

This happens because we are facing complex, multiple-layered texts that build the traveler, the nation and the readership at the same time. Landscape is vital for this

² James Clifford. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

³ Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁴ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p.3.

narrative. As James Houston writes: “[...] land is the palimpsest of human needs, desires, meaning, greed and fears”⁵.

Landscape can be seen as full or empty. In the latter case, people who explore it feel the need to fill it in with their presence. This means that they add their spiritual and emotional connection to the land, offering new meaning to the geographic area. In the first case, the “full” landscape is considered in its totality, which means that its past and the people who once lived there are taken in great consideration. This happened with Native Americans and their land. Travelers could not drive by without thinking about the historic patrimony of the place. In fact, humans enrich landscapes with their spiritual touch and landscapes offer them the chance to do it in a mutual relationship.

Traveling becomes the tool to discover or achieve one’s identity (this can be social, psychological or political). It is through interactions with others that the traveler validates his or her vision of the world. When it comes to an American traveler who starts his journey abroad, the traveler himself represents “Americanness”, which means that he is a symbol of the place he comes from and not of his persona⁶.

Primeau’s view corroborates this point of view in travel narrative. In fact, the narration of events is not a mere description of events as they happened, but it always includes the willing of the author to explain, identify or trace a pattern of what happens around him. On the other hand, travel narrative takes some of its elements from older literary traditions, such as picaresque tales, epic tradition and pilgrimage.

A picaresque novel tells the adventures of his hero *pícaro* who shifts from a place to another trying to survive⁷. Sometimes these figures get so much distant from daily routine that reintegration becomes very hard, so they choose to extend their journeys to avoid that moment.

Other similarities are found in the epic tradition where the narration itself creates the myth. The same thing happens in the road narrative, where the

⁵ Quoted in Mark Neumann, *On the Rim: Looking for the Grand Canyon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 5–6.

⁶ Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 60.

⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Picaresque novel* (<https://www.britannica.com/art/picaresque-novel>) consulted on 14th December 2016.

protagonist himself contributes to the creation of some mythical elements, such as highways, majestic landscapes and freedom.

If we look closer, we can also notice some elements of the pilgrimage⁸. Both pilgrims and people on the road are exploring vanishing regions for different reasons. This makes the road hero a new kind of pilgrim.

The narrative of the road explores the personal sphere of the protagonist but, at the same time, it mixes landscapes and cultural symbols. In fact, cultural values are always expressed, even if they may be not explicit.

There are different layers of values in each narration; the most important are the residual, dominant and emergent ones.

The residual ones are defined as:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation⁹.

Dominant values sometimes might be too inconsistent to be explained, because they have always been part of a certain society and its culture. Therefore, they survive through the residual ones.

Emergent values are defined by Raymond as: “By ‘emergent’ I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created¹⁰”. It can be an escape, a social reform or a political protest, as long as it introduces a new value for the community.

So far, we have discussed about elements of the narration and literary similarities, but it is important not to neglect the most important question: why do the protagonists feel the urge to travel?

⁸ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p.6.

⁹ William Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977, p. 121.

¹⁰ William Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977, p. 122.

There are different answers to this question and, before explaining them, it is important to notice that the protagonist usually travels alone. It is a way to preserve the purity of the experience and to preserve autonomy while on the road.

People on the road travel to distance themselves from the routine, dissatisfactions, family or simply to fulfil the desire of change. Some of the writers who embraced this kind of journey were looking for themselves, some others were looking for the real identity of their country and some others were traveling for experimental purposes only.

It might be interesting for a non-American reader to try to understand why someone should travel to find the identity of his country. It is essential to consider how the United States of America were born, which means we are facing a restless country made by restless people who, as a consequence, produce a restless literature¹¹.

Writers explore the road looking for some – apparently – lost values. They explore lost villages, countryside, wild nature, diners and everything that can give them the chance to know more about America's seemingly lost identity. One way to discover it is going back to the myths that shaped America. Native Americans are the perfect example to clarify this phenomenon. In fact, all of the violence perpetrated against them seems to be forgotten for a while when we encounter them in literature. The myth becomes different from the historical facts and what seems to stay is a romanticized version of the truth.

The creative process is always personal thus, theoretically speaking, there might be one different American identity for each writer. Whether or not this is true, the main intent is always to celebrate it. In fact, "America is a poem waiting to be written", according to Emerson¹².

The second part of the discovery offered by the journey concerns the self. Every road offers the possibility to get away from restrictions, routine, family, everything that requires commitment. In fact, highways lead out of societies towards open

¹¹ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p.51.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957, p.19.

spaces. This opening to the new and the unknown offers a good chance to the self, which can find and recreate itself.

This new “floating” condition where the traveler is free from responsibilities and suspended between the past and the future, the known and the unknown, it is called liminality¹³. Liminality is a special condition, a rite of passage, where the protagonist floats between what he thinks he knows and what he can only imagine about the future. By the act of reading, we are also taking part in this process.¹⁴

The physical road that creates a bridge between space and time, society and the outside, also becomes a road through the interior, offering a path to self-exploration. The road becomes a therapy; in fact, it is not surprising that one of the motifs we encounter in travel narrative is meditation. There are different kinds of it, it can be done by oneself or it can be shared. In order to start the process of shared meditation it is necessary to have a companion, in this case a passenger with whom the protagonist can experience closeness, intimacy and a genuine relationship free of any obligation.

If on one hand the long ride is a symbol of escape, loneliness and freedom, on the other hand it provides the tools to see the other – both as abstract entity or as another human being – in a different way, which seemed impossible before the departure. Listeners serve to this purpose: changing mindset and facilitate a new depth in interactions, no matter the length of their trips.

This is the case of *Travels with Charley* by Steinbeck, where driving helps to free the mind because it activates some conscious and unconscious mechanism, which help thinking on a different level, leading to self-discovery.

A special mention in these journeys goes to the car. Without it there would be no relationship between drivers and hitchhikers and no unconscious mechanism could

¹³ Victor Turner. *The Ritual Process*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969.

¹⁴ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p.69.

ever take place. The car offers protection from the external world and the threats that may appear¹⁵, but it stays always connected to reality by the radio.

Automobiles offer a healing power against the world outside by being a safe nest but, at the same time, every car is also an intruder of the wild paradise around it. Not to mention that every long trip by automobile may easily slip into homogenization and monotony.

One of the consequences of homogenization and monotony is discouragement. In fact, the journey might become harsh when it is seen as a possible solution to escape from depression or anxiety.

The way the driver feels also influence the elements outside. For example, if the driver feels down, he perceives the road as hostile, boring and incapable to free his mind. We see the transformation of the road from source of redemption to barrier. A maze where the hero will eventually lose himself¹⁶.

Different books explore this sense of disappointment by showing how the search for direction and meaning slowly turns into an unfulfilling experience for the protagonists. The hero and the antihero lose the sense of excitement along the journey.

Another possibility of road narratives is the parodic self-commentary. It includes an ironic view from the inside, which aims to both criticize and celebrate the system at the same time. *Lolita*¹⁷ is an example of a parodic self-commentary where the journey has no destination; its only purpose is to distract Lolita from reality.

This aspect of road literature is very important because it is the only way that writers have to communicate to the readers the real disappointment they felt. Moreover, it shows that road narratives are constantly evolving. The values they

¹⁵ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, pp. 83-86.

¹⁶ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p. 90.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*. 1955. New York: Putnam, 1958.

represent are dynamic. It is through the dialogue between the text and the reader that values are constantly reaffirmed, reconsidered or renegotiated¹⁸.

So far, we described the road and the motifs of the writers, but we have not examined in depth to which group the majority of the authors belonged to and who are the minorities. Especially before the 1970s road narratives were dominated by white men, but this does not mean that they were the only group who traveled.

Native Americans, African Americans and women moved too but we do not have records of road trips. In fact, for Native Americans for example traveling was a community activity rather than an individual one. For African Americans the situation was different.

The Northern and the Southern part of the country had a different perception of African Americans. These were constantly exposed to the threat of lynching. It required a lot more courage for an African American to go on the road than it required to a white man. Often they had to wear hats and pretend they were working as drivers for someone else. They did not have access to all of the motels and restaurants of the country and, even when they could stay the night, people tended to look smugly at them.¹⁹ For all of these reasons black people traveled and wrote less.

Women, both as characters and as writers represent another minority. Female characters were present in road narratives, but they usually remained on the side and never as protagonists. There were few women driving and the ones who did were not motivated to write about it because literature was dominated by men and they thought that what they had to say was not interesting enough to be published. Women's presence in literature started to have some importance with the character of Mrs. Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck.

She is a strong woman who adapts to changes better than male characters. She is the one always keeping hopes up by taking care of the morale of the family and their physical needs. It seems that women can bring their own roots with them when they travel, while men cannot and have more difficulties to adapt to changes. Female

¹⁸ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p. 106.

¹⁹ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, pp. 117-118.

characters represent a calming influence in books, they set goals that are more realistic, they avoid letting themselves go with depressive thoughts and they are against drastic separations from family and friends.

On the other hand, women writers of road narratives modify the way the road quest had been seen for years. They adapt it to their perspectives avoiding mythicizing their dreams.

Alexandra Genser analyzes the female point of view in her work *Roads of Her Own* (2009). She criticizes Primeau's categorization of women as "other minorities". In fact, even if Primeau is one of the first who takes women in consideration, he does not give them the right importance according to Genser. Beat literature produced by women was a result of their struggles against social confinements and a constant feeling of exclusion.²⁰ They were not socially accepted as artists as men were.

Their protest started during the 1970s when a second wave of feminism criticized the domestic values of the 1950s. As a response, women wanted to prove that they had no spatial limitation, nor a "home" that could trap them. They went on the road with the only purpose of re-shaping the patterns created by men and destroying previous assumptions on the role of women. They refused to romanticize the idea of women on the road but, nonetheless, their production has not been considered by literary criticism for a long time²¹.

On the other hand, it was dangerous for women to be alone on the road. In fact, in addition to the usual risks of traveling, women were often considered as territories to conquer or, in other words, territories ready to be invaded.

As mentioned by Slettedahl in her *Women's Movement. Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*²², there is a motif in women road literature and it is represented by the escape. They escape in order to question the feminine space, the nest they have been living in for too long and the choices made within that space. This motif was perceived as alarming, because a woman who left home was seen as much more reproachable than a man who did the same. In the first

²⁰ Alexandra Genser. *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000*. Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2009, p.47.

²¹ Alexandra Genser. *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000*. Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2009, p.49.

²² Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson. *Women's Movement. Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 2000.

case, the woman was considered a wanderer with all of the possible bad implications, in the second scenario the man was seen as the hero of the road. In order to show resistance against gender rules, women used a car. The car plays an important role for women because it gives them the chance to leave the familiar spaces and to get closer to education, independence and freedom. It was one way to re-shape their feminine identity, for themselves and society.

Annette Kolodny observes that “like their husbands and fathers, women too shared in the economic motives behind emigration, and like the men, women also dreamed of transforming the wilderness. But the emphases were different”²³.

Historically women had always been associated with stability and the idea of home rather than the road, which was considered a male prerogative. Also, when their husbands were traveling and experiencing new adventures, women were supposed to stay at home waiting for them, as Penelope did with Odysseus.

Shirley Ardner talks about a social map where spatial differences are marked according to gender differences²⁴. According to this list, as previously explained, the road is a male domain. Consequently, if a woman wants to cross the borders, her actions are seen as a threat to patriarchal society. Social and spatial changes were strictly connected to each other, only when society starts to change, the road follows.

If we want to fully understand women on the road and their escape motif, we need to go back in time to the *picara*. We have already mentioned the character of the *picaro*, but this time we want to focus on the female variation of this phenomenon. The picaresque wandering serves as an inspiration for different literary genres. Her wandering is adventurous and often has no aim.²⁵

The original *picara* was born in Spain during the 16th century; she was then found in German states during the 17th century, moved to England and France during

²³ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. xii.

²⁴ Quoted in Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, eds., *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1994), p. 1.

²⁵ Alexandra Genser. *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000*. Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2009, p.258.

the 18th century and finally went to Europe and United States of America during the 20th century.

She was an outsider, undesired by society and usually disguised. She was always on the move because she did not want to be determined by her territory, her class and her gender. Female *picaras* had less chances than men because they had almost no access to education and they were totally dependent from men.

There are different views on the topic. Some argue that the *picara* only had a marginal importance in the genre, while others see this figure as responsible for the contemporary image we have of the fantasy heroine, the woman in control of her destiny.

On the other hand, Cathy N. Davidson highlights the fact that the escape motif was not born with the picaresque tradition. In fact, in 19th century North America we already see a psychological escape through books. Women started to read in order to escape their domestic duties²⁶.

The picaresque tradition differs from the usual road quest we mentioned so far. We do not have the classic structure made of departure, journey and arrival, but we tend to read more episodes that are isolated and adventures with no connection between each other.²⁷ The *picara*, as the female characters of *On the Road* (1957), uses drugs to freely live her adventures on the road.

She follows the motto "Turn on, tune in, drop out" by Timothy Leary.²⁸ Unfortunately, she soon realizes that nothing really changes for her, nothing is really conquered. This feeling slowly turns into rage, which is reflected in female popular music and films.

The situation is different for the male hero. The last part of his journey includes his way back; otherwise the cycle is not completed. In fact, coming back home is an essential part of the journey. The hero who comes back from the trip is not the same

²⁶ Cathy N. Davidson. "The Picaresque and the Margins of Political Discourse." *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986, pp. 151-211.

²⁷ Lackey Kris. *RoadFrames. The American Highway Narrative*, Lincoln NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

²⁸ Alexandra Genser. *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000*. Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2009, p. 266.

who left. He gained wisdom and self-knowledge. Unfortunately, this stage is always difficult, full of complications and less adventurous.²⁹ It can be very boring, therefore drivers avoid using maps in order to alleviate the process and make it more exciting. Sometimes they plan some stops along the way, which make it easier to cover a certain path or they choose different roads. It does not matter if the path is the same or not, the most significant thing is that the hero changed the way he looks at places, people and circumstances. Narrative patterns used at this stage reflect this psychological change in the author.

Going back to reality often implies a strong sense of frustration once the protagonist realizes that no one is really interested in his stories. They might ask about the trips, but they do it to be polite, as they might do about something else to start a polite conversation. Out of this sense of frustration, both negative and positive effects are created. Firstly, there is a sense of disruption that threatens the equilibrium of the family. Secondly, this general indifference leads the hero to write about his journey hoping to reach a wide audience that may care about his adventures.³⁰

The road experience becomes an educative experience that allows the protagonist to go through a self-purification process that will change him for good. Usually this process includes some direct or indirect confrontation with death that reminds him of the dangers of the road, as well as of the dangers of life.

The journey may also be a repairer of relationships, especially the ones with the co-traveler that will grow along the narration. A sense of optimism pervades the protagonist even when the trip is over. In fact, as Steinbeck says in *Travels with Charley* people do not take trips, but trips take people³¹. This means that the effects of the journey will stay forever with the hero even when he stops in one place.

The journey itself is vital, but the way of telling the story and the narrative choices are just as important as the trip.³² Depending on the style choice, the message

²⁹ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, pp. 127-128.

³⁰ Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, p. 131.

³¹ John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 191.

³² Ronald Primeau. *Romance of the Road, The Literature of the American Highway*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997, pp.136-139.

highlights some aspects rather than others. For example, the long narrative may be more self-reflexive than songs or shorter compositions.

The choice of narrator is very important as well. When the narrator is the person who travels his view is considered the objective one, the truth. This is just one of the possible choices. In fact, some writers decide to distance themselves from the narration. This way the reader is constantly reminded that he is reading a product of fiction. According to the chosen process used to describe fiction or non-fiction, the reader will have a different experience of the journey. Therefore, we can conclude that the process is as significant as the journey.

✎

Thus, we want to analyze the journey for American people and try to understand why it is so important for them. First, the road trip is considered part of the America collective memory, which plays a crucial part for the nation's cultural values and identity³³. This collective memory generates a sense of belonging because it binds together an individual with his own culture and vice versa, therefore collective memory becomes part of one's individual experience. Because of this close interaction between what is individual and what is collective, it is hard to separate what is rationally true from what we think it is. Road trips are the perfect example for it. They have always been part of the collective memory because people can easily relate to them.

They were very common between white middle class families during the 50s. They used to travel with the whole family during summer and, afterwards, some of the kids who took part to that trip used to travel again in search of America identity. The question is, what do we mean by "America Identity" and why do we think there is just one identity of the country?

The roots of the question are lost into the American myth. In fact, the constant move as a myth is part of the Manifest Destiny, which became a cultural institution.

³³ Madaline Zappala. Deconstructing the American Road Trip Experience: the "Search" for "American Identity"(2012), *Senior Capstone Project*. Paper 72.

This sense of freedom translated in moving and wandering influenced a lot our cultural perception of facts.

The real motif of the road trip must be searched in the motifs of the first pilgrims: freedom and the possibility of a better future. What encouraged people to move from the old Europe to the New World was the possibility to create a better future by having land and freedom. The only way they had to achieve their goals was by movement and travel. These two motifs had been romanticized throughout the years and the influence of collective memory shaped the facts the way we know them today.

This phenomenon is not new. Myths wipe facts, so eventually facts get lost in favor of myths. The main issue is that American collective memory is imperfect because based on individual memories as well and, finally yet importantly, these memories belong to the ones who had more freedom.

One of the main products of American collective memory is the famous Route 66. It opened up the West to everyone and connected cities between each other. It represented and still represents freedom. Everyone could buy a car or fix an old one and start the trip. In addition, its geographic position contributed to its fame: it was a flat road, therefore easy to sweep.

Its fame increased even more thanks to music. Almost every artist, from Rolling Stone to Natalie Cole covered the song “Get Your Kicks on Route 66” had a role in creating the myth of the legendary Route 66. Music facilitated the cultural remembering of the experience, and confirmed the Route as a symbol of hope, especially during the 1930s when it led people to California.

In 1999 President Clinton promulgated the Preservation Act and Route 66 became a commercial tourist resource for the towns surrounding the highway. Since then, the Route was associated to leisure. Its importance never decreased; in fact, nowadays it made it to the entertainment industry where it plays an essential role in the movie “*Cars*” (2006).

Pat Chestnut focuses on another important feature of the road trip, which is the road trip as the encounter of Otherness. The road trip is also a kind of rite of

passage, something that needs to be done at least once in a lifetime. The encounter with the Otherness may take many different forms.

As we know, meeting the other is part of the adventure, in fact the traveler meets different people almost every day, but there is more. From a close reading of *Hours and Days*³⁴ we come to the conclusion that the traveler is Other because his experience will always be different from the ones of his fellows. Even if they all travel the same path, they always have different experiences because their backgrounds and their perception are personal. In this sense, every traveler is an “other” meaning that he has to be different from another driver. The trip becomes a reaffirming sense of selfhood because one identifies himself as different from another.

The other feature of the Otherness is the space. Space is perceived as different from the Self and different from what is already known.

Every trip brings a sense of authenticity and authority. The first one comes from the fact that every experience is individual and it brings its own truth for the ones who experience it. This authenticity empowers the traveler and gives him authority, which is why he feels the right to claim the truth about the identity of the country based on his own assumptions.

In his book *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck refers to the instability of the truth and to its complexity. In fact, no true truth claim can be made because no one can possibly own nor experience the whole truth. American collective memory is related to one's mind exactly as any other familiar or personal memory: “[...] what I found was closely intermeshed with how I felt at the moment. External reality has a way of being not so external after all. This monster of a land, this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of microcosm me”³⁵. This makes it imperfect, flawed and contradictory.

Having said that, we can discuss different point of views, different literary choices and paradigms, but no universal conclusion can be reached.

³⁴Pat Chestnut, "Hours and Days." *The Bad Version* 1.001 (2011). <http://thebadversion.com/essay/hours-and-days>.

³⁵ John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 159.

American road narratives used symbols that soon became international and were used by non-American narratives. The ancestral desire of going on the road was perceived as a continuous “pursuit of happiness” that already started with Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. The quest has always been part of American history: quest for independence, personal liberty and economy opportunity as we previously mentioned. All of these elements are used in non-American road narratives as well. This means that different societies absorbed these values. The cause of this phenomenon is due to the presence of America in the entertainment market. In fact, the idea we tend to have of America largely depends on the way we see it through the distorted lens of American movies.³⁶

Nevertheless, it has not always been like that. The perception and the aim of road narratives have been changing through time.

As Ann Bringham explains in her work *Early Road Narratives and the “Voyage into Democracy”*³⁷, mobility has not always been perceived as an escape. In fact, mobility may be considered as a gradual education of the self that can only be achieved through dislocation. This was the idea most of the writers had during 1900 and 1910. They thought that by traveling the driver felt more incorporated into his own Nation. This happens because of the heterogeneity of the country, which leads to a metamorphosis: the microcosm (the traveler) feels connected to the macrocosm (the surroundings). This way of crossing the country helped the ones involved to appreciate the locals, the so-called “true Americans”. In fact, true America and true Americans are hidden in the ordinary and there are more chances to discover them through similar experiences.

One of the purposes of the motorization process is to drive the self out of individualism and out of its geographic limitations in order to join the union. When we talk about union we mean the whole country. All of the truths about America and

³⁶ Brian Ireland. Errand into the Wilderness: The Cursed Earth as Apocalyptic Road Narrative. *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (December 2009), pp. 497-534.

³⁷ Ann Bringham. *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Americans make the union. Only if we consider all of them we can get at least closer to the idea of national identity.

Road narratives represent mobility as intimacy because it is capable to overcome social differences. One main difference between pre and post-World War II road narratives is the way couples are created and developed within the text. In the early texts the couple did not exist until the story twisted in a way or another. Usually two different people who initially disliked each other started a trip together and only afterwards they would both fall in love and eventually get married. Two people who did not know each other and only met thanks to the road who will bring them together could represent the second scenario. Most of the time the mentioned couple got married. In this case, the road could cancel social differences.

Road narratives from the 1950s were different. They already presented a couple who started the journey together. It could be a couple of friends or lovers who were close to each other and stayed that way during the entire trip. In both periods of time, mobility represents an act of intimacy in two different ways. The first one concerns personal relationships: people who share close experiences and decide to stick together. The second one concerns the intimacy with the land. In fact, as we previously mentioned the traveler has the opportunity to take a closer look at landscapes, people, their habits and everything that is related to daily life in a different geographic area of the country. It is this kind of intimacy that turns the travelers into patriots.

The chance of meeting strangers on the road creates a special bond for travelers that helps them feeling citizens of the United States of America before recognizing themselves as regional citizens. This experience helps people evolve from a provincial point of view to a national one. Unfortunately, this intimacy was precluded to the ones who could not afford to buy a car. Therefore, if on one hand we can affirm that road experiences canceled in some way social differences, on the other hand we have to say that not all of the population had access to this experience.³⁸

³⁸ Ann Brigham. *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

To fully understand this phenomenon we have to look closer at the historic circumstances of the second half of the twentieth century. The end of World War II brought prosperity to the United States of America. People moved to middle-class suburbs, they bought houses, young people started going to college thanks to the G.I. Bill and the so-called “baby boom” phenomenon was registered. People could easily get modern domestic appliances and soon the car culture spread.

All of these factors made possible the fact that almost every family owned a car. Henry Ford, the owner of the car company, created the concept of the weekend by giving his employee the Saturday and the Sunday off. These two resting days started to be spent on the road, therefore a car was needed more and more.

Owning a car soon became a symbol of wealth and masculinity, a way to show who was in charge. This was not the case of a group of young people who only wanted to have a car to escape from society. These people were called “The Beats” or “The Beat Generation”. They drove to enjoy the pleasure of driving and their philosophy was to live in the moment, to live the present to the fullest without planning too much for the future.

All of these values are perfectly embodied in *On the Road* (1957), which creates a modern cowboy who crosses a geographical path that corresponds with his personal journey. The key word for this generation is movement, and it is always defined in masculine and patriarchal terms.

On the other hand, narrative styles are very different but there is often a common feature, which is the effort to cancel the emotional distance between what is written and what is felt by the reader. One of the narrative techniques included dialogues, details and sometimes the authors themselves were part of the story. No detail or experience is left out: drug addiction, explicit sex, induced visions and all kinds of physical experiences are included in the book. This style was called “New Journalism” or “Gonzo Journalism”.

Other writers chose a different path to describe their road experiences. They embrace the feeling of nostalgia and focus on landscapes and characters, rather than on themselves. It is the case of John Steinbeck- whose work will be described more in depth later on – who collides with the one of the Beats and the New Journalism. His

main focus stays on the outside and not on himself. Steinbeck chooses nostalgia and decides to look at America through this feeling.

Kerouac, another relevant author for our analysis, bases his trip on consciousness and that is what he wants to achieve. Steinbeck, who started his trip when he was already a mature man, is in search of something else, something bigger that cannot be only personal. Nevertheless, he can still be ironic. In fact, we cannot ignore the fact that in one of his most important books he chooses a dog as his companion³⁹.

Another main concept encountered in road narratives is masculinity. As previously mentioned earlier road narratives focus on the story of a man on the move looking for something elusive such as himself, his country or vital knowledge⁴⁰. After World War II historical circumstances change and U.S faces Cold War and the atomic age which influence road narratives. One can argue that Americans start to approach mobility as a reorientation in disorienting times. Raced masculinities are reproduced in an era of uncertainty and this becomes possible only through the mobility process. Writers shape their Self and their idea of social and philosophical truth and they choose mobility to reach their aim. They become participant observers of the journey and respond to the uncertainty of life using the road, a device that gives them a direction. These times were considered an “era of restlessness” or a “virus of restlessness” using Steinbeck’s words: “When the virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man, and the road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet, the victim must first find himself a good and sufficient reason for going”⁴¹.

Thus, life on the road seemed easier because there was no need to pay the bills and these kinds of worries seem far away.

On the road there is no responsibility and everything seems paused. This idea feeds the so-called American dream: if you are not happy in the place you are you can

³⁹ Debora Paes De Barros. Driving that highway to consciousness: late twentieth-century American travel literature in Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁴⁰ Ann Brigham. *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p.54.

⁴¹ John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p.3.

seek happiness elsewhere. It seems a universal truth, an American fact, but it is clear that eventually the only one who left was always the man (and he was white).

Kingsley Widmer⁴² replies to these facts by introducing a very interesting idea: the white man does not leave because he feels that he does not belong to that place, he leaves because belonging to the modern society is the real problem and causes a sense of guilt. Mobility offers an antidote to men who feel trapped at home and gives them a real chance to be men, to show their masculinity out of society.

Road narratives change their focus after World War II. In fact, earlier narratives approach mobility as a process to explore, a symbol of freedom and democracy. The focus is different because there are different opportunities. Before, it was more difficult to get a car and roads were less populated. After World War II it is easier to get a car, there are many other travelers and commercial tourism increases becoming a threat to the road as a space of independence.

Road narratives of this period reveal how masculinity is being threatened because of cultural containment, racial exclusion and mass consumption⁴³. Consequently, men feel immobile and seek their independence in new situations out of their social context. This new experience is both disorienting and liberating.

Mobility turns this sense of disorientation into the orientation of the male subject to himself and what surrounds him. Moreover, mobility is considered the only necessary condition for creativity and intellectual production. Postwar narratives focus on the individual, his gender and racial features, while earlier narratives focus on the shift from local to national identities. People started their journey as individuals, inhabitants of a specific geographic area and at the end of their trip, they felt Americans.

Later narratives focus on the self, which replaces the nation. This starts to be evident also in the choice of the titles that prefer personal pronouns to generic structures. This constant work on the self starts with the body. It always change when

⁴² Kingsley Widmer. Utopia and Liberty. *Literature of Liberty: A Review of Contemporary Liberal Thought*, vol. IV, no. 4, Winter 1981.

⁴³ Ann Bringham. *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

on the move because it is always confronted with different situations. Mobility starts with the body, especially in those cases when writers had to travel in disguise. In order to recognize and incorporate the self, it is necessary to take some distance from it and to approach the Other. The traveler must become a stranger to himself; he must turn into other if he wants to find himself again.

It might seem a paradox, but it is through mobility that the self finds stability and is able to reestablish white masculinity. The ideal aim is to create a version of the self that is free from racial constraints. Going on the road also means dreaming of a world without borders. In fact, being on the road implies crossing borders, thus creating unity in opposition to the outside racist world.

This kind of narrative exalts the individual, his qualities, and his adventures but at the same time it distances itself from individualism – which is the celebration of the self against the other, implying that the self is better or more important.

Likewise, it is difficult to fully understand the motifs behind every road trips if we do not spend some time comparing the road to the story of America. If we look at the road without considering all of the gender and racial issues, as we already did, it is easy to fall in love for what the road represents: hope, regeneration and a timeless romanticism made possible by songs and everything we previously mentioned about the collective memory.

The road is compared to the story of America because the traveler makes himself, becomes a different person while on his way to somewhere else. The process of becoming is strictly related to movement, and so it is the story of America often celebrated. It is the self-made man, the symbol of America that is somehow represented on the road. America has always been perceived as different. Mostly, being different from Europe. Being American represents a state of mind, because one may turn into an American if he is able to succeed in life.

This point of view is controversial and it lays its roots in the emigration phenomenon that created America as we know it. The emigrants, the restless people felt that they could only be happy and fulfilled if they moved from their “here” to

another “somewhere”. This journey was a pursuit of identity that ended with supposedly “new” Americans.

We previously criticized the secondary role that women, African Americans and other minorities had in road narratives, but the same critique goes to what we know of the American tradition. It was the male immigrant who arrived to the new land, the male Western pioneer who decided to explore further areas and, as per definition, the cowboy has always been a representative of that kind of man. The male traditional figure who was becoming American is nothing but the traveler we analyzed so far. Once we understand this parallelism, every road story becomes the story of America too. The limit of this point of view is in the fact that the individual is merged with the community and the man becomes the prototypical storyteller and traveler⁴⁴.

One of the consequences of this masculine vision of facts is the sexualized vision of spaces. In fact, all of the spaces that cannot be invaded, every place where men could establish their dominion are feminine. The famous Route 66 is female, universally known as “The Mother Route”. Cities like Paris or New York are considered female because they provoke libido in travelers. A significant passage reports of D. Porter says: “love is home-sickness; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself while he is still dreaming; this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before, one may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body”⁴⁵.

Both the route and the cities appear to be passive and receptive in this case. They can only accept what the traveler is ready to do. The idea of home seems to have the same faith: what it is left behind is associated with women, as they were considered the ones who stayed at home⁴⁶. This theory of sexualized spaces is also known as “spermatic travel”⁴⁷. According to this interpretation, women are associated to stability just like the wombs, while men need to be errands and wild just like the

⁴⁴ Jessica Enevold. *Women on the road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility*. Göteborgs Universitet/Karlskrona Tekniska Högskola, 2003, pp. 53-60.

⁴⁵ Dennis Porter. *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991, p. 245.

⁴⁶ Jessica Enevold. *Women on the road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility*. Göteborgs Universitet/Karlskrona Tekniska Högskola, 2003, pp.70-77.

⁴⁷ Eric J. Leed. *The Mind of the Traveller: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

sperm. Therefore, it seems almost natural that male travelers constantly need to move, while women are stable stations of sexual dispositions. The hypothesis of a woman on the road seems so inappropriate that it is soon associated with promiscuity.

In this chapter, we have dealt with the road trip and its protagonists, we have tried to understand its roots and why it became a vital part of American culture. At the same time, we tried to throw some lights on the so-called minorities of this journey who, as we saw, were not secondary after all. As every myth, American road trips are built up on true facts and imperfect, romanticized memories.

Chapter 2.

“I was surprised, as always, by how easy the act of leaving was, and how good it felt.

The world was suddenly rich with possibility.”

- J. Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)

2.1 The Beat Generation: between jazz and history

The Beat Generation is considered the movement that Jack Kerouac initiated with other writers. It first started as a group of few friends who were having their recurrent meetings in some jazz clubs in New York in the mid-40s. Only later, they got to represent an entire period of time, including the frustrations and ambitions of a whole generation.

The first ones who regularly met in these clubs during the mid-40es were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty in the novel) and William S. Burroughs. They started in New York and then moved to San Francisco, where other people joined. Most of them wanted to be published and their community was a good way to support one another in the common struggle of finding a literary voice and a publisher. Jack Kerouac invented the definition of “Beat Generation” in 1948 when he introduced this term in a conversation with his friend John Clellon Holmes. It was only after, in 1952, that the *New York Times Magazine* explained the meaning of the

expression⁴⁸. In 1958 he explained the concept during a speech at Hunter College and tried to clarify the concept and to avoid misconceptions⁴⁹.

There are different interpretations of the word “beat” in this context. It was thought that the term had a negative implication, like “poor” or “exhausted”. Maybe this was the first meaning of it, but Kerouac twisted it according to his vision. He explained that “beat” stood for “beatitude” in a mixture of bliss but at the same time awareness of the historical moment they were living in. He chose this term because it relates so much with jazz music too. In fact, this music style had a huge influence on the Beats, it gave them a new, innovative approach to the creative process.

In his book *Go* (1952) the author John Clellon Holmes explains that jazz music had something rebel, it represented an attitude toward life, a real lifestyle that helped the authors to feel part of something. Here the author claims:

In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them, and their lives knew a gospel for the first time. It was more than a music; it became an attitude toward life, a way of walking, a language and a costume; and these introverted kids (emotional outcasts of a war they had been too young to join, or in which they had lost their innocence), who had never belonged anywhere before, now felt somewhere at last.⁵⁰

They used drugs such as Benzedrine to focus more on the creative process and to feel inspired. We can deduce that they did it also to emulate their jazz idols.

This emulation was also reflected in their prose. The “bop prosody” wants to recreate the rhythm and the pauses typical of jazz music. In fact, Jack Kerouac tended to write everything as if it was a stream of consciousness, with very little punctuation, just when he wanted to let the reader breathe again. His aim was to recreate in literature what jazz musicians did in music. The Beat style was based on improvisation, as Allen Ginsberg says in his expression “composing on the tongue”⁵¹, which means composing spontaneously without following any rule, composing following the momentum, just like jazz artists.

⁴⁸ Janssen Mike. *Jazz and the Beat Generation*. Litkicks.com. Web. Consulted on 17th April 2017.

⁴⁹ Open Culture. *Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg & Margaret Mead Explain the Meaning of “Beat” in Rare 1950s Audio Clips*. <http://www.openculture.com/2013/10/jack-kerouac-allen-ginsberg-margaret-mead-explain-the-meaning-of-beat-in-rare-1950s-audio-clips.html>. Web. Consulted on the 17th April 2017.

⁵⁰ John Clellon Holmes. *Go*. New York: Carrol & Graf, 2002, p.161.

⁵¹ Allen Ginsberg. *Composed on the Tongue*. Mechanicsville: Grey Fox Press, 1980.

Ginsberg, in fact, composed poems following the length of his breath, creating new lines only once he ran out of breath. He used to stress the second and the fourth line, just as in jazz music, while Western tradition tended to stress the first and the third line.

The connection between the jazz world and the Beats went outside of the pages too and became a real friendship. In fact, Kerouac was passionate about the bop scene and became friend with lots of jazz composers, such as Charlie Parker.

It was inevitable for both writers and musicians, to keep their worlds separate. Still, their continuous sharing gave birth to complex and diverse literary works, such as the one we are analyzing. These important details on bebop jazz makes it easier to understand how culture is constantly influenced by different approaches coming from diverse areas of expertise.

2.2 *On the Road*⁵²

It is difficult to approach *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, written in 1957, because so much has been said already. People loved it, hated it, underestimated or overestimated it; they made it the symbol of an entire generation. No matter which reaction people had, no one ignored it.

Another reason that makes it difficult to start talking about this work is that the main characters themselves do not know when their journey begins or when it actually ends. They undertake different trips towards different directions: the first one goes from the East to the West, the second one from the West back to the East and the last one breaks the rules and change the path going South to Mexico.

This variety of landscapes and routes does not allow us to label the book as geographical or task-oriented. The whole story is filled with moments of reflection that seem to follow the rhythm of the jazz musicians of the 1940s. It is also difficult to pick just one main motif because there are several. We encounter spirituality, mythology

⁵² Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. The edition we chose refers to the first one published in 1957, and not the original manuscript, since the 1957 edition was the one known by the American 50s reader and thus the one that influenced that generation and the future ones.

and elements of modernist tradition combined with pre-existing postmodernism⁵³. Kerouac's work is considered an innovation because it merges different forms together creating a new one.

Some critics considered the novel just as a disappointing experience described in an enthusiastic prose⁵⁴. However, before lining up with any kind of criticism, it is important to understand that this novel was published in between the conservative novels of the 1950s and the next narrative experimentation of the 1960s.

The work is a thinly fictionalized autobiography that narrates Kerouac's road trips with his friend from New York Neal Cassady, who in the book impersonates Dean Moriarty, while the author embodies Sal Paradise. Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady went on different trips together: Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver and Mexico City are only some of their destinations. These journeys gave Kerouac/ Sal Paradise the necessary inspiration to start the book. It is believed that he wrote the entire work in three weeks on a single roll of paper that was 120 feet long. This is partially true and partially fictional because he spent his travelling years taking notes of what he experienced. The author was not very keen on revision, as he believed it would take away the truth of the moment, but still, we know that he thoroughly revised his work.

The book presents some postmodern features. First of all, minorities are re-considered and re-put somehow in the spotlight. This happens thanks to the protagonist's internalization of these minorities. In fact, Sal Paradise tries to embody racial diversity as an expression of identity and re-invents the average white American male representing America during that period of time. He personally expresses the desire to be racially marginalized, in order to express himself to the fullest without feeling that sense of disappointment and bitterness typical of the white American male.

He expresses this desire when he looks at Negroes or other minorities expressing themselves inside of their communities, such as jazz bars to mention one example. We can see this desire from this passage:

⁵³ Jill Lynn Talbot. *This Is Not An Exit: The Road Narrative in Contemporary American Literature and Film*. A dissertation in English. Texas: Texas Tech University, 1999, pp. 54-58

⁵⁴ Tony Hilfer. *American Fiction Since 1940*. New York: Longman, 1992.

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night... I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes.⁵⁵

All he wants is to travel the road and to get to see the world at the end of it, what he believes to be a society without any social restriction.

Eventually he finds disappointment. The end of the road – and the end of his hopes – is represented by California: “Everybody looked like a broken-down movie extra, a withered starlet; disenchanted stunt men, midget auto-racers, poignant California characters with their end-of-the-continent sadness, handsome, decadent, Casanova-ish men, puffy-eyed motel blondes, hustlers, pimps, whores, masseurs, bellhops--a lemon lot”⁵⁶.

California, the Promised Land he dreamt about, turns out to be a corrupted land like any other, so far away from the land of the pioneers he had in mind. As hard as it may seem after such a disappointment, not everything is lost. The world, the hope, the spark he is looking for exists, but he will find it in the most unusual places along the road. Different races, backgrounds, music, places and cultures represent this chunk of humanity he finds. These people are all “in the field” of life playing their parts. A common, invisible force unites them, which is the way they see life. Sal is so fascinated by them, that he eventually embodies these racial identities, as we mentioned previously.

This connection is built upon individual reality, which allows the self to create its own identity and to belong to a different community, which does not have to be the one related to its personal or social background. This is exactly what happens to Sal, who feels he belongs to different communities, very often the marginalized ones. The protagonist is easily able to pick a different identity because he is away from home;

⁵⁵ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p.170.

⁵⁶ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

hence in a way he is more inclined to lose his previous social identity in order to adapt it to the new context.

For example, when he is in Mexico he wishes to be Mexican, but this feeling disappears when he gets sick and needs to go back to the United States. This example highlights a big limitation of the main character: as bad as he wants to be part of those minorities, he cannot get to know their point of view from the inside. This is simply not possible; in fact, he remains confined into his white world.

Kerouac's interest in minorities is very important anyway because it builds the basis of the social protest by offering an interesting and unusual perspective on reality. Furthermore, his point of view is revolutionary if we consider the racial tensions happening when Kerouac was writing.

Additionally, he pays attention to American landscapes. According to him, America is a text and one of the ways he has to read it is by describing its natural beauty. We can read it in some passages such as: "Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgandy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries"⁵⁷. Another interesting description is relevant to understand his perception of the nature that surrounds him: "For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me"⁵⁸. Another one, very clear, is: "[...] but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing"⁵⁹.

Unfortunately, this perception of beauty does not help avoiding the emptiness he feels inside. Eventually he realizes that no matter for how long or how fast he travels from a destination to another, no location could ever offer a permanent escape from his sense of loss: "I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion"⁶⁰. The bitter conclusion

⁵⁷ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p.72.

⁵⁸ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 269.

⁵⁹ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 93.

⁶⁰ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p.113.

he makes is that there is no resolution to his personal struggle, only further sadness. As Kerouac writes: "There was no end to his loss, this thing would drag on forever"⁶¹.

It is interesting to notice how vague he is when it comes to what he feels. He calls it "thing", without specifying what it is made of. The reader assumes that the "thing" is made of loss, pain, dissatisfaction, but there is no explicit explanation in *On the Road*. However, there is a kind of healing power in his trip, represented by Dean Moriarty. He is the fuel of many adventures; he is the reason behind most of the things that happen in the book. Even if Sal Paradise never admits it fully, he lives in the shadow of Dean Moriarty, absorbing his courage and his impatience, his constant will to change and escape. Dean has something in common with characters from the picaresque tradition, because he comes and goes without telling anyone, he just makes his appearances in Sal's life destroying his previous balance and creating a new one⁶². It is Sal himself, who admits that it is because of his friend that his life on the road started: "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road"⁶³.

Dean embodies the restless traveler, a soul "wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road"⁶⁴. Society or monogamy cannot trap him because nothing that stands still or has rules is able to attract him for long. He is addicted to strong emotions, adrenaline, risk, women and everything that may possibly get him in trouble. He follows a "drop-out" philosophy⁶⁵, which Sal encourages, which is to run away from responsibilities, including his family.

Dean Moriarty is the perfect representation of the Beats. In fact, Howard Webb Jr. describes them as unable to believe in anything. This emptiness will push them to travel in search of a meaning⁶⁶. On one hand, we may conclude that at the end of the road, there is only disappointment, but on the other hand this experience is the reason why Kerouac reached his success. Sal/Jack Kerouac expressing his creativity in his work

⁶¹ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p.70.

⁶² Stuart Miller. *The Picaresque Novel*. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve U, 1967.

⁶³ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 230.

⁶⁵ Jill Lynn Talbot. *This Is Not An Exit: The Road Narrative in Contemporary American Literature and Film*. A dissertation in English. Texas: Texas Tech University, 1999.

⁶⁶ Howard W Webb Jr. "The Singular Worlds of Jack Kerouac". *Contemporary American Novelists*. Ed. by Harry T. Moore. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1964. 120-133.

by extrapolating the deep meaning of his quest represents the real end. As much as he can seem confused, he still has a positive attitude after all: "...we all must admit that everything is fine and there's no need in the world to worry, and in fact we should realize what it would mean to us to UNDERSTAND that we're not REALLY worried about ANYTHING"⁶⁷.

Jack/Sal and Neal/Dean struggle to find the sense of life, something that could give them a reason to live, a lost enthusiasm that could ease their inner fight, but even when they realize that nothing can save them they keep driving. As Kerouac writes "I didn't know where all this was leading; I didn't care"⁶⁸. Dean and Sal get to a point where the act of driving is more important than the destination or the purpose of it. They drive not to feel, think or to face their voids. Driving is definitely easier than stopping because they have no goal set, nothing to achieve therefore, nothing can really satisfy them or establish the end of the trip. There was no end since the beginning because everything was inconsistent.

However, there is still something that gives them hope. Dean is able to rejoice in people, he feels enthusiastic about other people's stories, his eyes shine when listening to some jazz or to beautiful women. As hopeless as he is, he can still find beauty in people.

The end of the book seems to suggest that there is no exit sign for the protagonists. Dean and Sal depart from each other and no emotion shines through; it seems there is no fulfillment but, as we suggested earlier, the fulfillment may be found in what happens after the end of the road. The end is not the end, it is just a departure, which keeps a dreamy tone: no matter what happened, Jack/Sal ends his book thinking about Dean Moriarty.

2.3 Women we find on the road

⁶⁷ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 121.

⁶⁸ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 124.

“I love, love, love women! I think women are wonderful! I love women”⁶⁹. This is what Dean screams to let the whole world know how much he loves women. It does not take long to realize that his personal love for women does not include respect.

If, on one hand, *On the Road* is considered as being some sort of pursuit of the American Dream for the white Caucasian male, on the other hand it has to be considered as the American Nightmare for women and other minorities, as Glen Ruitenbeek⁷⁰ points out. Since the beginning of the novel the role of the woman is defined as a secondary figure. Women are objectified while white men can live a hedonistic and bohemian lifestyle. Sexual pleasure is an important purpose of the trip and it is pursued without really thinking about the consequences on women's lives.

Since the beginning, Marylou has to satisfy Dean. He orders her to prepare some coffee assuming that her place is in the kitchen making coffee and sweeping the floor: “Dean got up nervously, paced around, thinking, and decided the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor. “In other words we've got to get on the ball, darling, what I'm saying, otherwise it'll be fluctuating and lack of true knowledge or crystallization of our plans.”⁷¹”.

What he desires is the perpetuation of inequality between men and women so he can have the time of his life while his wife takes care of the house and the family. Consequently, marriage is not a holy institution and Dean goes on cheating on his wife, conquering hearts and cheating on new girls too.

Thus, he cheats on his wife with a woman named Camille, he marries her and then abandons her for a new girl, Inez. He will have a child from her, but this will not prevent him to get back to Camille and have two children with her. These relationships are the mirror of an existential dissatisfaction rooted to the core of his life. He gets sick of routine, children, responsibilities, everything that traps him in a role and eventually runs away from everything with no regrets.

⁶⁹ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Glen Ruitenbeek. *The American Nightmare in Jack Kerouac's On the Road*. Academia.edu. Web. Consulted on the 14th April 2017.

⁷¹ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 28.

“With one illegitimate child in the West somewhere, Dean had four little ones and not a cent, and was all trouble and ecstasy and speed as ever”⁷². It is evident that nothing really affects him and it is easy to assume that this is also possible because the mothers of these children are taking care of them. Sal does not act like Dean, but his marriage had failed too. Both characters have a “phallogentric” view of life where the phallus represents the patriarchal character, the male power overcoming the female one. It is a cultural construct and not a biological given and it permeates every page of Kerouac’s book.

In addition, the way minorities are treated was largely criticized. If the book gives a voice to this part of the population, but assumes that they are not as important as the white Caucasian part of people. There is an episode in the book when Sal meets Terry, a beautiful Mexican girl. After they slept together, she thinks he is involved with prostitute traffic. Sal is deeply offended by her implication as we can read: “I realized that I was pleading with a dumb little Mexican wench”⁷³.

If she were from his community, maybe he would have not felt the need to use the term “Mexican” to insult her. He highlights her ethnicity as a synonymous of stupidity. He let the word slip away when he is frustrated and angry, while he pays extra attention to his behavior and his words when he is in control of his emotions. There is another interesting episode, which feeds our doubts about his vision on minorities. He was working with Terry as a cotton picker surrounded by Mexicans. He was as poor as they were and bounded immensely with the whole community by sharing the same destiny and the same efforts. He also refers to the workers as “us Mexicans”, but the situation radically changes when he receives money from his aunt. He is not in need anymore and leaves the community, abandons Terry and her family to their destiny and goes back to New York. His attitude confirms our impressions on him and Dean: they are interested in minorities, in African Americans playing jazz in the clubs, they want to listen to their stories, dreaming with them by imagining a different life, but eventually they get back to reality and to their privileges, albeit Dean’s are different from Sal’s. They recognize other communities; value them for a

⁷² Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 247.

⁷³ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 85.

small amount of time but that is not enough to change society, events or to help anyone.

Once again, the void that both characters feel cannot be completed by someone else's story or by women. Their journey looks like the medieval search for the Holy Grail. They keep looking for alternative spiritual values and a lost personal identity that maybe never existed in the first place. This is why they experience disappointment at all levels. Everything they touch seems to be ruined. Nevertheless, the road was perhaps profitable at least for Kerouac. In the end, he gets to write his novel (one that is after all the result of his travel experiences), and thus some sort of fulfillment was achieved.

2.4 *Travels with Charley: in Search of America*⁷⁴

This book is considered as non-fiction, being a travelogue of the trip that the writer started in 1960 looking for the real America. It represents a re-interpretation of the picaresque narrative and a transformation of that literary form. Steinbeck's narrative differs from Kerouac's or the ones from the New Journalism, since his work focuses more on the land itself and the way it changed.

The writer did not travel to protest against politics or economy. He started his quest motivated by a desire to understand what led the country to its current situation (during the 1960s) while experiencing a new personal freedom. He does not travel according to the urges and the rush of a certain time, because he plans in advance what will be needed for his journey⁷⁵.

The second reason why he wanted to start the journey – other than freedom – was to get closer to his land and his people in order to tell its story from the inside. He was sick of basing his contact with the country only on newspapers and news on the radio.

⁷⁴ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000. From now on, all quotations will be from this edition.

⁷⁵ Raluca Tanasescu. *Language, Literature and Cultural Studies*. Vol. V, No 1. Bucharest: Military Technical Academy Publishing House, 2012, p. 47.

His work became an inspiration for subsequent non-fiction books, as it happened somewhat with *On the Road*, which created a context for future fictional works.

John Steinbeck started this journey with his loyal truck Rocinante, named after Don Quixote's horse. The truck was previously prepared with all of the necessary utensils to hunt and fish. The author believed that it was much easier to justify a solo trip by using the hunting excuse, than to explain the urge to travel and discover the land he had been writing about for twenty-five years. He started the journey as a man and an artist; hence, what he wrote is the reflection of both perspectives. The whole journey is determined by absolute anonymity, in order to avoid or at least limit distractions. His only companion is Charley, a French poodle who observes almost as much as his owner does. The purpose of the trip is not only to find his "lost" America, but also to combine this purpose with the uniqueness of every journey. As Jill Lynn Talbot explains: "Steinbeck's work serves as the foundation for the theory of internal reality, a paradigm for examining the individual's perception of the journey in all of the road narratives"⁷⁶.

According to this theory, every perception is not only unique, but it changes according to the context and the varying perceptions that the individual experiences on the road. Therefore, the same place can be felt differently during different times of the day, under different lights, different people and different memories. Steinbeck claims that his representation of the macrocosm (in this case part of the United States of America) also includes the representation of his microcosm, which means his personality and his beliefs: "[...] what I found was closely intermeshed with how I felt at the moment [...] This monster of a land, this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of microcosm in me"⁷⁷.

Considering all of these factors, the journey does not end when the protagonist goes home. It continues in time and space, in his changing microcosm and keeps adjusting the surrounding macrocosm accordingly.

⁷⁶ Jill Lynn Talbot. *This Is Not An Exit: The Road Narrative in Contemporary American Literature and Film*. A dissertation in English. Texas: Texas Tech University, 1999, p. 5.

⁷⁷ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 159.

The choice of the modality of the trip is not casual as well. The writer was afraid of feeling dependent from someone else as this was already happening due to his health issues. His family had already been concerned about this trip for a while; therefore, he wanted to prove them that he did not need any help.⁷⁸ The book shows a progression of changes happening both on a personal and on a national level. Thus, the writer highlights some changes that might have some catastrophic consequences. First, the industrial progress is depicted as a bad change because it causes a huge loss of natural land in favor of industrial advancements. Where the majority of people feel enthusiastic about the future and the comfort that will bring, Steinbeck fears its consequences on an environmental level. As he writes:

I wonder why progress looks so much like destruction”⁷⁹, or: “American cities are like badger holes, ringed with trash--all of them--surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered in rubbish. Everything we use comes in boxes, cartons, bins, the so-called packaging we love so much. The mountain of things we throw away are much greater than the things we use.”⁸⁰

A special mention goes to the place of his childhood and adolescence, California. He notices the changes, but, at the same time, he feels distant from it because he did not change with it. In addition, his friends, who are still there, keep thinking about their youth years and people who were part of them, without realizing that there is nothing left of that past: “The place of my origin had changed, and having gone away I had not changed with it. In my memory it stood as it once did and its outward appearance confused and angered me [...]. You can’t go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory”⁸¹. The gap between present and past keeps growing until they will be too far from each other. In order to understand this point to the fullest, it is important to understand the writer’s background. The place where he comes from, Salinas, in California, was strongly influenced by Western culture but at the same time it saw the rising of the bohemian

⁷⁸ Jill Lynn Talbot. *This Is Not An Exit: The Road Narrative in Contemporary American Literature and Film*. A dissertation in English. Texas: Texas Tech University, 1999, pp. 24-31

⁷⁹ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*.. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p.181.

⁸⁰ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p.26.

⁸¹ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p.156.

writer class in *Big Sur*⁸². He is not an outsider in American society and does not embody the anti-hero. We know he was born in a middle-class family and now has a loving wife, a house, a boat and a comforting life. For these reasons, he distances himself from the Beats. Also his truck, *Rocinante*, does not have any graffiti or signs that may catch any kind of attention.

The structure of the book reminds the picaresque tradition: there is a person who leaves for a journey, in this case a writer in his mid-fifties and not a young hero as in the picaresque novels, and faces several difficulties – such as flat tires, poor conditions – in order to reach his goal⁸³. His work is unique because he combines the narrative of the highway with the traditional picaresque genre. The writer adopts the position of the spectator in his journey to observe as much as he can while driving. This is how he sadly remarks the loss of American accents in everyday speech. He nostalgically remembers when one could understand the origins of his interlocutor just by the way he was speaking. There was something in the intonation, the way words were pronounced, even the way the mouth was opened, that made it possible to link that person to a specific area in the States. He finds it only in Montana: “Here for the first time I heard a definite regional accent unaffected by TV-ese, a slow-paced warm speech”⁸⁴. For Steinbeck these changes do not look like progress, they look more like destruction. He also makes a point about the development of mobile houses that could be re-assembled and moved somewhere else. He sees this change as a lack of permanence and roots. People did not feel attached to their roots anymore; they develop the necessity to go wherever there is something to do. In a way, they just follow the progress. He points out that: “the fact that the homes can be moved does not mean that they move”⁸⁵ in fact “sometimes their owners stay for years in one place, plant gardens, build little walls on cinder blocks, put out awnings and garden furniture. It is a whole way of life that is new to me.”⁸⁶

⁸² Raluca Tanasescu. *Language, Literature and Cultural Studies*. Vol. V, No 1. Bucharest: Military Technical Academy Publishing House, 2012, p. 52.

⁸³ Raluca Tanasescu. *Language, Literature and Cultural Studies*. Vol. V, No 1. Bucharest: Military Technical Academy Publishing House, 2012, p. 53.

⁸⁴ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 121.

⁸⁵ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 96.

⁸⁶ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 96.

Also in terms of racial tolerance he notices how America is going backwards, meaning that the so-called process that is invading everyday life on a practical level, is not involving American consciences too. His personal interpretations make this travelogue a book about human nature, which helps us discovering more about his personality and the one of the people he meets during the journey. As he writes:

Thus it remains that I am basically unfitted to take sides in the racial conflict. I must admit that cruelty and force exerted against weakness turn me sick with rage, but this would be equally true in the treatment of any weak by any strong. Beyond my failings as a racist, I knew I was not wanted in the South. When people are engaged in something they are not proud of, they do not welcome witnesses. In fact, they come to believe the witness causes the trouble⁸⁷.

The book motivated very different reactions. It was judged as a poorly written guide of the United States, while others appreciated his effort to overcome regionalism and to look for a national identity able to include every citizen. Another interpretation stressed on the idea of Americans as a new, restless breed, regardless of its ethnicities.

The press considered the book as one of the best books of Steinbeck's production. On the other hand, the academic community was not pleased with his work and considered it as a decline of his career. Some readers found too many American stereotypes and clichés represented in the book⁸⁸.

On the other hand, as readers, we should not forget that these strong reactions were also caused by the fact that it was the first time that a writer had the courage to claim something very powerful: America was destroying itself from within. This statement, which may seem to strong, mainly refers to the environmental criticism against the plastic waste and industrialization in general, as we can see when he writes that "chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea"⁸⁹.

⁸⁷ John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley*. London: Penguin Classics, Ed. 2000, p. 187.

⁸⁸ Charles McGrath. A Reality Check for Steinbeck and Charley.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/books/steinbecks-travels-with-charley-gets-a-fact-checking.html>.
Web. Consulted on the 18th April 2017.

⁸⁹ John Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley: in Search of America*. With an Introduction by Jay Parini. New York: Penguin, 1997, p.26.

Readers and critics were not yet sensitive to these topics, which may explain part of the poor reception of the work. They were not ready to understand the future danger; therefore, they underestimated what the writer had to say about it. Whatever the critique might have thought about his work, it is clear that the author is able to provide both a subjective and an objective point of view on the changes occurring in the country during that time.

On the other hand, we cannot avoid mentioning the great controversy about the truthfulness of the travelogue. Even if the writer claims that everything he wrote happened for real, we now know that this is not entirely true. There were later found many discrepancies between the actual road trip and what he describes in his book. Bill Steigerwald, a former journalist for *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* or Jay Parini are just some of the names who thought that the book was mainly fiction⁹⁰. His travelogue was mostly fiction. There was never an official declaration about the nature of the work, but the Penguin Group admitted that it should not be considered entirely as a non-fiction. Therefore, it would be a mistake to take this travelogue too literally. As a novelist Steinbeck was always re-elaborating, changing the sequence of events or just inventing dialogues in order to improve his story⁹¹, as we can see by the conversations he has with strangers, which seem almost romantic or at least full of interesting material most of the times. For example, when the author rents a room in a hotel and manages to reconstruct the life story of the man who was there previously just by looking at some details, or the conversations he has with the waitresses in the bars he visits:

The room had not been touched since its former occupant had left. I sank into a comfortable chair to pull off my boots and even got one of them off before I began to notice things and then more things and more. In a surprisingly short time I forgot the bath and the sleep and found myself deeply involved with Lonesome Harry. An animal resting or passing by leaves crushed grass, footprints, and perhaps droppings, but a human occupying a room for one night prints his character, his biography, his recent history, and sometimes his future plans and hopes. I further believe that personality seeps into walls and is slowly released [...] As I sat in this unmade room,

⁹⁰ Bill Steigerwald. The Truth About 'Travels With Charley'. truthaboutcharley.com. February 17, 2017. Web. Consulted on 25th February 2017.

⁹¹ Bill Steigerwald. The Truth About 'Travels With Charley'. truthaboutcharley.com. February 17, 2017. Web. Consulted on 25th February 2017.

Lonesome Harry began to take shape and dimension. I could feel that recently departed guest in the bits and pieces of himself he had left behind. Of course Charley, even with his imperfect nose, would have known more. But Charley was in a kennel preparing to be clipped. Even so, Harry is as real to me as anyone I ever met, and more real than many. He is not unique, in fact is a member of a fairly large group. Therefore he becomes of interest in any investigation of America. Before I begin to patch him together, lest a number of men grow nervous, let me declare that his name is not Harry. He lives in Westport, Connecticut. This information comes from the laundry strips from several shirts. A man usually lives where he has his shirts laundered. I only suspect that he commutes to work in New York. His trip to Chicago was primarily a business trip with some traditional pleasures thrown in. I know his name because he signed it a number of times on hotel stationery, each signature with a slightly different slant. This seems to indicate that he is not entirely sure of himself in the business world, but there were other signs of that⁹².

The role of Charley in the book is relevant too. The author emphasizes its presence, turning the character into a human companion. This choice can be a result of the theory of internal reality, which means that the role Charley played in the journey is totally up to the writer, who is describing his personal impressions.

An interesting input for further investigation would be the application of the theory of internal reality to Charley, so we could see how humans – in this case Americans – appear to a dog. For now, we are going to limit our analysis on the road only to human beings. Controversies apart, Steinbeck's book uses the road and this is what matters. The road is shown to enable the writer to paint/write about what he thinks he has to show. The road helps him getting closer to his country and to Americans. The road represents his way to feel independent and teaches him that it is impossible to control it. As he writes: "A journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it".⁹³

2.5 Rules of the Road

⁹² John Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley: in Search of America*. With an Introduction by Jay Parini. New York: Penguin, 1997, p.90.

⁹³ John Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley: in Search of America*. With an Introduction by Jay Parini. New York: Penguin, 1997, p. 4.

We can notice a clear change of time, scenario and characters for this work compared to the previous ones we discussed. The writer is a woman; hence, her point of view may encourage different reactions in the reader. Her work did not make history as *On the Road*, it was not the symbol of a generation, its prose is not particularly poetic or rough and all of the main characters are women.

The protagonist – Jenna Boller – is a young, inexperienced girl working as a clerk for a big shoe brand, Gladstone's Shoes. She is passionate, loyal and smart. We can already spot the first differences between Jenna and Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty or John Steinbeck: she is inexperienced, she knows nothing about life and she is not looking for any escape. There is no existential drama apart from a difficult relationship with her dad, whose name is never mentioned. Her life is surrounded by women; she lives with her mother and her sister Faith and has a female best friend, Opal Kincaid. She is very close to her grandmother, who suffers from Alzheimer but keeps influencing her life. As natural as it can be in this context, women have shaped the idea she has of life. We do not know the names of the protagonist's mother or grandmother, they are just referred to as "mom" and "grandma" and are depicted as strong women: "I thought about how Mom had crawled out from such a painful marriage, how she'd pushed herself to look at the things she needed to change"⁹⁴.

The co-protagonist of this novel, the fuel of the story, is the old Madeline Gladstone, the owner of the shoe company, who will ask Jenna to cross the country with her while driving her car. Madeline, this old, inscrutable lady, is not Dean Moriarty or maybe we should compare her to Sal Paradise, as she seats on the passenger seat. She is a self-made woman; she had a happy marriage and does not want to escape from society or find her own country, as Steinbeck did. She has to undertake this journey only for business reasons. Jenna and Madeline could not be more different from each other, they belong to different generations and have different needs, but both of them want to feel independent. The girl accepts to drive across the country because she needs the money, as she aims to be independent and to feel as an adult. The old lady needs her because she is unable to drive, yet she does not want to ask her son, Elden. Therefore, Jenna becomes her way to be independent.

⁹⁴ Joan Bauer. *Rules of the Road*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005, p. 137.

The men of their lives do not have a good influence on them: Jenna's father is an alcoholic, the less she is with him the better she feels. Madeline's son is a social climber. He is blinded by money and does not value his family's teachings such as loyalty, hard work and honesty.

The two women need a change in their lives, even if they do not know it yet when they start travelling together. One has the wisdom and the other has light heartedness, creativity and the strength typical of her age. They will enrich and empower each other by maturing together in different ways.

We cannot say the same of Sal and Dean, as they share troubles, infatuations, alcohol and miles together, but the moments they open themselves to each other are very rare and ephemeral, but we find an analogy between the pair Jenna/Madeline and Steinbeck, who talks to his poodle Charley as if he was a human being.

Written by a woman, this book creates a world of women which does not exclude men. It is a story of loss, forgiveness, strength, growth and reconciliation.

The very beginning of the book makes the reader think about an unusual reality:

It seemed to me that the people who made the rules of the road had figured out everything that would help a person drive safely right down to having a sign that tells you you're passing through a place where deer cross. Somebody should stick up some signs on the highway of life. CAUTION: JERKS CROSSING. Blinking yellow lights when you're about to do something stupid. Stop signs in front of people who could hurt you. Green lights shining when you're doing the right thing. It would make the whole experience easier.⁹⁵

Since the beginning, two concepts are clear: first, life resembles a highway, so the whole trip represents our journey in this life. Second, the main danger are "jerks". Thus, we can discern the first implicit link between jerks and men.

It is interesting to deepen the metaphor of the road as a representation of life and as a teaching tool: "Now I see that it isn't the problems along the way that make us or break us. It's how we learn to stand and face them that makes the difference"⁹⁶. If – somehow – we recognize this metaphor is also present in the previous works

⁹⁵ Joan Bauer. *Rules of the Road*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005, p.1.

⁹⁶ Joan Bauer. *Rules of the Road*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005, p.146.

discussed, on the other hand we have to admit that it does not look very realistic. *On the Road* the highway leads them nowhere. There is no personal growth for the characters: the reader follows their adventures, he experiences their fears, their restlessness but there is no sense of evolution. In fact, Sal and Dean do not evolve as human beings. They become more aware of their surroundings, they have to chance to spend more time with the so-called minorities, they experience different jobs in order to afford their daily needs, they fall in love quickly, they leave their loves even faster, but they do not come to any meaningful conclusion, at least as far as it concerns the story. No one overcomes his fears; no one escapes from all of the things they were struggling with before leaving their houses. The writer, Kerouac, finds in the road his inspiration to write, which was what he was looking for when he started the journey: “[...] I was a writer and needed new experiences [...]”⁹⁷.

Steinbeck’s case is different, since he mostly wanted to know his country again and he partially succeeds in it. His mission does not have a beginning or an end; it all depends on the way he feels and the way he wants to end the journey. There is no other person he needs to prove wrong, as it happens in *Rules of the Road*.

In this book, the older character Madeline has a mission: she wants to stop her son from selling her company. As per Jenna, she does not start the journey with any specific goal to achieve, but she will change her mind during the journey. This is not the typical picaresque novel, since there is no wandering but a specific path to be followed. This story reminds more the *Bildungsroman*, where the protagonist finds his own identity and matures as a person. In fact, in these novels as in this one by Bauer, there is a psychological change and a visible growth for Jenna. Unexpectedly, also Madeline learns how to change and how to adapt her personality to new events. She was scared of depending on someone. She was used to her freedom and grew up as a brilliant, opinionated woman. Her temper changes when she slowly starts to trust Jenna and she lets her taking care of her. This is a further sign of maturity and the testimony that wisdom wins over pride. The story celebrates what are viewed as important values, such as marriage, as we can see from the long-lasting relationship Madeline had with her husband until the day he died. Jenna’s mum believes in

⁹⁷ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 2000, p. 9.

marriage too, this is why she tried to overcome difficulties when her husband became an alcoholic. These examples create a context of monogamy and sets marriage as a positive, comforting bond, not something to escape from.

Alcohol, on the other hand, is condemned. There is no explicit condemnation of it, but we can easily catch it from the devastating effects that alcohol has on Jenna's father. He becomes violent, unrecognizable and neglects his family and his job because of his addiction. His behavior pushes Jenna and her sister away from him causing the protagonist to feel a great sense of responsibility and pain all the time she thinks about her father. In fact, she feels she has to take care of her father and swallows her pain and her disappointment in order to help him. By the end of the story, she will eventually realize that she simply cannot take the weight of her father's bad choices on her shoulders. As painful as it may seem, this necessary process will bring her to healing and acceptance: "You know the thing about hope, how it sneaks up behind you when you're sure everything's in the toilet, and starts whispering to you that maybe, just maybe, things could turn around"⁹⁸. These mixed feelings underline another important value in this story, which is family. Even when it is torn apart, even if parents are no longer together and it seems that life gets harder, the female characters of Jenna's family try their best to stay united and to support each other.

We have seen how positive is the influence of female characters in this story, but we also have to look at male characters. The main ones, Jenna's father (whose name is not mentioned) and Madeline's son, Elden, represent everything that may be considered wrong: alcohol, disrespect, lies, arrogance, cheating, and selfishness. It is hard to say for sure if this was the writer's purpose, but we cannot deny that women embody the ultimate strength and every positive feature.

Another interesting element worth to focus on is the importance of shoes. If in *On the Road* jazz music creates the atmosphere and catches the reader's attention – or maybe we should say his ears – in this book shoes are the foundation of the story. Jenna works in a shoe company, Madeline spent all her life picking the right materials to manufacture the best shoes in the States. They become their reality and both women learn all about this world, they understand about colors, numbers, shape,

⁹⁸ Joan Bauer. *Rules of the Road*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005, p. 152.

comfort. As funny and futile as it may seem this leads to one question: why shoes, an object, are so important for this story?

One possible interpretation could be that the story is contemporary; we live in a society where the beauty cult is celebrated every day. We make an effort to look pretty, to have elegant clothes, to look happy from the outside. Shoes may be just a way to express the disease of this society who needs to spend money on shoes and clothes to affirm its status quo. But, both main characters do not seem shallow or particularly interested on their looks. The choice of shoes may be a sign of how priorities change in time meaning that in our contemporary society stylistic choices seem to be more important than in the past.

Talking about changes, the conclusion of the story differs from the one of the previous works we discussed. We have a happy ending, but without sugar coated details. Jenna needs to experience pain and face her anger before coming to forgiveness and, in a way, let her father go. She takes her life back and does not let her one of the people she loves the most jeopardize her life. She owns some shares in the shoe company and stands up for herself on the road to independency.

Madeline has her happy ending too. Although retired, she manages to preserve her business from social climbers. She learns to be loved by a sixteen-year-old girl and manages to teach her some important life lessons. Their relationship changes both of them, despite their age gap their journey concludes in the most satisfying way. They come home with a full heart, a good amount of nostalgia but also impatient to see their families again. This is one of the biggest differences between Bauer and Kerouac: her characters come back because they want to, because they feel they belong somewhere, which is what happens to Steinbeck too. He decided to go back when he felt it was the right moment for him as the protagonist of *Rules of the Road* did.

It is difficult to say if one conclusion is better than the other ones. All of them are fair for their stories; they tell different stories, describe different kind of restlessness, different pains and several ways to escape from it. These stories were created in different historical, cultural and social contexts, thus making it difficult to criticize or to imagine Sal and Dean coming home as Jenna did.

It is the proof that the concept of Good and Bad – in literature as in reality – is constantly blurred and it depends on so many different, contradictory facts. The two entities keep crossing each other's path and in real life we constantly need to adjust to both impulses, as the characters did in their stories.

Chapter 3.

“The struggles we endure today will be the ‘good old days’ we laugh about tomorrow.”

— A. Lauritsen, *100 Days Drive: The Great North American Road Trip* (2016)

At this point of the analysis, the attention focuses on road movies, their Hollywood story, their success and the ones that made history.

As David Laderman explains in his work⁹⁹, road movies have a common denominator, which is rebellion. This is not new, as we already looked into it through literature; people are sick of the constraints of society and want to get free. This process is called defamiliarization, which implies a change from what is considered familiar into the unknown. Movies represent a way to show this process and to celebrate this kind of subversion.

The road, among other things, represents a means to become independent and to take control over our destiny. Cinema also wants to reproduce this hope and depicts the road as the ultimate desire for whoever needs freedom. On the other hand, it also represents it as a source of anxiety. As every encounter with the unknown occurs, some doubts are very likely: will the protagonists survive the road? Will they be disappointed?

The act of driving may be seen as a cultural challenge and the need for a change. The person who takes the journey wants to challenge the culture of his society, everything he belonged to and looks for new answers on the road. The road movie aims to represent these cultural limits by using the American fascination for

⁹⁹ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

the road and translating it into images. One of the way to overcome these boundaries is through excesses. They can be emotional or physical, but most of the time they represent the means to understand these limitations. Moreover, cinema wants to convey the idea of travel for travel's sake, which means the urge to travel for the trip itself, no matter the destination.

During the classical Hollywood era (from 1917 to the early 1960s), several movies presented road elements, but it was only during the 1960s that the road movies became a genre through the influence of the New American cinema. The elements of the genre were not innovative because cars and highways had always played more or less important roles in the history of cinema. They represented mobility from rural to urban lifestyles and then from urban to suburban communities.

If we go back to the 1920s we can see that both cinema and car industries decided to produce goods for the masses, supporting their homogenization. It is very important to mention this piece of information because it leads us to an important reflection: these products were the image of a changing society based on a new culture of technologies. As Hey explains:

As consumer objects, cars and films seemed to evolve hand in hand, providing mobility (literally, or in the form of "escapist" narrative entertainment) for Americans in transition, first from rural to urban, then from urban to suburban lifestyles. Both cars and movies promised to express the idealized uniqueness of the individual consumer; it is therefore perhaps no coincidence that both industries became, at approximately the same time (late 1920s), mass production, assembly-line institutions, more or less homogenizing their respective commodities¹⁰⁰.

Cars represented one of the ways to look at the world: constantly going somewhere, looking at life through glasses and protected by something created by us. It is impossible to tell for sure if this can be considered one of the reasons why cars became the stars of the movies, but we know for sure that cars had always played a part in the movie making process. Actually, they were used to film traveling shots and

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth Hey. "Cars and Films in American Culture, 1929–1959." In *The Automobile and American Culture*, edited by David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, 193–205. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.

to facilitate the filming of other scenes. However, there is no clear explanation on how the car raised from there to the spotlight.

They were used to help people or to terrorize them. In the first case, they were a tool to escape from difficult situations, they represented salvation; in the second scenario they were used by gangsters to have their revenges and to scatter fear and violence. The road movie genre developed both of these trends.

In some cases, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) the cinematic act of driving is filled with a politically rebellious spirit¹⁰¹. This kind of spirit fueled the road movie genre and helped its flourishing.

Nowadays this genre is rising again. This phenomenon may be a consequence of our anxious, restless society who reproduces its fears on the big screen. In fact, to understand any phenomenon to the fullest, it is important to consider the cultural and historical context. Going back to the 1960s, political revolts were everywhere, as we know from Paris contestations and street revolts, which took place particularly during 1968. People were hoping for a global industrial society where everyone could equally participate. These last hopes came from Romanticism and, as history taught us, represented a utopia.

These modernist and romantic inputs mentioned above are combined in the road movie genre where a strong need of rebellion mixes all the time with social criticism on the screen. The spirit of these movies played an important role to its success, but the elements that really made the difference were the iconographic power of cars and their style. As Corrigan states “cars and motorcycles represent a mechanized extension of the body, through which that body could move farther and faster than ever before and quite literally evade the trajectory of classic narrative”¹⁰². This means that vehicles are not considered only as means of transportation, but represent a mechanized extension of the bodies of the characters. The engine of the car becomes the fuel of the movie too and the act of driving becomes essential. One may argue that the act of driving includes also other vehicles, such as busses,

¹⁰¹ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.7.

¹⁰² Timothy Corrigan. *A Cinema without Walls*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994, pp. 144-146.

motorcycles or bicycles. They all played some roles in the history of cinema, but did not become as iconic as cars and motorcycles due to the fact that cars offered individuality and independence, which is the most important condition for freedom. Moreover, the possibilities that the car offers inside its space are different from the other vehicles. We can fairly say that road movies are about driving and driving means hitting the road. Therefore, also the passengers are protagonists, they move on highways and roads and they experience the road through or next to cars, even if they do not drive them directly.

The other undisputed protagonist of this genre is the highway. Firstly, because it represents freedom and embodies the values shown on screen; secondly, because it is the only way to experience the so-called defamiliarization that we mentioned earlier. For this reason, road movies are different from racing films, even if both of them are car-oriented¹⁰³. Landscapes are appealing too, but they do not represent the element of wilderness. In fact, motels, diners and gas stations convey this element. These venues are usually very important for the development of the story because they offer a chance to meet someone new with whom the protagonist can have interactions that may have consequences.

The twists and the plot are important, but a good movie also relies on the techniques used to produce it too. The most used techniques are the tracking shot and the traveling shot. The first one is more traditional, while the second one provides a very different experience, as it is much faster thanks to the car usage. These effects are very important because they give different shades of thrill to the movie and they help highlighting the concept of travel for travel's sake. Framings are important too. Lots of them include the front or the side windshields or the mirrors in order to focus the attention on the car as an independent environment. This helps the spectator to focus on what is happening inside of the vehicle, avoiding distractions by the nature outside.

The projection of spaces is very important because it helps balancing the importance of the internal and external environment. As Michael Atkinson puts it:

¹⁰³ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.14.

Few cultural developments outside the first atomic bomb test at Los Alamos have had such a decisive impact on movies. The structure of the car, designed both to conform to our bodies' shortcomings and powerfully extend them, has become how we regard the world (through the screen-like, Panavision-shaped lens of the windscreen and, like a miniature movie within a movie, the rear view mirror¹⁰⁴.

Soundtrack is another relevant element. During the late 1960s with the advent of rock and popular music, this kind of songs were playing very often on the radio while the protagonists of the movie were enjoying the drive. This particular rhythm created an immediate association between this music and these movies. The thrill of driving was magnified by the feelings produced by music, but the experience on screen was also influenced by the soundtrack of the movie itself, which is the song picked by the director to accompany the entire movie and not just for the driving scenes¹⁰⁵. They used it to enhance the mood on screen and to push reactions from the public.

Music plays an important role in the production of a movie, but characters always play the first and main role. Thus, we encounter different kind of heroes on the road. We may find troubled individuals who live the journey as a challenge to achieve their purposes or solitary people who embrace the road as a way of experiencing life. They can travel by themselves, in small groups or in couples. Couples behind the wheels are included in the movies we will discuss later on. They can be a romantic couple or just friends and are very common in Hollywood. The use of a couple makes everything easier because they let the conversation flow or they may generate conflicts, so the spectator is always entertained.

Road movies engage all kind of heroes. As Lopez says talking about the people willing to travel, "[they] seek the freedom of the road as a refuge from a narrowing past, or to search for its exhilarating, liberating strength"¹⁰⁶. This quote puts into perspective and allows the spectator to value the road as one of the characters: not just as a means to escape or to reach a destination, but almost as a real path of salvation.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Atkinson. "Crossing The Frontiers." *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 1 (January 1994), p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.16.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Lopez. *Films by Genre*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1993, p. 257.

This cinematographic genre is different from the others when it comes to time units. Usually it does not follow the Aristotelian time units, which include a beginning, a middle part and an end, but it mixes different time references together depending on the purpose of the movie. It may look a bit confusing at the beginning but at the same time, it conveys the message that on the road everything is possible, even time melts together past memories, future hopes and the current situation.

On the other hand, human characters may not be the absolute protagonists of the movie. Most of the time, we watch the progressive bonding between cars and their owners. Cars or bikes become a tool to express anger, frustration or desire. In other words, they represent real “buddies” and become the real stars in scenes with several close-ups. On screen relationships with cars have a double purpose. The first one is to criticize society for the way men rely on technology and become more and more dependent from it; the second goal is to emphasize the benefits of this winning combination of human intellect with machinery¹⁰⁷.

This desire may show how American society wants to go back to pastoralism, which has been essential and still is to a certain extent for society and literature. To understand this phenomenon, we need to go back to its roots. Pastoralism in literature is defined as: “class of literature that presents the society of shepherds as free from the complexity and corruption of city life. Many of the idylls written in its name are far remote from the realities of any life, rustic or urban”¹⁰⁸. Firstly, there is a difference between European pastoralism and the American one. In European tradition, pastoral literature was very popular because it could rely on famous ancestors such as Theocritus and Virgil, who became particularly influential during the eighteenth century. During the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, famous American authors felt inspired by this literary tendency and wanted to reproduce it¹⁰⁹. The issue was that American literature and society could not relate to a similar reality because they had never experienced something like that in social and ecological terms. In fact, socially

¹⁰⁷ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, pp.17-20.

¹⁰⁸ Pastoral Literature. <https://www.britannica.com/art/pastoral-literature>. Web. Consulted on the 23rd of April 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Gordon M. Sayre. *The Oxymoron of American Pastoralis*. muse.jhu.edu. Web. Consulted on the 28th of April 2017.

speaking there was no difference between shepherds and landowners in America as there was in Europe. Therefore, Leo Marx adapted this concept of pastoral to explain the primitive and agrarian stage in American history in opposition to the technological era. From his point of view pastoralism is a desire to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek a simpler way of living, which is closer to nature, as he argues in his work *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).

Pastoralism represents the goal and the motivation of some of the road trips we see on the big screen and it evolves in the image of the car in the garden. The car stands for every technology used in our society and the garden recalls a lost sense of nature. This combination is picture-perfect for the cinema and advertises the automobile as the perfect tool to fulfill that old pastoral longing. Industrialization and Romanticism go along for the first time in this Hollywood reality.

It is important to expand our analysis to the context that made all of this possible. Road movies emerge in a decade of social protests during the proliferation of alternative lifestyles. As we briefly discussed earlier, the 1960s are also defined as the peak of drug culture, which led to several kinds of transgressions. The majority of young generations grew up with a desire of rebellion, which was somehow embodied by road movies. Some of the most appealing features of this genre are high speed and the trip itself. High speed is usually important when the protagonist is chased or needs to chase someone. It is also used to catch the audience's attention and to constantly shift from life to death.

As in the literary genre, in movies the trip is also considered a quest, even if the way it is represented changes. An important element that makes the difference between books and movies is the influence of rock music on this genre. In fact, the values that this music wanted to convey were the same that the young rebel generation of the 1960s was looking for. Rock music had a powerful impact on society. It started to be popular at the beginning of the 1950s and it was soon used for advertisements and movies. Rock and roll lifestyle is mainly connected to sex and drugs, which is not very far from what we (also) find in *On the Road*.

Some road movies show the adventures of some rock musicians on tour with their bands. The most powerful feeling instilled by these movies is a general

disenchantment, which produces the desire of disintegrating the idea of home or what is left of it. As we already mentioned for the literary world, in most of the cases this disenchantment turns into bitterness until the hero loses his hopes. The genre appeals to the dark side of people who are secretly looking for rebellion. As such, the core of the road movies is rebellion against traditional social norms, but at the same time, the desire of rebellion takes place inside conservative cultural codes. This perpetual fight between these two inputs, rebellion and conformity, redefines both of these entities.

The rebellious impulse may have two different narrative pretexts: the quest road movie and the outlaw road movie. The quest road movie wants to emphasize the importance of roaming itself as a possibility to reach something else. Usually, the protagonists move towards something that very often has an important emotional meaning for them. They may be seeking for their identity, America's identity, life's meaning or whatever makes them feel distressed. They are looking for answers.

On the other hand, outlaw road movies represent the escape from a crime. The protagonists are looking for freedom and the reasons behind the crime are not fully considered. It may happen that both categories have some elements in common with the other one; this is because they have a common denominator, which is combining transgression and liberation through mobility.

It is not always easy to combine these elements together because there is always interaction between the passengers and other people the protagonist(s) meets on his/their journey. Therefore, he can never leave his cultural baggage completely behind because social conventions keep chasing him. According to this point of view, it seems that liberation is always partial and never total.

Moreover, the proof that liberation is never complete resides in the conservative subtext of this genre. There is a sexist hierarchy, which clearly privileges white heterosexual male's point of view over gay, black people or women. Women are relegated to the passenger's seat or they offer a sexual diversion to the protagonists, as *On the Road* showed us: women are denied as peers and there are numerous references to masculinity. One of the ways used to reinforce the idea of the white strong masculine man is the derision of homosexual characters in some scenes.

The analysis is different when it concerns women because they may be the protagonists of the story - *Bonnie and Clyde*, for example – but their values, the main features of their personalities are defined by stereotypical bounds: “Women may be included but they are always restricted to minor roles [...] (their) strength is ambiguous”¹¹⁰. They are naïve, irrational, passive and they represent an appendix of men. The way movies show women to the audience makes them dependent on men¹¹¹. Their strength looks ambiguous and does not really conquer the audience. The fact that the focus is on a patriarchal society depends on the heavy cultural baggage, which means that movies absorb the context and reproduce it in more or less explicit ways.

Another common tendency is the idolization of exoticism, which was partially explained through pastoralism. The protagonist longs for a primitive culture and an unusual destination that could set him free and offer an antidote to the Western culture and its industrialization. This longing romanticizes everything that is considered exotic, as it happens with Jazz musicians and African American communities in Jack Kerouac’s novel. This mechanism is considered ambivalent and most of the times it generates contradictions because on one hand it criticizes imperialism and conquests, but on the other hand violence is still seen as an instrument of liberation.

The concept is not new; it has been clearly conceptualized by Richard Slotkin, who affirmed that violence is a tool of regeneration, especially in the creation and representation of the myth of the frontier¹¹². This is because wilderness, in other words everything that exists outside of society, does not respond to its rules and needs to be faced using violence. Violence in road movies creates a paradox: what should subvert American values becomes a reassertion of those very same values.

Most of the fundamentals of road movies come from other classical genres. What we see as a result is an amalgam of Hollywood features. It is important to look at these influences separately if we want to appreciate the nuances between rebellion

¹¹⁰ Marsha Kinder. ‘The Return of the Outlaw Couple.’ *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (summer 1974), pp. 2–6.

¹¹¹ Shari Roberts. “Western Meets Eastwood.” In *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Cohan and Hark, pp. 45–69.

¹¹² Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation*. New York: Atheneum, 1992.

and conformity¹¹³. The first genre taken in consideration is the Western. It can be considered one of the ancestors of the road movie because it tells its story through mobility. It emphasizes the precariousness between nature and culture and explores the “art” of wandering or the migration phenomenon in aesthetic terms. The visual representation of this genre is very similar to road movies, as the characters move through and experience wilderness, the land, the road, even if it is not the typical one we discussed in road literature or movies.

The second category that has common elements with the road genre is the Depression-era social conscience film. In this case, mobility is used as a tool of rebellion, a response to the social crisis caused by the Depression. Mobility represents the core of these movies, while stability and domesticity represent a prison. This comparison is already familiar to us and to the characters of *On the Road*, for example. They were not the first ones to feel this way, but in these Depression-era movies, the main incentive to move away is social and political, not personal. These films are full of wandering and flights, other features in common with the road movie.

The third category apparently very different from the one we have taken in consideration so far, is the noir road film, which exaggerates the criminal or outlaw element in psychological terms. Future road movies from the Depression-era are able to combine the psychological element with social and political criticism. One example is *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) where the personal journey corresponds also to the pursuit of social justice. This combination marks an important transition to the contemporary road movie. The main character, Tom Joad, went to prison after killing a man in self-defense. He becomes a new kind of “hero”, unjustly imprisoned by society and he turns into an outsider. The element of the rebel or the outsider is largely used in road movies too.

In terms of techniques, this movie is again significant for the future development of road movies. There are periodic non-narrative road travel montages, which aim to romanticize the flow of cars and the road itself. There is a patriotic music in the background, which helps giving meaning to what the Joads are doing. The

¹¹³ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.23.

camera is mounted on the traveling car, so the spectator has the point of view of the characters inside the car. Mobility represents affirmation for this desperate family who is travelling to find a better future and every technique aims to emphasize that aspect.

The antinomy home versus wandering also exists in different genres even before the road movie appeared as a genre. Wood defines this antinomy as “basic ideological tension” ¹¹⁴present in different genres, such as noir and melodrama. What the road movie does is to re-invent this tension between the individual impulse and social organization within the road and travelling framework. Furthermore, usually road movies rely on more quality because they have a literary tradition behind them, which is important for the narrative mechanism.

Road movies represent the drama more figuratively and challenge the passive viewer’s reception through dynamism. However, this genre cannot be considered subversive because the subversive and progressive elements incorporated into this genre are not new; they have just been re-adapted from different genres. The main difference between road movies and others is that eventually the characters who populate other genres go back to their status quo, while it seems that for the protagonist of the road movies the trip does not end completely even when the movie ends.

3.1. *Easy Rider*

- “- They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.
- Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.
- Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom”.

- D. Hopper, *Easy Rider* (1969)

Easy Rider (1969) is considered one of the movies, which turned the road movie into a recognized genre. The protagonists, Wyatt and Bill, buy drugs in Mexico and sell them in Los Angeles, raising money to travel to New Orleans on their motorcycles. The movie represents the rebellion of the counterculture and celebrates the liberation of life on the road. The most significant element is the transience as a way of living, a

¹¹⁴ Robin Wood. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

weapon used to fight the conservative part of America. Unfortunately, *Easy Rider* shows us how bitter is the end of the road and who the winner is: we see how rednecks crucify the protagonists¹¹⁵. The movie is a product of the late 1960s counterculture and represents the New American cinema. At the time, it was very popular to drive cars or ride motorcycles. They were not just the product of a consumerist society; they started to represent more and more the individual itself, as they came with the possibility of being personalized. This phenomenon stimulated the birth of the real road movie. This definition includes movies about vehicles where the quest motif is more and more mechanized. The beginning of this genre is associated to the mid-sixties, this is when the protagonist's identity tends to be related to his vehicle and the perspective of the camera follows the one of the car. The movie starts with a scene on a customized motorcycle picturing the flag of the United States of America, which significantly corresponds to the name of its owner, Captain America.

The combination of these elements makes the movie important for our analysis. The driving part is the heart of the plot, since it is used as the foundation on which everything else is built. The journey becomes the framework of Captain America and Bill's adventures and there is an explicit emphasis on driving, which means that the spectator needs to pay attention to the act of driving itself, not only to what happens while driving. Dennis Hopper's film is considered a cult movie. The director manages to combine everything that will define a road movie in the future: glorified transience, cultural critique, visionary impact due to the montage techniques, restless sensuality and a fugitive lifestyle.

The characters that make the story such a cult are two men in search of America. They put this quest at the core of their journey and add a spiritual and cultural meaning to it, in opposition to other road movies where the quest is not so profound. *Easy Rider* has some elements in common with *On the Road*: the purpose of both stories is to integrate the search for the self with the search for America, and this happens by traveling across the country. There are two protagonists and other secondary characters.

¹¹⁵ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.66.

Peter Fonda plays Wyatt, known as “Captain America”. He seems detached, quiet, a visionary and a witty observer. His friend’s name is Billy (Dennis Hopper), and he is more impatient, earthy, and easier to understand. Their personalities, so different yet so complementary, feed the tension that enlivens the movie. They represent different qualities of humankind and both are looking for the thrill that the ride can give them.

The movie celebrates mobility over stability and idolizes the vehicles, as we can see from the close-ups of Captain America’s motorcycles. The restless sensuality we mentioned before seems to be not only a prerogative of Wyatt and Billy but also of their vehicles, as they are almost considered as human beings. Moreover, the soundtrack fuels the general excitement. They are mostly rock’n’roll songs, which exalt freedom, the road and all kind of liberties. The most iconic song used is *Born to Be Wild* by Steppenwolf, who sings: “Get your motor running, head out on the highway, looking for adventure in whatever comes our way”. The singer is expressing exactly what the protagonists are experiencing, which is the dream of an entire generation. There is no reference to temporal or spatial boundaries; everything seems suspended in a third dimension.

This is clear in a scene at the beginning of the movie, when Wyatt throws away his watch and leaves. It is supposed to show the refusal of time as a limitation as if the protagonist is beyond it. In the following scenes, we watch other symbolic events found in other road movies: drug abuse, the thrill of riding or driving, the journey as a discovery on different levels, and the pursuit of alternative values in life.

Wyatt and Billy embody all of these elements, but their journey is not as easy as the title of the movie may suggest. The price to pay for the way they chose to live is rejection. We can see it in the motel scene, when the owner decides not to give them a room because of their looks and their motorcycles. There is no conversation between the three of them; they do not even need to explain themselves. They carry the weight of the judgment and have to face the consequences of their choices. For the first time since the beginning of the movie, we understand how being different is a bliss and a sentence. Society rejects them more than they reject it.

After this episode, we see them camping next to a fire. The montage technique used is the flash-forward and the choice is not casual: the director chooses it to convey

the importance of not following a timeline. As the protagonists are free from time, he wants his audience to feel the same. This technique aims to unlock time, re-invent it and wants us to enjoy more the natural beauty in each scene. This last point is important because one of the purposes of road movies is to celebrate travel for travel's sake and one of the reasons why movement is celebrated through the landscape itself. Enjoying the ride is considered as the ultimate objective, therefore an end. Moreover, nature possess the power of rejuvenation meaning that everyone can be regenerated through it. The aim of the movie is also to convey an authentic, real image of America far from the touristic one exported everywhere.

The movie develops another interesting point, which seems to contrast the feeling of rejection experienced by the protagonists. Rejection and fascination are part of the same society and Wyatt and Billy soon learn it. For instance, when they walk into a café or meet some women for the first time, the most common reaction they cause is attraction. Women feel attracted by what they represent, which is freedom, sensuality, and wilderness. This is the effect of the Other, the exotic that meets stability, sedentary people. At the same time, men do not trust them. They assume they are troublemakers and start making homophobic jokes. It seems there is no middle term for the protagonists: people either love or hate them, but it is hard to stay indifferent.

George, the man they meet in prison when they attend a parade without authorization, is a victim of this hate machine. He is eventually killed by society, by all of those men who felt threatened by people like Wyatt and Bryan. Captain America has an interesting conversation before this happens. He remarks that America used to be a great Country, but now people are afraid of freedom. George's response is:

“ Oh, yeah, that's right. That's what's it's all about, all right. But talkin' about it and bein' it, that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.”

This thought is the start of a cultural critique that we can observe in several other scenes. Wyatt affirms that he “never wanted to be anyone else”. He expresses his

satisfaction for the life he is living, in opposition to what society preaches, which is the need to always buy something else, pretending to be someone else until you will finally be happy. He seems so sure of his words but his feelings soon change when he exclaims, “We blew it” towards the end of the movie.

This expression is full of meaning and uncertainties; the protagonist does not finish it and leaves the spectator to his own interpretation. We believe that he gets to this conclusion after a climax of events that led him to disenchantment. First, after George’s death the mood becomes darker, it seems that it is more difficult for Wyatt and Billy to cohabitate. They get on each other’s nerves more easily, the silence between each other becomes thicker and the interpersonal failure is around the corner. This situation makes us think that the protagonists have never really left behind the pressure of society. Somehow, they internalized it and let it grow, until one day it shattered right in front of them. Their desires seem to stay unfulfilled as the ones of the people who still belong to the so-called society.

“We blew it” could also mean failure on a personal level, failure for not having left all of these toxic feelings behind, failure for not wanting to be on the road anymore. After this bitter realization, the scenario seems to change too. The landscape is not so interesting, so colorful or lively anymore. It all gets boring and loses its value.

Technically speaking, this bitterness is represented by psychedelia. Both protagonists experience an acid trip at the end of the movie, but this does not lift them up. On the contrary, drugs show their misery, they abandon themselves to sadness, childish sobs. Everything seems to change, even what brought them fun and comfort betrays them and reveals their true self. The only witnesses to these scenes are women. They represent sexual desire and are related to stability, this is why they are left behind¹¹⁶. However, they are present during the episode of drug abuse, even if they have not been part of the road trip.

The climax reaches its peak with the end of the road that corresponds with the tragic death of Captain America and Billy. It is important to analyze all of the symbols if we want to see the political tension hidden in the movie. The duo is killed by some reactionary rednecks, which means that the conservative society wins over the rebels.

¹¹⁶ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.76.

Also in terms of vehicles, the typical truck owned by rednecks wins over the modern, customized motorcycles. Destroying the vehicle means destroying the person on it. The death scene is very symbolic in this sense. The vehicle, in particular the main part painted as the flag of the United States of America, blows up in the air with Captain America. We do not see him dying but we understand that both of them stop existing. It seems obvious that one force wins over the other, but it is not as obvious as one may think. People like Wyatt, George, Billy and all of the hitchhikers who want to pursue the road, exist because there is a reactionary society behind them. This means that they can exist only with these conditions; they need an oppressive society in order to stand out and hit the road.

Captain America embodies capitalist America, as well as the freedom of market and the freedom of the open road. He admires nature and people who live off the land, but he does it with his cultural baggage full of patriarchal and imperialist oppression. The “redneck” Captain America co-exists with the one who lives on the road. We believe that the redneck who kills the protagonist and Captain America are sides of the same coin. They need each other to affirm themselves. As David Laderman argues:

That is, the cultural dominance of the redneck Captain America (expressed through his phallic gunblast) becomes mirrored by the countercultural dominance of the radical Captain America (expressed through his assassination/ crucifixion, and ensuing spiritual sublimation). Captain America and the killer redneck may be flip sides of the same coin.”¹¹⁷

The end of the movie is bitter and hopeless and conveys one important message: the ones who survive and pass their culture to the next generations are the rednecks, while free people with their bohemian lifestyle are killed on the road. It is bitter and leaves a bad taste in our mouths, but at the same time, it offers something to reflect on: everything has its dark side and all of the good needs its part of bad to exist in this world. The road represents liberation, a means to appreciate natural beauty, to live in contact with it and to feel independent. The road becomes a means to find themselves, to experience more and to get to know other people.

¹¹⁷ David Laderman. *Driving Visions. Exploring the the Road Movie*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.81.

3.2. Women on the Road: *Thelma and Louise*

“Well, you get what you settle for.”

- R. Scott, *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

Thelma and Louise (1991) was very important for the road genre because it caused many different reactions in the audience. The film has been defined as surrounded by “furor”¹¹⁸, criticized as “phony feminism [that] fails on the silver screen”¹¹⁹. It was seen as an “acting [out] of a male fantasy of life on the road” that “can hardly be called a woman’s movie or one with a feminist sensibility”¹²⁰. Kenneth defined it as “pleasingly subversive”¹²¹. Some others expressed opposite opinions, such as “morally and intellectually screwed up [...] small-hearted, toxic film”¹²². The aim of reporting such reviews is to show how many interpretations we can have of the same movie, mostly depending on the perspective we choose, the social contextualization and, of course, subjective taste.

Thelma and Louise are two women who want to go on a road trip for the weekend. They want to distance themselves from their husband and boyfriend respectively. The movie opens with Louise asking Thelma if her husband already gave her the permission to leave. She seems shy, not confident and almost afraid of her husband’s reaction, this is why she decides just to leave a note for him and join her friend. They are on the road when Thelma convinces Louise to go to a roadhouse to drink something. Harlan, a customer who starts to be flirty with both of them, soon approaches them by asking: “What are two Kewpie Dolls like you doing in a place like this?”

It is easy to understand his intentions, but Thelma lets him play because she wants to “put her hair down” meaning that she just wants to have a little fun. The situation escalates fast once Harlan takes her to a parking lot and tries to rape her.

¹¹⁸ Elayne Rapping. Feminism Gets the Hollywood Treatment. *Cineaste* 18.4, 1991, pp. 30–33.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Sharrett. Phony Feminism Fails on the Silverscreen. *USA Today Magazine* 120.2558, 1991, p. 57.

¹²⁰ Margaret Carlson. “Is This What Feminism is All About?” *Time* 24 June 1991, p. 57.

¹²¹ Kenneth Turan. “Movie Reviews: Smooth Times for ‘Thelma and Louise’”. *Los Angeles Times* 24 May 1991.

¹²² Margaret Carlson. “Is This What Feminism is All About?” *Time* 24 June 1991, p. 520.

Luckily, Louise appears right in time and demands Harlan to stop while pointing a gun to his head. He lets her go and Louise steps back with Thelma, until he says something that has big consequences for his life. He exclaims: "bitch, I should have gone ahead and fucked her!" Louise loses her temper and asks him to repeat one more time. At that point, he shoots the answer that will cost his life: "I said suck my cock". Eventually she shoots him to death.

After this episode, they run away becoming two women on the lam. At first, Thelma suggests going to the police explaining the situation, but Louise does not want to because she already knows that there is no justice for women and they would be in disadvantage. They start their journey as outlaw, even if at this moment only Louise has a criminal record. They stop in a motel where Louise calls her boyfriend asking him to give her the amount of money she has in her bank account. He agrees to help her, while Thelma's husband demands her wife to come back while he is busy watching television. Thelma hangs up and regrets having called.

During their trip to Oklahoma City, they meet a hitchhiker called J.D. played by Brad Pitt. He seems interested in Thelma and shows her the way he feels. Louise is more suspicious and does not want him in the car, but eventually they all make it to the city. Louise meets her boyfriend who gives her the money, while J.D. surprises Thelma and spends the night with her.

He talks about his past and says: "I may be an outlaw, but you're the one stealin' my heart". Thelma ignores the fact that he is an outlaw and has sex with him. The next morning the women realize that J.D. has stolen their savings. This action triggers something in Thelma who decides to rob a shop to recover the money they lost. At this stage, the police is officially looking for them trying to trace their phone, while they are in Thelma's house with her husband.

After the robbery, Thelma expresses her wish to go to Mexico with Louise and they look for the smartest way to get there, trying to avoid the police. Two episodes, which we will further discuss, happen during their attempt to reach Mexico. First, a police officer stops them and Thelma uses the gun again to threaten him and then hides him in the trunk of his car. The second episode concerns a man who catcall them several times while they are on the same highway. He makes obscene gestures and says vulgar things. They manage to make him pull over and they shoot his wheels and

his truck. The man does not stop and keeps insulting them. Therefore, they make his truck explode leaving him alone in the middle of nowhere.

The police chases them using several cars and Louise tries her best to avoid them for a good while, until they get to a dead end and they need to surrender. Eventually they choose death over surrender and they go roaring into the abyss from the edge of the Grand Canyon.

3.3. The female characters

The protagonists of the movie, Thelma and Louise, are women. They travel as a pair and they represent the female alternative to the “buddy” road movies usually populated by men. Thelma and Louise are very different from each other and they embody different characteristics, some of them more male-oriented than female. Louise is a strong, independent woman. She works in a restaurant and has a boyfriend, but it seems that he does not want to commit. She is compulsively organized and a little bossy, while Thelma represents the oppressed housewife who lives to obey her husband, afraid of what he may say. They embrace the road as fresh, new air for different reasons. Louise does not want to settle for a boyfriend who is not emotionally there for her, confirmed by what she states: “you get what you settle for” meaning that she is not ready to settle for this kind of behavior.

Thelma just wants to escape a vilifying marriage and have fun. They are very different also in terms of life experiences. Louise seems to know how dangerous the world can be, as well as how little women can protect themselves. She represents the rage against male society, which is the main reason that leads her to shoot Harlan. Later on, we find out that she had a bad experience in Texas; we guess she was raped when she was younger, but the story is not confirmed. Thelma, on the other hand, is not aware of her condition. She seems “asleep” and probably does not want to acknowledge her situation because it would be too painful to accept. Her growth accompanies this awakening process until she is finally empowered and alive. Accordingly, multiple times towards the end of the movie, she claims that she feels alive like never before.

At the beginning, it looks like the focus of the movie is on Louise, who is the first to commit a crime. She seems to dominate the story, but if we look closer, we

watch *Thelma & Louise*'s transformation. She travels at her own speed awakening little by little with the events that surround her. The movie develops on different layers. The first layer is represented by the plot itself, which is the chase of two outlaws that happen to be women. The second layer, more subtle, consists of the internal journey of both protagonists, which is as important as the plot, because it gives depth and additional meaning to the movie. The third layer concerns the thematic of the movie. The message, which raises above others, is that society cannot tolerate women who decide to fight back against men's abuse. Another possible interpretation is that there is no space for this kind of women.

A significant scene is when *Thelma* goes out of the store after the robbery and, talking to *Louise*, says: "I guess I went a little crazy" and *Louise* replies: "Well, it's the first chance you've had to really express yourself". This conversation stresses two points. The first is the internal journey of *Thelma*, her awakening, the end of her torpidity. The second point is just a guessing: would this happen to any woman if she had the chance to "go a little crazy" for a while?

Maybe yes, maybe no. It might depend on the society they are living in. For *Thelma* and *Louise* this journey is an escape from patriarchal values and boundaries. The protagonists attack men, considered the guardians of patriarchy, law and marriage and they all succumb to their rage. *Harlan* is shot, the policeman is trapped in his trunk, the truck driver is confronted and his truck blown up¹²³. Some spectators identify the movie as strictly related to feminism, some others not. One thing is sure, movies where the protagonists are male and use the same kind of violence are perceived differently. There is the tendency not to report or to condemn this kind of behavior if the protagonists are men.

This interesting fact gives us the input to talk about the "regendering" of a genre, which is more than just replacing male characters for female ones. As *Jessica Enevold* explains:

I propose that *Thelma & Louise* unmistakably excites and upsets the professional critics as well as the general audience, because, in this movie, gender and genre are intersecting at a major cusp, intruding on each other's

¹²³ *Jessica Enevold. Women on the Road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility. Göteborgs Universitet, 2003, pp.130-132.*

paths—*rescripting* one another, and in the process crossing culturally scripted, binary boundaries¹²⁴.

In order to understand this concept, we have to say that every work, in this case related to the road, is mapped and defined by the people who write about it or film it. This means that the reader and the spectator expect something when they start to read a book or to watch a movie about that particular topic. They may expect some male protagonists for example or some pre-defined behaviors. In *Thelma and Louise* we find the traditional road script with an additional twist, which is a different behavior from female figures¹²⁵. The spectator has the feeling that some classical sites (for example the road) are violated and the point of view used to narrate the story has changed.

On the other hand, as Toril Moi points out in her essay “What is A Woman?”, there are some adjectives, which are qualified as masculine and others that are perceived as feminine¹²⁶. Among the masculine ones, we find words like: aggressive, ambitious, analytical, assertive, competitive, dominant, independent and self-reliant. In the list for the feminine qualities there are: affectionate, childlike, compassionate, shy, soft-spoken and sympathetic. The aim of Moi is to free us from these linguistic definitions that tell us how a woman should be. As she claims: “a theoretical picture that tells us how things *must* be, and so blinds us to alternative ways of thinking”¹²⁷.

Things get more complex in *Thelma and Louise*, since the protagonists do not fit in any of the categories just mentioned. They embody both qualities, because they can be compassionate, shy, sensitive, but strong, independent and self-reliant at the same time. The aim is to confuse gender stereotypes by retaining some of the female characteristics and thus conquering what was considered as a male genre. In this sense, the movie represents a regendering of the genre.

The road represents freedom, a means to re-discover the true self and to become alive. Even if the end of the road means death, for Thelma and Louise it still

¹²⁴ Jessica Enevold. *Women on the Road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility*. Göteborgs Universitet, 2003, p.133.

¹²⁵ Derek Gregory. *Scripting Egypt: Orientalism and the Cultures of Travel* in Duncan and Gregory, pp. 114–50.

¹²⁶ Toril Moi. *What is a Woman?: And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, p.118.

¹²⁷ Toril Moi. *What is a Woman?: And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, p.118.

represents salvation because they have the opportunity to express who they are outside of social constraints.

3.4 This is a man's world

A common complaint of male viewers is that male characters of the movie are represented as stereotypes. We may argue that it is intentional. In the end, this is the kind of man that Thelma and Louise want to condemn. The first man that earns our attention is Darryl, Thelma's husband. He is self-absorbed, treats her wife like his personal slave and does not seem opened to any dialogue. He has the power, as we can deduct from the fact that Thelma needs to ask for his permission in order to leave for the weekend with Louise. She is so afraid to confront him that eventually decides to leave a note. He is so self-centered that even when his wife calls him to inform him where she is, television distracts him and he loses the majority of the information. We also understand that he is not used to tender words. When the police tells him to be nice with his wife ("Sound like you're really glad to hear from her. Women love that shit."), so they can have more time to trace the phone, he sounds so artificial that Thelma immediately notices that the police is at her place.

The second male figure we encounter is Jimmy, Louise's boyfriend. He seems nice and caring as he accepts to help her and deliver her the money, but we learn that he is shy of commitment, which makes Louise suffer. She decides to go on a road trip to distract herself from the fact that he has been recently ignoring her. His interest in his girlfriend is renewed once she is on the lam, but this does not convince Louise, as she claims: "Jimmy's like any other guy, he just loves the chase." However, they both seem to have a mature conversation when he joins her in Oklahoma City. They talk about their feelings and their future, while in the other room Thelma is having an affair with J.D.

J.D., the beautiful hitchhiker, is another man who takes advantage of them. He steals their money, seduces Thelma and leaves without caring.

Harlan is another example of an abusive man who tries to take advantage of Thelma's body, first by using some sweet lines trying to flatter her and then using his strength and imposing his will on the woman. He does not seem sorry for what he did, as we can see when he goes on saying that he should have had sex with her.

Another interesting male figure is the truck driver, who catcalls them and abuse them verbally. He too, as Harlan, does not seem to be sorry when confronted with what he did and eventually finds himself with no truck while he keeps blaming them.

The police officer is the next figure they meet. He acts like a macho man pointing his gun, being assertive and shouting orders but he quickly loses his authority once he is deprived of his gun.

There is just one man, the police officer who has contacts with Louise over the phone, who seems to be more compassionate and understanding - as we can see when he asks the other officer to be reasonable: "How many times do they have to be fucked over?" - but at the same time he refers to them as "girls" and not women, which suggests that he does not take them seriously. However, he seems the only one to be aware that they are living an unfair situation due to the sexist society they live in.

Thus, amongst the male characters no one seems to justify them or understand their reasons, as they just keep exclaiming "Good God", "My Lord" expressing their incredulity for their behavior¹²⁸.

3.5. The End

The way the movie ends can be interpreted in different ways. The first, more optimistic interpretation, is that Thelma and Louise are finally the owners of their own fate. They are fully aware of themselves, they went on a personal journey, which transformed them and gave them a new freedom. As a consequence, they decide to take ownership of the situation while they run to the Grand Canyon committing suicide. We do not see their car destroyed, or their bodies crashing. The last image of the movie depicts both of them, hand in hand, smiling while they embrace their destiny and their choice.

However, as optimistic as it may be, it leaves us sad. The conclusion is that there is no space for women like these in this society. They are not justified for what they did and their reasons are not fully heard, that is why they only have two choices: death or prison. Both interpretations are sides of the same coin, which shows us that women can free themselves but they only have a limited time to live their freedom. In this case, just a weekend.

¹²⁸ *Thelma and Louise*. Cyberpat.com. Web. Consulted on 30th of May 2017.

It is up to the spectator to decide if that weekend was worth their life or not. In any case, the road made it all possible, thus it becomes the third protagonist with Thelma and Louise. The road empowers them, gives them a possibility. Even in the end, the road offers two options: leave it or continue the path they had chosen. They decide not to abandon it.

3.6 *The Straight Story*

“The worst part of being old is remembering when you was young.”

- D. Lynch, *The Straight Story* (1999)

The Straight Story (1999) by David Lynch tells the story of an old man, Alvin Straight, who decides to visit his brother. He starts his journey from Laurens (Iowa) to Blue River (Wisconsin), a 250-mile journey on his lawnmower. The movie begins with a dreamy montage of slow-motion scenes from a small town, a little American paradise where Alvin's house is situated. The protagonist is a good, honest man, a man worth admiring who gives advice to people he meets on the road. He is lucky enough to meet good, decent people during his journey, which gives a sentimental background to the story.

This atmosphere may seem far from Lynch's works but if we look closer, this straight story does not seem so straight after all. It seems that the director is using one story to mask another, more sinister and hidden. The spectator is only able to have some glimpses of the true story to reach his conclusions. He speculates on the real story behind Alvin, even if there is no confession or confirmation of it. We know that Alvin's daughter lost her four children to the State after one of them was burned in a fire when someone else had to look after them. As he says: “Someone else was supposed to be watchin' them, and there was a fire, and her second boy got burned real bad”. The protagonist tells the story to a girl who camps with him and explains that the State did not judge his daughter capable of raising children due to her speech impediment.

This version of the story seems too vague and makes us think that maybe this is just part of the true story. In fact, later on we learn that Alvin had an alcohol problem in the past. He only mentions that his grandchildren were with “someone else”; there

are no names and no one takes the blame as we can see from the passive structure he uses. This is why we are inclined to think that there is the possibility that he is the one responsible for the fire. Maybe it started with one of his cigarettes, which we often see in the movie, and it got out of hand while the alcohol distracted him. This interpretation does not seem impossible or too creative if we think about Lynch's movies. In most of them, the idea of family hides some sinister events. Lynch's families are more likely to be incestuous and violent, torn apart by unspeakable secrets: we see a husband murdering his wife (*Lost Highway*), a woman complicit in her husband's death while trying to seduce her daughter's boyfriend (*Wild at Heart*) and a dad killing his daughter (*Twin Peaks*), all examples of distorted families.

On the other hand, it seems that family is very important for Alvin, as we can see from a metaphor he uses with the girl who camps with him. He tells her that he used to give a stick to each of his fourteen kids and say, "You break that". Of course, they could. Then he used to give them a bundle of sticks asking them to do the same thing. They could not. "Then I'd say, 'That bundle--that's a family.'" It is a nice moment and the girl seems delighted by the story, but the meaning changes and becomes more sinister if we look at the origins of the story. The "fasces" are a bundle of rods with an ax in the middle used to kill people. It was an object used by Roman magistrates to celebrate the Imperial power. The metaphor is also used in Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy of a senescent patriarch. Hidetora, the Great Lord of the Ichimonji clan, uses exactly the same demonstration to instruct his three sons in the value of filial unity: he gives his son a bundle and asks him to break it. The reaction of the son is more aggressive. He smashes the bundle – the fasces – across his knee and claims: "You've spilled an ocean of blood. You showed no mercy, no pity. We, too, are children of this age, weaned on strife and blood. We are your sons, yet you count on our fidelity--in our eyes, that makes you a fool, a senile old fool."

Alvin's story is different, since there is no one who can contradict his nice metaphor of the bundle, but we can see that reality does not match his story. There are no contacts between himself and his fourteen children, his grandchildren are not with him or his daughter, and he does not speak with the only brother he has. We do not know why he has not been speaking with his brother for ten years, and when asked he gives again a vague answer mentioning, "anger... vanity..."

Two episodes give us a glimpse of what is Alvin's straight story. Firstly, he meets a woman who has run over a deer by accident. She seems desperate and angry at the same time. She explains Alvin that this is the thirteenth deer that she kills and she likes them, but she cannot understand where they come from. She tries to justify her actions but eventually leaves the deer on the road and goes away. Alvin decides to pick the horns of the deer and takes them with him on the lawnmower. Horns are usually a symbol of violence in Lynch's movies, which makes us look closer at this episode. The camera zooms in on Alvin's reaction and we see he is upset, almost as a reaction to some experiences and not only because of the deer's death.

If we look even closer, we notice that the woman who kills the deer feels a victim. She does not know where they come from, she tries to avoid them, and she even loves them, but cannot help killing them somehow. This story has some similarities with what happened to Alvin. He loves his grandchildren, it was not in his intentions to hurt one of them, but it happened and he cannot understand why these things happen to him.

The second relevant episode is when he loses control of the lawnmower while passing next to a burning house where firemen are training. From the zoom on his face, we can see that he is very scared, shaking, it seems he is remembering something. According to our interpretation, he may be remembering the fire, the screaming, the danger and everything that led to the burning of his grandson. Even after, once he is safe, he keeps shaking.

At the same time, the story shows other more positive episodes, as when he gives words of wisdom to the people he meets. He even encourages the twins who fix his vehicle to be closer to each other, to love one another because no one knows you like a brother does:

There's no one knows your life better than a brother that's near your age. He knows who you are and what you are better than anyone on earth. My brother and I said some unforgivable things the last time we met, but, I'm trying to put that behind me... and this trip is a hard swallow of my pride. I just hope I'm not too late... a brother's a brother.

The third episode worth to mention is in a bar with another old man he met in town. They are both drinking beer, talking about their experiences in World War II, when he suddenly confesses that he had a problem with alcohol and he managed to

save himself thanks to a preacher. Alvin mentions that one of his faults during the War was killing a "little fella", a Polish boy named Kotz. He shot him by mistake and he is the only one to know what he did, while everyone else believed it was the enemy's fault. He strengthens many times "little fella" and it makes us think about his grandchild, who is only a little boy. He does not feel guilty for the German boys, defined as "moon-faced boys", which makes us believe that he is capable of violence.

For all of these reasons, this quest on the road seems a quest for forgiveness, a need for atonement. He starts the journey to expiate his faults, not because his brother had a stroke, but because he knows that there is not so much time left for himself. His heaps are failing, his circulation is bad and he has the beginning of an emphysema. He knows his time is coming and he needs to be forgiven.

In this sense, the movie looks like a sentimental story: a loving father living with his daughter, a wise old man giving advice to younger people. This is – also – true, but it is only a part of the story, as we said so far. His life with his daughter seems very sad, there is no contact with anyone else of the family, and his physical conditions will worsen soon. The straight story starts with a lie, it seems everything but straight. It takes some digging to see behind the mask.

At the same time, we may find a happy conclusion. Even if a man has a dark past, even if he is guilty, he can still make his way to atonement and recover lost relationships. It is a scarce consolation but it gives us a new perspective on the road. The road becomes a means to accept what we were. As Alvin says: "The worst part of bein' old is remembering when you was young." This is what Alvin does with his quest, he remembers when he was young, he experiences again that pain and he lets it go once he is finally reunited with his brother in Wisconsin¹²⁹.

Conclusion

The aim of this work was to better understand how the road trip became (and still is) such an iconic and enduring theme in American culture.

¹²⁹ Tim Kreider. *Film Quarterly*. Web. Consulted on 1st of June 2017.

The conclusions to be reached are not universal statements or criteria. They intend to be the result of the study of a process and all of its implications on human beings. The journey inside other people's trips involves the visual area connected to movies, but also all the other senses and feelings originated by the act of reading. The purpose of this analysis was also to stimulate the reader and the spectator by encouraging criticism, attentive reading and by becoming more aware of how relevant it may be the role of those elements considered secondary in a movie. Moreover, we wanted to show the evolution of this genre both in literature and in cinema hoping that this may be the starting point to analyze the contemporary road trips.

We concluded that the road represents personal fulfillment both in literature and cinema. In *On the Road* it was represented by the act of writing the book, which means that the road provided the necessary inspiration to be creative. In *Travels With Charley* the road represented independency: Steinbeck proved himself that he could still go on the road by himself. At the same time, the road raised awareness about his country and his people. In *Rules of the Road*, the road represented growth. The protagonist matured with it as well as she learnt how to deal with her personal struggles.

Cinema showed us other aspects of the road. In *Easy Rider* the road meant freedom, connection with nature, adventure, abuse. It also meant death, but until the end there is no sign of regret from Captain America and Bill. In *Thelma & Louise*, the road may seem short but it was intense. The road showed Thelma how to leave the role of the wife behind and be independent, assertive and strong. The journey meant freedom and subversion of the traditional antinomy man-woman in society. The road empowered the protagonists and even when it offered death, it still represented a choice. Thelma and Louise decided their destiny, no one else. Thus, the road eventually gave them something missing at home: the ability to choose.

In *The Straight Story*, the road represented forgiveness and memories. Alvin scattered his sense of guilt on the road, gave his advice hoping to help others and confessed his bad memories from the war. The road represented liberation from an inner pain and, at the end of it, there was reconciliation and forgiveness.

These examples show us how the road can have different meanings according to one's personal experiences. It is able to provide joy and independence as much as

disappointment and bitterness. Thus, we may see the road as a metaphor of life: bad and good circumstances co-exist, but they are both necessary to grow.

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