The American Road Narrative: A Brief History

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Abstract

The American road narrative, a personal story told through physical movement, is derived from a long line of written journey pieces from all around the world, which simply started as flat retellings of voyages. The personal accounts in these more contemporary American travel stories have either positive (redemptive) or negative (contaminative) outcomes, but what has more significance is the overarching theme of rebellion, and its place within normativity. In more recent American history, road narratives, both in literature and film, follow a theme of rebellion and freedom, as seen in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, and Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*. As time progresses, the American road narratives show a greater and more significant nonconformity that rises above society, the law, and gender roles. This analysis is followed by an original creative nonfiction journey essay.
Road narratives tell a personal story through physical movement. There is a
definitive beginning and ending to both the physical and emotional journey, and the
parallel of the physical and personal journeys is the compelling drive behind the story.
While analyzing the history of the road narrative in literature and film throughout
American history, it is clear that there are stories of both redemption (a story that starts
badly but ends well) and contamination (a story that starts off well but ends badly). Some
stories even have both. However, what seems to be more significant is the way in which the
narrators and protagonists chose to view their journey and construct their reality. While
most road narratives in literature and film follow a theme of rebellion and freedom, as we
see in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, it becomes clear that
early road narratives uphold societal norms and rules. However more recent road
narratives, such as Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise*, show nonconformity that rises above
society, gender roles, and the law.

American road narratives build off of a long tradition of travel writings from around
the world. Unlike later road narratives, which incorporate the personal journey of the
narrator or protagonist, these early forms of travel writings were straightforward
narratives of an itinerary. Some of the first known pieces of pilgrimage literature are the
religious itinerariums of the Roman Empire. These itinerariums were road maps in the
form of listed cities, with documentation of the travel necessary between landmarks, and a
detailed description of each listed destination. For example, *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, the
oldest known Christian itinerarium, recounts the writer’s journey to the Holy Land in the
years 333 and 334 A.D. as he traveled by land through parts of Europe and Asia Minor.
Later, secular “explorer” narratives emerged, among them the *Vinland Sagas* based on
Viking trips to the New World in the early thirteenth century. These are two Icelandic texts written separately from each other, and represent the most complete information known about the Norse exploration of the Americas through their exposition of topography, natural resources, and native cultures encountered. In addition, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* are two examples of early travel narratives from the Greek and Japanese cultures respectively.

In addition to the influence of worldly travel stories, road narratives are also built upon the foundation of early American writings. The United States is a nation built upon the idea of rebellion and fighting for freedom, which is evident in its literature. As literary critic David Laderman explains: "The cultural roots of the road film go beyond the immediate context of its emergence, however, and include a literary tradition focused on voyaging (the Journey), which in turn often reflects an ideology of expansionism and imperialism (in the strict literal sense of asserting one's self elsewhere)" (41). And indeed, looking back to the earliest American writings, the theme of mobility is evident. Even the political writings of Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and the like, establish the national themes of rebellion and autonomy that are key to most road narratives. Later, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau reinforced the idea of individuality and separation from society and organized institutions with their transcendentalist writings. With expansion into the west, the idea of manifest destiny set the tone for another type of mobility in literature.

All of these examples from early American literature lead up to what is considered the foundation of the contemporary road narrative. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, published in 1957, is a tale of two young male friends, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, who trek back
and forth across America, awakening their souls through exploration and travel. One important aspect of this novel that marks it as crucial to the road narrative’s beginning, is that it establishes the automobile as both the primary mode of transportation and a symbolical vehicle of transformation. This is an important departure from wagons, in stories such as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* and William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, and boats in stories such as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

*On the Road* is an artifact of the countercultural and postwar Beat movements, both of which embrace poetry, drug use, and jazz music. The novel articulates the bohemian lifestyle, with a clear rejection of conservatism, traditional family values, the Protestant work ethic, and middle-class materialism. However, even though *On the Road* demonstrates bohemian qualities, the story still perpetuates traditional values of the time. For example, in his article, “What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture,” critic David Laderman notes that “rugged white male individualism” drives the plot, while minority races and women are secondary. In the novel, women in particular are ultimately distractions to the men finding their freedom on the road. Another literature critic, Carmen Indurain Eraso, notes that at this point in the road narrative tradition, “[women] are allotted a passive status in minor roles as plot-elements, a disrupting factor that triggers the action and calls for the male hero to restore order” (63).

Regardless of the rebellion present in the novel through drug use, violence, and poor decision-making, *On the Road* still upholds that white men are allowed to make these decisions and still be sanctified by society and the legal system. Another popular road narrative with these traditional motifs is Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*. This film displays
similar countercultural themes through the journey of two bikers traveling through the American South and Southwest. However, their fate is far worse than the protagonists of *On the Road*; by the end of their quest for identity, one of the bikers declares, “We blew it,” and soon after, they are murdered by two men in a pickup truck. This ending is clearly contaminative for the leading characters, and the emphasis is on conventionality’s rise over individualism and the countercultural movement.

In 1967, Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* marks the next era of road narratives, as an instrument of social critique and rebellion. This time, the protagonists are a man and woman duo, breaking the traditional male pairing of their road narrative predecessors. The movie depicts a Depression-era outlaw couple, which serves as a countercultural critique of conservatism and aggressive capitalism. The two protagonists meet when Bonnie finds Clyde trying to steal her mother’s car. Bonnie, who is bored with her job as a waitress, is intrigued by Clyde, and decides to join him as his partner in crime. The mobility aspect of this film is clear, and adds to the overall nature of their crimes and escapes. David Laderman notes that:

> In the spirit of *On the Road*, this thematic association of liberation with motion will persist throughout the film: whenever the members of the Barrow gang are stationary, in a motel room, for example, they become irritable and vulnerable to attack; on the road, they are free and happy, symbolized by the up beat banjo music that usually accompanies their flight from a heist. (45)  

It is not surprising then, that eventually the pair is deceived, trapped, and murdered while stationary. While this film too tries to act as an instrument of social critique, it also fails to
do so, as the police, agents of the government, get the final say, and kill the rebels—a true contamination story for Bonnie and Clyde.

We get quite a different ending for the protagonists of Ridley Scott's Thelma and Louise, released in 1991, which marks the next era of road narratives. This story is among the first emergence of two female protagonists on the road. Their physical journey is motivated by rebellion against patriarchy and more emphatically, a legal system that legitimizes rape. Initially, Thelma is fleeing from a male-dominated home in which she is tightly controlled and bullied, and Louise is getting away from her unsatisfying workplace. Along the way, they commit murder, steal from a convenience store, and blow up a tank truck, among other illicit activities. At the end of the movie, the women are finally tracked down and cornered on the edge of the Grand Canyon by an overwhelming FBI presence. It is at this culminating moment in the film that we see one of the most cathartic displays of agency of any road narrative. Thelma and Louise choose to die; their pedal-to-the-metal trip off of the edge of a cliff is a “triumphant slap in the face of Tradition” (Laderman 55).

While the end of the film seems to shed a positive light on the women's choice of death over surrender, it is an extreme action that is outside of the boundaries in place for female agency. Choosing death over submission to the police seems absurd to many viewers and critics alike, however their death is constructed as a redemptive story rather than a contaminative one; Thelma and Louise are laughing and smiling as they plunge out into the Grand Canyon. In her article, "Serendipity and Agency in Narratives of Transition: Young Adult Women and their Careers," critic Marcy Plunkett notes that:

Agency is used synonymously with intentionality and instrumentality and is thus embedded in a 'quest' narrative, implying the existence of a clear goal, strategy, and
unflagging ambition, impervious to temporary setbacks and distractions... It is a highly individualistic notion in which relational considerations are clearly secondary in priority, regarded as interferences that must be resisted, or at best, delayed. Not surprisingly, this is widely regarded as a model based on men's development and not characteristic of most women's lives. (153)

Here, Plunkett offers a compelling insight in the comparison between male and female agency. Road narratives before *Thelma and Louise* were predominantly male, or showed a couple working together under the leadership of the male counterpart. However, Thelma and Louise show strong agency in ridding themselves of their male controllers. They show “unflagging ambition” and are “impervious to temporary setbacks and distractions” while on the road, and this is revolutionary in the history of the road narrative. Women making these extreme decisions and embodying these traditionally male characteristics was completely new when the film was released in 1991.

While rebellion is a significant characterizing theme of the road narrative, this rebellion doesn't always need to include drug use, murder, or robbery. While the essence of the road narrative is personal progression through physical movement, rebellion can be any break with normativity. We see this exemplified simply in the progression of American road narratives over time. Starting as a form based on two male protagonists on a bohemian journey, the road narrative becomes more inclusive to women and truly pushes against societal norms. The road narrative shows a personal quest, either fulfilled or unsatisfied by the end. Dan McAdams notes that “meaning-making lies at the heart of those turns in the road that people think of as life transitions” (xv). Personal identity is formed by the way in which life is perceived. Whether redemptive or contaminative, journeys, road
narratives suggest, alter the way we develop mentally, emotionally and psychologically, the way we learn to view the future, and the way we cultivate interpersonal relationships. While the evolution of the road narrative is clear, one aspect that has remained the same over time is that the journey is rarely taken alone. The bond between two protagonists is only strengthened by these figurative “turns in the road,” which makes any journey that much more meaningful for the travelers, the audience, and the reader.
Works Cited


The lease to my new Boston apartment started September first, which was annoying only because the lease to my soon-to-be-former apartment ended on August 26. Anticipating the stress and complex nature of that in-between week, my mother made a detailed plan for moving me out, which she e-mailed to me and my brother Harrison, whose help she had also enlisted. They would come on a Tuesday afternoon, she in her Honda Odyssey, and Harrison in his beat-up '98 Toyota Camry. If the parking gods were smiling upon us, there would be two spots in front of my building and we could load up the cars in under an hour.

So on Tuesday, when my mother and Harrison turned onto Orkney Road to find that the parking gods had other plans that day, I told my mother to pull into the small parking strip to the side of my building. There were only three spots which I knew all belonged to boys from Boston College, who also happened to be moving out that day, and who glared in our direction, but didn’t say anything when my mom created a fourth spot behind their cars. We pretended to not see them as Mom, Harrison, and I began schlepping back and forth between my apartment and the cars. Harrison had parked right in front of a shiny red fire hydrant.

I tried to get emotional about leaving my first city apartment, but I was too sweaty and tired. When we were done, we backed out of the parking lot, ignoring the Boston College boys from apartment two whose raging keggers had kept me up so many nights. I wanted to give them the finger, but I was too exhausted to lift my arm.
I was most excited, though, to drive home with Harrison. We were best friends until he entered high school, when he realized it was maybe not so cool to call your older sister your best friend. We used to watch Nickelodeon together after school, take selfies with my digital camera instead of doing our homework, and get excessively competitive in our rivalry over the card game War. On the weekends we hung out at the Blackstone Valley Mall or played video games in his bedroom—Spyro, Tony Hawk’s Underground, SSX on Tour, and, our personal favorite, Grand Theft Auto.

But once he entered high school, we would pass through the halls every now and again, sharing nothing but a split second of eye contact. A new freshman, Harrison spent his afternoons in his room playing video games with his friends or playing basketball at the town courts. The only time we ever spent together was in the car on the way to church or at the dinner table, both with our parents. There was no more Nickelodeon, no more mall trips. Once I went off to college, he would tell me that he missed me, but only every few weeks when my mom passed the phone to him against his will.

As we followed my mother’s Honda Odyssey through Brighton Square, I asked Harrison how school was going. He was surprisingly chatty when I asked him about his Sports in Literature and Film class, the football team he quit, and even Mom’s recent obsession with baking Bundt cakes. It didn’t even matter what he said, honestly, I was just so happy to listen to him talk again.

Twenty minutes into our trip, we had our first good laugh together in longer than I could remember as we witnessed our mom run two red lights in the span of three minutes. Our laughs are completely different. Mine is high-volume, and his is silent, just a smile.
 Seeing that smile-laugh on him was so satisfying. Then, when we hit the Mass Pike, Mom headed straight for the fast lane, figuring we knew how to get home on our own. And we did. Harrison turned on the radio and Pitbull bellowed: *Grab somebody sexy, tell 'em hey, give me everything tonight...*

“I hate Pitbull,” I told Harrison. “He’s the worst singer.”

“If you can even call it singing!” he added.

As we listened to Maroon 5 playing on a new radio station, Harrison told me about the mixed CD our mother had given him as a reward for getting a C in Algebra last quarter. “It’s terrible,” he admitted. “It’s basically a CD of songs I liked six months ago.” He listed off a few, and I didn’t tell him that a few weeks back Mom had e-mailed me a list of these same songs. The title of the e-mail was *Would Harrison like any of these?*

Traffic was steady on the Mass Pike, and so was our conversation. We talked about pulling into the Westborough rest stop to get ice cream cones from McDonald’s, but agreed Mom would get upset with us for not inviting her, and Dad would get angry if we arrived home late. Instead, we talked about how it was hard for Harrison to be friends with most of the kids in his class. He was so much more mature than all the other seventeen-year-olds. He didn’t find interest in getting high or drunk even though he was aware of how these activities determined social ranking, and this was something I admired about him.

As I watched him steer the car with his hands clenched around each side of the wheel, I couldn’t help but think about the times when his hands grasped a game controller instead, a smile-laugh on his face as we played *Grand Theft Auto* years ago. My gaze was still on him as I wondered how his maturity would manifest later in his life—in college, in his first real job, in his future family. *He is,* I thought to myself, *so wonderful.*
We continued driving, and I mentioned how he needed to teach me how to play *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. While he vetoed that idea, calling me a lost cause, I read the signs as we passed them on the highway: *Sturbridge, Exit 9, 1 Mile.*

We had missed our exit. By approximately fourteen miles.

At first he didn’t believe me. “There’s no way we missed the exit by *that* much.” We couldn’t stop laughing as we eventually looped off and on the highway, making the 180-degree turn to get ourselves back on track.

Mom called. “I got home fifteen minutes ago. Did you guys take off with the car or something?”

I couldn’t stop smiling as Harrison moved into the fast lane.

“It’s gonna take us a little longer,” I said, “but we’ll get there.”