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The Significance of the Automobile in 20th C. American Short Fiction

Megan M. Flanery

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AUTOMOBILE IN 20TH C. AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

by

MEGAN M. FLANERY

ABSTRACT

Midcentury American life featured a post-war economy that established a middle class in which disposable income and time for leisure were commonplace. In this socio-economic environment, consumerism flourished, ushering in the Golden Age of the automobile: from 1950 to 1960, Americans spent more time in their automobiles than ever before, and, by the end of the decade, the number of cars on the road had more than doubled. While much critical attention has been given to the role of the automobile in American novels, less has been given to its role in American short stories. The automobile has been featured in literature since its creation, but after Henry Ford perfected the assembly line – making cars more readily available and less costly – the automobile became an American crown jewel. The apex of the American car industry came just after World War II, and the wax and wane of this Golden Age can be traced throughout 20th Century American short stories. The automobile is an extension of one's identity and an essential fixture of the American Dream. This project focuses on selected short stories from three distinct authors, writing before, during, and after the mid-century car boom. Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor, and Breece Pancake use the automobile as a motif in their texts, and, while each author presents the car in her own light and from his own angle, the unprecedented freedoms and inherent dangers connected to the automobile are almost universal.

INDEX WORDS: Automobile, American short story, American Dream, Automobility, Eisenhower Interstate System, Roads, Nostalgia, Trauma, Car accidents, Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor, Breece Pancake, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, *The Old South*, *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*

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by

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(Under the Direction of Dr. Caren Town)

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DEDICATION

To my father, SFC Christian Michael Flanery, Ret. (11 Nov 1965 – 1 Jun 2017).

You continue to shape my life.

Born and raised in the “Motor City,” my father took great pride in his hometown and the industry upon which it was built. His biological father spent most of his life on the assembly line and eventually retired from General Motors – for this, I respect my grandfather. Nevertheless, the man who I respect the most – a decorated American soldier who fought honorably and selflessly for this country’s freedom in three combat theatres – is and always will be my dad. Without him, and the sacrifices he made for his family, I would not be where I am today.

Thank you, Dad, for teaching me all that you did.

You are my hero.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

American literature and culture have had a long love affair with the car. The automobile, a tangible, yet complex, object representative of the American Dream, is intimately connected to social status, American freedom, independence, success, leisure, and masculinity. Like the Rolls Royce in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or the 1949 Hudson that carried the narrative from Virginia to New Orleans in Kerouac's *On the Road*, the automobile is an essential thread in the fabric of American culture and society. Since the 1920s, cars have grown to become the preferred method of transport, which transformed the way that Americans shop, live, and earn a living. Arna (Arnaud) Bontemps (13 Oct. 1902 – 4 Jun. 1973), Flannery O'Connor (25 Mar. 1925 – 3 Aug. 1964), and Breece (Dexter John) Pancake (29 Jun. 1952 – 8 Apr. 1979), to name just a few of countless American authors whose writing features cars, weave the automobile into the fabric of their short stories as a motif. Selected texts from each of these noteworthy authors will be analyzed in this thesis, keeping the significance of the automobile at the helm of all discourse.

The car is an essential fixture of the American dream. As Brian Finnegan explains, “the dream of automobility ... acknowledges the celebration of the Road to which much of American literature's traditional canon has held” (92). However, Finnegan suggests that “the automobile operates as physical counterpart for the dream deferred” (94). Thus, the car has become an iconic part of American life and culture, but it is a potential trap for those who sit behind the wheel, forcing them to risk their lives and livelihoods on the products of Detroit. The trap is both literal and figurative: a literal collision or accident would literally entrap the driver, turning this mobile representation of freedom into a deformed steel casket, and the metaphorical trap of ownership,

traps the owner in a cycle of product depreciation and inevitable debt. For the culture as a whole, as the Golden Age of the automobile wanes, the ugly patina of the automobile industry reveals itself: the large-block combustion engines that were produced on the line for years evolved into environmental pests that would eventually lead thousands of American soldiers into a quest for oil in the Middle East, which would become scarce by the early 1970s. This fact is especially important in regards to Pancake's texts, wherein the abatement of the mid-century car boom is apparent.

The post-World War II economic boom that allowed for the burgeoning car culture changed forever the definition of American life and, by extension, the substance of the American Dream. This post-war economy established a middle class with greater disposable income and more time for leisure than in previous generations. Because of this economic expansion, consumerism flourished, ushering in the Golden Age of the automobile, and cars became more widely available. Post-war America also saw the return of millions of veterans, who, after sixteen years of depression, recession, and war, finally had enough money to maintain a comfortable life – filled with previously-unaffordable luxuries. As industry in America changed gears (literally and figuratively) after the war, turning back to civilian needs, automobile manufacturers could barely meet consumer demand.¹ For example, industry-wide records were shattered in 1950 when Chevrolet became the first company to make more than 2 million units in one year. As William H. Young aptly notes, “everyone, it seemed, wanted a part of this post-war version of the American Dream. The result was mass production of standardized middle-class luxuries,” to include automobiles (61). Cars quickly became synonymous with social class, economic status, and success, all of which will be discussed in relation to the stories analyzed in this thesis.

Most significantly, after World War II, America experienced an unprecedented economic expansion that resulted in (just to name a few), an increased number of women in the workforce, the G.I. Bill, the baby boom, and, importantly, the mass-production of the automobile.

Americans cast aside their penny-pinching ways, which were necessitated by twenty years of severe economic depression and war, replacing them with an obsessive desire for consumer goods. When soldiers returned home from the war in 1946, “builders erected almost fifteen million homes, a new national record” (Young 66). By 1950, more than half of American households possessed a car, as well (US Census 880). The car became a new American status symbol: the bigger and the flashier, the better. And, because of the increasing population in suburbs filled with newly-constructed homes, the lines between necessity and luxury became blurred, as many families moved further away from their grocers, barbers, doctors, and workplaces – all of which are located traditionally in the city – making the automobile an essential facet of suburban life.

Many canonical American authors reacted to this blossoming car culture, and several wrote texts that are centered around the automobile. In Bontemps’s stories, “A Summer Tragedy” and “Saturday Night: Portrait of A Small Southern Town, 1933,” the author makes good use of the automobile, staging it to represent the class struggle between white and black Americans during the tail end of the Jim Crow Era. In “Saturday Night,” the Depression is beginning to set in, and the closing of a local Ford dealership is the litmus test for economic growth and sustainability. Moving forward on the automotive and literary timeline, O’Connor’s stories present the car as a danger to American lives and American culture. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The Partridge Festival” and “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” the automobile leads the characters into precarious, and sometimes insidious, situations that cause

either a revelation or eternal damnation. The car is a catalyst of sorts, that brings characters from point A to their knees instead of to point B.

Finally, Breece Pancake presents the automobile as an escape, as well; however, his characters are oftentimes too impoverished to obtain a car or fix the one rotting in their front yards. O'Connor and Pancake both reveal the dark side of the automobile: the advantage it gives to those with malicious intent. Criminals can use cars to prolong their freedom and enhance their ability to escape justice, which allows them to commit more crimes in more areas during a given time span. Pancake's "Foxhunters" focuses on a young mechanic who does not yet have his Impala ready for the road, and he is stuck working on other people's cars until he has enough money for parts. His boss is an unsavory fellow who is involved in the murder and assault of two female high school students, who die in a suspicious car crash, and the young mechanic is set on escaping his hometown after learning about his employer's involvement in the crime. Some of Pancake's characters, as well as The Misfit from O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" are the Ted Bundys of American fiction, as they kill random people they encounter on the road, and just continue driving forward in search of their next victim. Even though these characters have made headlines and their cases are well-known, their automobiles provide enough cover to migrate from place to place, through ever-changing law-enforcement jurisdictions, without being pinned down.

In all the stories that are analyzed in this thesis, the car is representative of both the positive and negative sides of the American Dream. Obviously, the car represents a new level of mobility that affords Americans more personal freedoms, but this freedom can be used for good and for bad. Additionally, the car is problematic for black Americans, as evidenced by Bontemps's texts, who are not afforded equal freedom and privileges, which is still a stumbling

block in American society today. Even if black Americans could obtain a car, their pursuit of the American Dream is limited by white Americans who control the status quo. So, the car is surely a symbol of American innovation and production, but the benefits offered by increased mobility can be undercut by those who become victims of increased automobility. Whether it be a fatal car accident, manslaughter by car, or murder on the road, cars can present life-ending risks.

Still, American society accepted the car warmly and molded itself to fit the car as a home away from home: a private space that still allows one to go where they need and want to go. Because of the car boom, “life in America is completely reinvented ... Modern American life becomes nearly impossible without a car. As a result, businesses factor this into their model. For the first time, you see drive up restaurants ... you see drive- up movie theaters” (“The Spoils of War,” 52:34). Cars changed the shape of American society to an unprecedented degree. The way that businesses crowd the real-estate market at every interstate exit reveals that Americans and cars have become almost inseparable. The landscape of America has been carved into: paved highways and interstates create a grid across the country for easier travel, and people are beginning to move out of crowded cities and into suburbs because automobiles allow for easy trips to the city without the hassle of living in the city at a higher cost and in a smaller dwelling than what that cost would support in the suburbs.

A television commercial for the 1956 Ford Customline Victoria and the 1956 Ranch Wagon emphasizes the ways in which the automobile became the pinnacle of post-war American culture. It begins with a young wife accepting an invitation that “she couldn’t have accepted three weeks ago.” Like so many people, she says, “we live in the suburbs, and Dave [her husband] must use the car every day for business.” She expresses how she felt like “a prisoner in her own home,” stating that she could only do her shopping “on Thursday night after Dave

brought the car home.” She’s able to accept the invitation, though, because instead of “being stuck with one expensive car,” Dave and his wife get to enjoy “all the fun and freedom of two fine Fords,” one of which they bought just three weeks ago. Toward the end of the advertisement, a male narrator tells viewers that it’s easy to become a “two-Ford family,” as there are “twenty different models” to choose from and “colors galore” (“1950’s TV Ad”). Ford clearly knew how to market their vehicles according to the developing needs and lifestyles in mid-century America. Engaging in more social activities, and having the freedom to do so via an extra automobile, means that there is more time for leisure and social networking. As this and many other advertisements of the times show, the automobile offered upward social mobility, and a chance to live the ideal, suburban life (at least as depicted on television).

In addition, the post-war years saw Chevrolet make giant strides in expansion and production, which allowed the company to lower prices, and Chevrolet was the best-selling American automobile brand by 1952. Between 1947 and 1949, production facilities and assembly lines were springing up all over the nation as demand increased. Flint, MI, doubled its means of production and plants were opened as far west as Los Angeles, CA. The next year, Chevrolet introduced the Bel Air, a new hardtop model that became an immediate top seller that same year (*The Chevrolet Story* 25). Chevrolet brought out the first automatic transmission in 1950, as well, branded the “Powerglide,” which was known for its sturdy construction and reliability, despite its being a new design. The comfort and convenience of an automatic transmission is the perfect metaphor for the period in which it was released, as it emphasizes the evolution of the American consumer. Automatic transmissions created less work and responsibility for the driver. Automatic transmissions allowed the driver to focus only on the

wheel, the gas, and the brakes – where he was going was all that mattered – and the transmission gauged itself according to the throttle.

Meanwhile, at Ford Motor Company, the 1949 Custom Sedan was the first all-new automobile design introduced by any of the Big Three automakers – Chevrolet, Ford, and Chrysler. Civilian production having been suspended for all three manufacturers for the entirety of the war, the 1946 through 1948 models from Ford, Chevrolet, and Chrysler were nothing more than refreshed pre-war models. The steel needed to manufacture new prototypes was being allocated elsewhere, to assist in the war effort, and the factory workers were too busy fighting overseas to contribute to the release of a new body style. The 1949 Custom, popularly called the “Shoebus Ford” for its slab-sided design, is credited both with saving Ford’s reputation as an automaker and ushering in modern design features such as integrated fenders and upgraded interior trim. The design was the best-selling sedan of the 1951 model year, and Ford was back in full force, trying to meet consumer demand by expanding production facilities. All of this production was fueled by the post-war economic boom.

These newly-built and upgraded production facilities required thousands of new workers, as well, providing the Detroit area with an unprecedented number of job opportunities, making the motor city one that supported the American Dream like no other. During this midcentury automotive revolution, Americans migrated to Detroit and the surrounding suburbs in order to work at Ford, GM, and Chrysler factories, or even tire factories. Beginning in the early 1950s, sales among independent car manufacturers were declining quickly as the market’s invisible hand deferred business to Detroit. The Big Three dominated the market, pushing almost everyone else to the sidelines, save for Studebaker and, arguably, American Motors. In 1952, Charles Wilson, who served in Eisenhower’s cabinet after holding the position of President at

General Motors, testified about a conflict of interest between the auto-industry and the government. He was asked if he was able to make a decision in the interest of the United States government that may have been detrimental to his stock holdings at General Motors, to which he responded, “I cannot conceive of [such an instance] ... what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa. The difference did not exist. Our company is too big. It goes with the welfare of the country. Our contribution to the Nation is quite considerable” (Terrell). Wilson’s answer exemplifies the deeply-seated bond between American culture, politics, and the automobile. His attitude here implies that the industry is too big to fail, and that the nation’s interests are forever intertwined with that market.

With a plethora of the new cars out in the market, a new infrastructure was needed to support the high volume of Americans commuting and consuming on local roads. As automobiles became faster and more efficient, roads had to be adapted to suit these newer vehicles. Consequently, a new infrastructure was needed to support the higher volumes of Americans commuting on local roads. In the texts discussed in this thesis, paved roads are commonplace, and dirt roads usually present a risk, even ending fatally in some texts. In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower took office, and he was a man who knew the importance of good roads, having studied extensively Germany’s *Reichautobahnen*, which is now known colloquially as the *autobahn*. Even though it was not until 1956 that the Federal Aid Highway Act was passed, Eisenhower knew for years that the infrastructure in America was in desperate need of improvement. He learned this while traveling cross-country in the Army, traveling along many, and sometimes even forging their own, dirt roads, trails, and paths along the way.

The need for and subsequent improvement of automobile-related infrastructures, a venture championed by Dwight D. Eisenhower, parallels the defining and refining of American

freedom in midcentury America. There are more dirt roads featured than paved roads in the fiction of Arna Bontemps and Flannery O'Connor in comparison to Breece Pancake's stories, which were written after Eisenhower's initiative and subsequent creation of the interstate system. After WWII, the United States emerged alongside the USSR as one of two newly-proven international superpowers, one who would eventually oversee the fall of the USSR after the destruction of the Berlin Wall. This level of international influence was unprecedented in America, just like Eisenhower's proposed interstate system was. This illusion of an everlasting positivism regarding American innovation is what fueled much of mid-century culture, as America yearned to improve not only for herself, but for the world in its entirety now that all eyes were focused on the US.

In the 1950s, the automotive manufacturers introduced, for the first time, more modern-day conveniences, that many drivers (and riders) take for granted today, than they have in any other decade, some of which are now considered essential for passenger safety: power steering; automatic transmissions; power brakes; air conditioning; the V8 engine as we know it, complete with overhead valves; and seatbelts. Even today, car culture is fueled by innovation. In fact, even small technological advances, like integrated lane-assist warnings, keep modern cars selling from year-to-year without flashy changes in body-style or engine performance, seemingly all of which have been widely-explored since the midcentury boom in automobile design and production. Even before the automotive boom of the midcentury, car culture was defined by this need to obtain the newest model with all of its improvements. This is evident in the work of Arna Bontemps, as he writes about automobiles during and after the era of the Great Depression. In the quarter-century following the second world war, no country could make a car like America

could make a Cadillac, and, even today, the domestic automotive industry is one that strives toward advances in safety, performance, and even sustainability.

Automotive technology advanced, and still advances, much in the same way as modern computer-software technology. As soon as one purchases the best-selling computer or phone, there is another, newer device released with a faster, more efficient processor. Now that cars are being combined with computers, the analogy becomes more literal, but in midcentury America, automobiles were an innovative technology in and of themselves. Simply put, newer and nicer cars have always pulled up to take the space of the vehicle freshly-driven off of the lot. The market for automobiles and the pursuit of the newest, nicest car available mirrors the way in which the American Dream is always something being chased rather than being attained. While the American Dream is not defined solely by one's automobile, it is most certainly a symptom of one's progress towards that goal. India Lassiter writes, "It is one of the fixtures of the American Dream" (Lassiter). Ownership of a vehicle and a home are key in attaining the level of autonomy and freedom that are essential to gaining independence as an individual, American citizen.

The automobile is the quintessential representation of post-war consumer culture because it allows for some personal expression while keeping some uniformity. For instance, one might choose a Bel-Air over a Thunderbird, and that's leaving out all the color options; however, cars were still universal enough to imply a social status. Driving a newer car, or a nicer brand like a Cadillac or Lincoln, meant that one had more money, and was advancing economically. Even today, assumptions about social class can be made based on the make of one's car. Land Rovers and Jaguars are certainly products that denote a higher economic bracket, unless one is living far outside of their means. Though, the freedom of choice in what automobile one drives is the key facet of the fixture that is the automobile. A CEO may choose to drive a Ford Pinto for the sake

of economic anonymity. But the janitor, who can only afford a Pinto, is one of the true members of a lower economic bracket, and due to financial restrictions, he has less of a choice in what he drives. So, as Americans are able to secure a position that is higher on the economic ladder than the previous rung on which they operated, life is made more comfortable, and this is expressed through one's vehicle. The culture of keeping up with the latest model car is one fueled by Capitalism and the marketing of goods in a society that values individual expression. Not all Americans will buy into the gimmick of "Keeping Up with the Joneses."²

A rejection of this new, consumer culture is exemplified in and forms the subject of much of 20th Century American short fiction. The short fiction of Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor, and Breece Pancake rejects the consumerism that makes up much of this new, post-war "American Dream," criticizing the new American "need" for nice homes complete with a TV, good clothes, and, most notably, "brand-new" cars that Americans already want to trade in for ones that are "even newer" before they can drive off of the lot in the one they just bought (131). In the texts analyzed below, the paved roads are commonplace, and dirt roads usually present a risk, ending fatally in some texts. While the fast, flashy appearance of the automotive industry seemed to be midcentury microcosm of logical positivism, one cannot be fooled into thinking that the freedom that came with the ability to travel longer distances at higher speeds did not come with significant risks. Speed kills, and cars quickly turn into mangled, steel coffins.³

Rejection of this car-culture and the consumerism that came along with it is not due to the inherent risks of driving a car, though. Anti-consumerism is often the result of the deep-seated inequalities that lie at the heart of America's history, problems such as systemic racism, which made the act of driving into a nightmarish experience for the black American, rather than

anything derived from a dream of any kind. Inescapable poverty is another inequality that can fuel the rejection of a culture that seems like it belongs to all citizens, when it truly belongs to only the middle-class, a socio-economic class that was growing at unforeseen rates and only allowed white Americans social mobility. Nevertheless, car commercials had become commonplace and American culture bent itself to fit around the automobile – i.e., interstate diners, drive-in movies, and other drive-through services. The car is not just a fixture of the American Dream. It is the essential fixture, as it mirrors the experience of one chasing that dream. Newer, better cars are constantly in production. The car fits perfectly into an ugly truth behind the Dream – that it can be a conundrum. White Americans may have been able to say that they were closer to attaining it, but black Americans, especially in the twentieth century, were not allowed anywhere close to it. And, shamefully, it was and still is not a matter of potential, but a matter of systemic inequality in America. The short fiction of Bontemps, O'Connor, and Pancake use the automobile symbolically, albeit in varied ways, to suggest that the American dream is something that is actively driving us rather than a concrete destination.

The second chapter in this thesis will examine two of Arna Bontemps's short stories: "A Summer Tragedy" (1933) and "Saturday Night: Portrait of a Small Southern Town, 1933," (1973), both of which were written in the 1930s and later collected in *The Old South* (1973). Bontemps, who published a great deal of poetry in addition to his prose, embellishes his stories with striking images that typically describe or examine concrete objects in a manner that evoke emotions relevant to the narrative, thus leading to a deeper, more unified meaning. These objective correlatives are oftentimes involved with, and sometimes centered around, the automobile. Automobiles are significant in more than half of the texts published in *The Old South*, some stories carrying the motif further than others. The car is representative of a higher

social status, and indicative of a character's progress in his pursuit of the American Dream. Sadly, for Jeff and Jennie Patton, in "A Summer Tragedy," one of Bontemps' most anthologized works, the automobile is integral in revealing that, for black Americans in the 1930s, the American Dream is a hollow, abstract idea, for it is unattainable for an entire race of American citizens who are not viewed with the same respect as white citizens. It is nonexistent because the white Americans who remain in power refuse to recognize the rights of free black Americans. Jeff and Jennie have done everything right in terms of ensuring their own success in chasing the Dream. With all odds against them, they obtain a Model-T; however, with this car, which should provide them with more freedom to do as they please, the couple commits suicide, driving into the river to drown themselves because of systemic racial inequality.

Bontemps also uses the automobile throughout "Saturday Night: Portrait of a Small Southern Town, 1933," (1973), to demonstrate the racist, anti-progressive nature of small, Southern towns in the 1930s. Instead of focusing on one couple, this text reveals the nature of the entire town. The town itself becomes a character of its own in this story, and the narrator, and his family, are set in stark contrast to the town. The narrator is from the north and fails to understand the traditions and conditioned behaviors of the Southern, black townspeople, despite being black himself. Bontemps uses the narrator's automobile, a Chevrolet with New York plates, in juxtaposition with horse and mule-drawn carts to reveal the differences between the progress of black Americans in the north versus the progress of Southern black citizens. The narrator, who is of a slightly higher social class than his neighbors, drives a car while the others lag behind in wagons on their way into town. The image at the end of the text, where several white men in a car call over a couple black passersby to push them out of the mud. The black men do not object, and they get stuck get knee-deep in mud due to the irresponsibility of capable, white men who

are free to drive away at the expense of the men who helped free them from the mud-rut. The images of automobiles that Bontemps incorporates in several of his short stories work to suggest the lack of socio-economic mobility that is unfairly and unjustly stripped from black Americans.

Chapter Three will discuss three of Flannery O'Connor's short stories: "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1955), "The Partridge Festival" (1961), and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953). Both "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" come from the same 1955 collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, while "The Partridge Festival" was finally published in O'Connor's *Collected Works*. In O'Connor's texts, automobiles represent danger: the car itself is a dangerous place, leads to a dangerous place, or is driven by a dangerous person. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the road trip that Bailey takes his family on leads to a violent, murderous encounter with the Misfit, who drives throughout the countryside killing people under the cover of his big, black automobile. Cars can lead to dangerous situations and to dangerous places, like the mental hospital where an assault occurs in "The Partridge Festival." And in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Shiftlet, like the Misfit, is a criminal who hides behind the wheel of a car. He is more manipulative than the Misfit and is evil personified. O'Connor, being a Catholic writer, often uses the automobile to drive her character's direction into epiphanic situations where a spiritual revelation is imminent. Sometimes the characters have a realization through idea of redemptive, Christian Grace; other times, they miss the opportunity. Cars are positioned as items of all-consuming consumerism, and O'Connor's texts suggest that the human soul can not be fulfilled by material goods. The car, in O'Connor, is representative of the American obsession with cars during the middle of the 20th century, but it also reveals the danger of the automobile and the danger of chasing the ideal, secular American Dream as a Christian believer.

The penultimate chapter of this thesis explores three selections from *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*, a collection published after the death of its author, Breece Dexter John Pancake: “Trilobites” (1977), which is the most well-known of all Pancake’s short stories and was published in *The Atlantic* before Pancake died; “In the Dry” (1979); and “Foxhunters” (1979). Pancake’s characters are poor, white Americans who are stuck in the arresting, poverty-stricken towns of Appalachia, the area from which the author hails. Many characters have cars, but the cars do not run. The old cars sit amongst overgrown grass like fossils waiting on a renaissance that will never come. Still, the characters hold onto their old cars despite their various states of disrepair, hoping that if they get them running again, maybe life will be as good as it used to be when those mid-century land-yachts – such as Bo’s 1964 Impala – were brand new in showrooms across the nation.

The automobiles in Pancake’s fiction are indicative of a character’s progress in pursuing the American Dream. For most of Pancake’s protagonists, the first step on this path is to escape the grotesque towns of Appalachia, and, to do this, these characters need running cars. Colly, the main character in “Trilobites,” is compared to a lone, locomotive tanker car that is rusted to the tracks at an abandoned train yard. Colly is dead set against leaving: he absolutely does not want to move toward Detroit, to Akron, Ohio, to make tires at Goodrich. Usually, the cars in Pancake’s fiction are direct extensions of their respective owners. Some characters, like Oattie from “In the Dry,” use their automobiles to escape past traumas. Oattie is the survivor of a debilitating, nearly fatal automobile accident. Pancake, having suffered injuries from a bad car crash of his own on Interstate 64, incorporates the inherent dangers of automobility in his fiction quite often. “Foxhunters” follows Bo, one of the youngest protagonists in the collection, who is a journeyman mechanic who is unsure about whether he should follow in his recently deceased

father's footsteps as a mechanic in his hometown, or if he should get his Impala running and leave next spring. When Bo goes Foxhunting with his boss and the older mechanics, he learns that the wreck may have been a double murder and that both girls were definitely sexually assaulted posthumously. Of all the stories in Pancake's collection, "Foxhunters" is most like the O'Connor's short stories because it ends in a clear revelation: Bo is going to get out of that town by spring.

In the final chapter, conclusions will be made about the texts presented in this thesis, and they will be presented alongside a discussion of what the future holds regarding automobility in America. As the automotive market pivots to favor electrically-powered engines and semi-autonomous technologies, car culture will change – it is changing now, as Tesla's Model S has been well-received in the space for mid-size sedans – and, these changes in the industry will affect the ways that the automobile is presented not only in literature, but in popular culture as a whole. Certainly, Americans will continue to drive cars in the foreseeable future, as the infrastructure simply does not support public transportation for all; however, the advances that have been made in electric vehicles in recent years has made the option of driving a fully electric car much more attractive for American consumers.

The cars in Pancake's fiction are a recurring concrete image – a motif – that reveals the American obsession with car culture and the impact it has had on the culture and life in Appalachia. Older cars are linked to a semi-toxic nostalgia and a denial of change in Pancake's fiction. Like in Bontemps and O'Connor, automobiles are presented with a warning due to the fundamental risks associated with driving through mountainous terrain. Sometimes it is not just the terrain or an accident that can lead to a fatality. Some of Pancake's characters are murderers who use cars and the excuse of an "accident" in an attempt to camouflage the crime.

CHAPTER TWO

ARNA BONTEMPS AND "A SUMMER TRAGEDY"

I scattered seed enough to plant the land
 in rows from Canada to Mexico
 but for my reaping only what the hand
 can hold at once is all that I can show.

– Arna Bontemps, “A Black Man Talks of Reaping”

Arna Bontemps published his widely-anthologized short story, “A Summer Tragedy,” in 1932, just as African-American automobility was on the rise. The above quotation, taken from Bontemps’ poem “A Black Man Talks of Reaping” (1926), highlights the blatant inequality and unfair economic conditions that black Americans suffered during the Jim Crow Era, especially for those who, like Jeff and Jennie Patton in “A Summer Tragedy” (1933), found themselves at the mercy of a new system of enslavement: sharecropping. Both “A Black Man Talks of Reaping,” one of Bontemps’s many poems, and “A Summer Tragedy,” a short-story later collected in *The Old South* (1973), reveal the futility of pursuing the American Dream as a black American during and after the Jim Crow Era – a Dream engineered for whites and built upon the broken dreams of black sharecroppers like Jeff and Jennie, who worked until they were completely “worn out” (63). It did not matter how bountiful their harvests were nor how diligently they worked. For all their “reaping,” only what a single “hand can hold at once is all that” these oppressed, used-up sharecroppers “can show.” For Jeff and Jennie Patton, even that carefully-portioned handful of their earnings can be taken from them, as their debt has been designed for perpetuity. Their Model T, a “peculiar treasure,” plays an integral role in their story,

operating symbolically to represent the cruel futility of pursuing the American Dream as an African American in the 1920s and 1930s (57). The couple's automobile, which should provide them with the freedoms and opportunities that come with automobility, is, instead, a reminder of their inequality and a metaphorical vehicle of their ultimate entrapment.

Beginning in 1914 and coming to fruition in the 1920s, Ford's mass-production techniques increased worker productivity and output.¹ This allowed Ford to buy raw materials in larger quantities, bringing prices down for automobile consumers. As the vehicle became more affordable, larger numbers of black Americans, like the Pattons, entered the realm of automobility. Ford sold more than 15 million cars by 1927, more than all other contemporaneous brands combined. The combination of a good product, productive assembly methods, and consumer desire produced unprecedented economic results in the automobile industry: the motor in Pattons' old Model T "started easily" (58). As David Kyvig notes, "The Model T's unchanging appearance and longevity were a great part of its appeal, as was its price, reduced to \$310 by 1921" (25). The demand for cars triggered a demand for products used to build and operate automobiles, such as steel, rubber, oil, gasoline, and glass. In this way, Ford, and its iconic Model-T, serves as the perfect symbol of the modern, consumer-driven economy. The automobile, then, symbolizes the American Dream, as revolutionized by Henry Ford. Jeff and Jennie Patton have worked hard their entire lives to obtain a running Model-T.

Jeff and Jennie have done everything right in terms of pursuing the Dream: they have been diligent, loyal, and hard-working; they own some fine – albeit moth-eaten – clothing; and they managed to purchase their own Model T. Still, sharecropping and racist attitudes, which include violence and intimidation, hold them back. The way in which the text presents the only road featured within it is reflective of the slim chance one had of escaping the system: "a tiny

thread of road, which passed directly in front of Jeff's place, ran through these green fields like a pencil mark" (56). The way in which the road is presented in the text reveals the near insurmountability of pursuing a flight out of the Delta as a black sharecropper (57). This same image, of a fine-pointed, narrow "pencil-mark" road appears three times throughout the short text as a sharp, narrow line that is nearly invisible when nestled between overwhelming fields of cotton. This is an image that emphasizes the Pattons' entrapment and the odds they face in escaping their situation (58). Their car is described as "tiny battered car" amongst the "immense levels" by which "the cotton was growing" along the roadsides, which reinforces the idea that their lives as sharecroppers have robbed them of retirement and a way out of the fields (58). The road is narrow, overgrown, and hard to navigate with the overgrown crops obstructing vision, making the road a half-tunnel. The road runs right in front of their modest cabin that sits among the fields, and they have a vehicle that runs, but, still, any chances at true liberty are only hollow ideas that fall flat upon execution due to the perpetual debt involved in sharecropping.

The description of the automobile is representative of the violence hidden beneath that façade, however: "The engine came to life with a ... bang that rattled the old car from radiator to tail light ... The sputtering and banging increased. The rattling became more violent" (57). While this description is an obvious foreshadowing of the couple's fate as it mirrors the final ride in its steady crescendo of moving engine parts that ends in violence, it is also connected to the inverted symbology of the automobile in this text. Their struggle has been one demarcated and affected by violence leading to death: the unexpected deaths of all five of their grown children in a two year time span may have been violent by symptoms of illnesses or by external causes that were most-likely fueled by racism, just as sharecropping is designed to perpetuate systemic racism; to produce their crop, they worked twelve mules to death, highlighting the violent, unsuitable

nature of their daily work; and Jeff has suffered a debilitating stroke due to the violently-grueling conditions of sharecropping.

For this couple and many, many others, sharecropping was designed to pad the pockets of the landowner while perpetuating poverty for those laboring to produce the crops. Even after many good years of farming, Jeff Patton will remain in debt to his landowner because the landowner starts with the upper hand, lending all tools, land, mules, and any other startup necessities at a high interest rate. As Jeff reflects, “It don't make a speck o’ difference though if we get much or if we get little, we still gonna be in debt to Old Man Stevenson when he gets through counting up agin’ us. It’s took us a long time to learn that” (60). Capitalizing on the dearth of work for newly freed, sharecropping was developed by racist, land-owning whites who hoped to maintain the socio-economic status quo of the Antebellum period by oppressing newly-freed slaves by hiring them to farm a portion of leased land in exchange for a portion of the goods produced on the borrowed land. Laws favored the the most unscrupulous of landowners, and, at the end of the year’s harvest, most sharecroppers were lucky to break even after selling off their portion of the cash crop, and this is by design. Sharecropping was one of few legitimate means by which a newly freed man could survive, but the system was designed specifically to keep the sharecroppers from thriving. Instead of allowing true freedom, sharecropping was a way to keep free black Americans from reaping the full spectrum of benefits of American, free-market capitalism, as sharecropping was a system designed to keep one in debt until death by finding themselves subject to baseless inflation of variable interest rates, unfair laws favoring landowners, and other legal forms of blatant systemic racism.

Towards the end of his life, finally falling “into the machinery of his mind like a wrench,” Jeff recognizes that sharecropping is simply slavery by a new name (57). This phrase is

connected to the image of a wrench falling into a large machine with moving parts – a machine such as an internal combustion engine – and causing a seizure of movement. Upon further analysis, the wrench operates as a metaphor for human rights: the act of freeing American slaves was the wrench that got thrown into the agricultural machine that drove the economy of every Southern state. Sharecropping was a means by which the machine could run without removing the wrench, rerouting moving parts to make do until Southern agricultural business models were forced to change again. Sharecropping played on the existing skills of freed American slaves and took advantage of the unprecedented situation that millions of black Americans found themselves in after the Civil War by offering a familiar job under false pretenses to struggling Americans who were searching for a way to make a living. The realization leads to Jeff's ultimate decision to end his life completely, a decision that his wife is in agreement with, ending all movement in each of their lives, forever. The Pattons worked for decades to produce many bountiful harvests, but did not reap a fair share of the net profits socially or economically: sharecropping in Louisiana robbed the Pattons of a fair chance in pursuing the American Dream. As victims of a system born out of and fueled by systemic racism, they did not receive fair wages for decades of productive work and were unable to escape their socio-economic station.

In his book-length study on sharecropping in the American South, Douglas A. Blackmon notes that “the region left prostrate by war, the ending of slavery, and the ostensible agonies of Reconstruction couldn't help but abuse its former slaves” (201). In Bontemps' text, Old Man Stevenson is a prime example of the malicious landlords described in Blackmon's work. “Major Stevenson,” who is old, sour, and set in his racist ways, “had the odd notion that one mule was all a share farmer needed to work a thirty-acre plot. It was an expensive notion, the way it killed mules from overwork but the old man held to it” (58). Even though adding a title like “Major”

before one's surname was popular in the south even for regular civilians, the title in the text evokes the memory of the not-so-distant American Civil War (57). Major Stevenson is one who is conditioned to keep the Pattons and all black Americans in a subservient social position. The high interest rates, unpredictable harvests, and unscrupulous landlords like him often kept sharecropping families severely indebted, requiring the debt to be carried over until the next year or even the following. Additionally, laws favoring landowners made it nearly impossible for sharecroppers to sell their crops without the supervision of their landlord. These laws also prevented sharecroppers from moving if they were indebted to their landlord, and Jeff and Jennie were required to follow all of these unfair laws.

The landlord would also determine the crop, micromanage the weighing and marketing of the crop, and control the recordkeeping, effectively stripping the sharecroppers of any choice in the matter. Houston A. Baker offers a terse, yet accurate, analysis of Bontemps' short story: "Arna Bontemps ... captured the poverty, depression, and hopelessness of the Southern tenant farmer" (205). Under this Jim Crow Era system of enslavement and oppression, the sharecropper rented a plot of land and paid rent with a percentage of the crop, usually 30 to 50 percent, keeping "the black Southerner poor, maimed, sightless and without hope" (205). Sharecroppers would borrow tools, animals, fertilizer, seeds and food from the landlord's store and would have to pay him back at incredibly high interest rates. Many black Southerners had no other opportunities, which completely undermines the premise upon which the American Dream is situated – that all Americans are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

While exposing the economic trap of working as a share farmer, Bontemps' text also pushes against common stereotypes concerning automobility and black Americans. Cotten Seiler offers an in-depth analysis of automobility on the "Other" side of the color line in America:

“Myriad representations of non-whites and immigrants as physically graceless, technologically inept and deservedly indigent served as reminders of the incapacity of racial others to fulfill the role of citizen” and driver (82). Also, according to Seiler, “A 1923 auto trade journal” designated non-whites “aliens in the auto consumer’s polity,” noting that even the famous boxer, Jack Johnson was not “immune” to these harsh exclusions (82). And, while Bontemps’ story subverts these myths about black Americans and automobiles, it also turns the car – a symbol of modernity, escape, and freedom – inside out, in order to reveal the oftentimes violent, cruel, and futile nature of pursuing the American Dream as a free, black, American citizen in the early twentieth century.

Jeff and Jennie know that they do not have the choice to leave, as they are in debt to Major Stevenson. Jeff’s production is in decline, too: last season he yielded 28 bales of cotton, and, this season, he has 25. In order to ensure a humane, dignified end, their only option is “to give up the struggle” that is their life (54). No one sums up their horrific ultimatum like critic Kirkland C. Jones: “having concluded that some of life’s situations are worse than death, the couple climb into their wheezing old Ford for the last time in order to carry out a meticulously engineered joint suicide” (183). Even though Jeff secretly admits to himself that “his courage had left him” following the loss of their “five grown children within two years,” he has the courage to carry on with the ride, for Jennie (58).⁴ Jeff says, “You mustn’t cry, baby ... We gotta be strong. We can’t break down” (61). Despite his own fear, Jeff displays his strength, determination, and love for Jennie. His solidarity reflects his unwavering commitment to their only choice – the choice to use their Model-T as a vessel that enables their suicide.

In challenging the stereotypes and questioning the traditions of the Old South, Bontemps’ short story illustrates why some must reject the status quo. Jeff and Jenny face their deaths with

courage. Not unlike Hemingway heroes, Jeff and Jenny face their bleak situation with dignity and grace, making a separate peace for themselves, albeit via suicide. The violent nature of their separate peace – the choice to die rather than become a burden to one another – reveals their desperate situation as hard-working black Americans. Sharecropping has worn them out. Even though they've acquired a vehicle, which should impart freedom, this freedom is only an illusion.

The description of the “little pounding motor” straining to climb the hill works as a metaphor for the Pattons' struggle to achieve freedom through the Dream: “The puff of steam from the cracked radiator became larger. Jeff realized that they were climbing a little rise. A moment later the road turned abruptly, and he looked *down* upon the face of the river” (61, italics added). Just as they begin to “rise” to the occasion, by acquiring all of the material things that would ensure upward social mobility, their journey takes an unexpected turn, running along the river, at an even grade. Because of their race, they are limited in their ability to climb the social ladder, and the flat, parallel road works as a glass ceiling for the couple – they cannot rise any further without going “down” into the river (61). Even when Jennie asks Jeff which way they are headed, he replies, “*Down* this-a way” (62, italics added). Despite their automobility, the only direction in which it leads them is downward because of their skin color and cruel, unfounded stereotypes.

Seiler notes that, in the early twentieth century, “car ownership was anchored by themes of confidence and self-determination,” which is certainly true for Jeff and Jennie. But, “the figure of the driver ... was established in racialized (and gendered) terms” (82). Even temporary trips out of the vast farmlands of Greenbriar Plantation, on which Jeff has toiled tirelessly for his entire life, were extremely dangerous for him as a black man. Just before the Pattons and their

Model-T plunge sixty feet into the river below, Jeff remembers traveling to New Orleans for Mardi Gras: “On that very trip Slim Burns had killed Joe Beasley.” After this reflection, Jeff’s “hands became steady,” and he “actually felt brave” (63). Jeff’s determination to die with dignity is catalyzed by the racism that he has seen, lived, and endured. His end would be no different than Joe Beasley’s or that of his twelve overworked mules. Jeff and Jennie do achieve a victory in their deaths, though. According to David Kuperman, “their suicide is a victory of love over death” (66). While the American Dream never quite materialized, nor would it be able to for Jeff and Jennie Patton, their death is a victory of determination and courage.

The final image in the narrative confirms that the couple has succeeded in their double suicide; however, it also captures the inversion of automobile symbology in the text, and, by extension, the inversion of the American Dream for the Pattons: “one wheel of the crushed and upturned little Ford became visible above the rushing water” (63). Their car led them to their pre-planned deaths, leaving their bodies to rest forever in the region that had so insidiously entrapped them through sharecropping and Jim Crow Era racism.

Bontemps is a master of these poignant, still-life images. The text, at certain times, paints a picture that emphasizes the theme or meaning behind the story in which it is presented. In “Saturday Night: Portrait of a Small Southern Town, 1933,” (1973) which was published in *The Old South*, as well, Bontemps begins the short-story by juxtaposing mule-drawn wagons teetering along down a dirt road in a caravan with a Chevrolet parked in the driveway of the narrator’s home. The story follows the narrator, who is not as familiar with small-town life, and the old, expired norms confuse him. The image of black men stuck in the muddy road due to the irresponsibility of white men indicates that the stagnant, old traditions and expectations imposed on black Americans are unacceptable. Leaving an entire race of American citizens stuck in the

mud in order for another race to advance in their pursuit of freedom, success, and happiness should be considered taboo, or, at the very least, insane, but it is the norm in this small town, on this Saturday night (and every night before and for a long, long time thereafter).

“Saturday Night” portrays the racial tensions upon which a small Southern town operates, employing automobiles to shine a light, maybe even using a high-beam, on the racial injustices in Southern society. In this story, Bontemps’ text ties the narrator’s identity directly to an automobile, reinforcing the idea that cars are a fixture of American identity, by giving the state of registration in his description of the license plates on the car in his driveway. The narrator hails from the city, New York specifically, and finds himself questioning the locals in search of a good reason for the tensions that he cannot understand, despite the fact that he is black himself.

Things appear to be backwards to the narrator. Here, in a small Southern town, the day “ends abruptly” rather than ending gradually, which is the typical, natural behavior and description of the sun; instead of the day ending gradually, it ends with a certain halt, perhaps because the night is more dangerous for the black folks in town, a phenomenon that is anything but natural (157). Their freedom comes to a halt as the sun sets simply because hateful whites want to terrorize black Americans under the cover of darkness. The narrator continues his ride into town in his battered Chevrolet, and, instead of people moving out of the way to let a car pass, pedestrians continue to walk in front of cars despite any risk of being run over. The people resist change at all costs here. If a road is paved where people once walked, the townspeople will continue to walk that same path, even if they find themselves in the middle of a newly paved roadway. Most traditions have been kept in place to combat progress, or any changes, positive or negative, that threaten the maintenance of the status quo for white townspeople.

The narrative opens with an image of a family of black share farmers, all in “identical cloth ... cut from the same tawdry bolt,” and behind them, a “smaller family of poor whites ... behind a team of leaner mules” ride together in their respective wagons, hobbling along the dirt road in formation (157). As the caravan continues, the narrator is standing still on his doorstep, with the Chevrolet in the driveway. Their physical positions in the story separate the narrator from the folks he sees riding in the caravan, but his socio-economic position, which apparently comes with car ownership, is what allows him to stay home a bit longer than those who must ride their mules into town. One of the men in the caravan has nicknamed the narrator, calling him “p’fesser,” and the narrator admits that it “is hard to explain the title they have given ... on first sight,” but he eventually ascribes it to his clothing, which results in him being too well dressed “for a share farmer and too poorly for a rural doctor” (158). Even the professor knows that his clothes reveal his socio-economic class, and his car works in the same way to reveal that he has more money than those who have to caravan via mule-cart.

Throughout the entire story, the road presents mobility at one’s own risk, and the risk of the road is apparent in more ways than one. For eccentric, old farmers like “Old Badfoot Tyson,” the road means being discovered because the road is the commonly-traveled path by all drivers, and the road also seems to become a place for vigilante justice among criminals. As a victim of literal highway robbery, Old Badfoot is upset when a truckload of local, black students steal his watermelons that grew too close to road. So, he goes out to the same road after drinking a bottle of his favorite hair tonic in lieu of liquor (due to Prohibition), which serves as evidence of his irresponsibility, recklessness, and disregard for the law. He looks for the truckload of boys to come around the curve where he sat patiently waiting, so that he could “cut loose with both barrels” and empty the bed of the truck bed of the petty thieves (162). Old Badfoot may have

been wronged, but the punishment is clearly too severe for the crime, and Old Badfoot has no one to hold him accountable, in courts or sitting alongside the road vigilante-style, for his unjust actions against the group of young boys.

Again, the main road is presented as a place where people get caught and get caught up. When the narrator gets to town on the first Saturday night, he sees the “Negroes walk rapidly ... All of them are getting off the main street, trying to make it to the darkened side-streets.” The narrator hears “a whip pop” and “wagon wheels grind[ing] on the cobble stones” (163). “Terror is on the street,” but the narrator and his family fail to understand why everyone is rushing around. Finally, when a “blubbery fellow” (163) bumps into them, they find out that a “white man been kilt on the pike jes outa town” (164). He had been run over by a car, and the narrator and his family, knowing full well that an investigation could not have been conducted yet, does not understand why the black townspeople have scurried away. They understand after the big man tells them that it was possible that it could have “been a cullud man what did that killin” (164).

The narrator describes the realization in a conditional manner: “The light breaks. We know right well that it was a colored man who was driving that car ... We had been told enough to put our minds on the right track. That driver refused to stop because he feared a mob” (164). In this passage, the narrator changes to shorter, more staccato sentences, rather than the longer, more complex sentences with which he described the ride into town. When the narrator is reminded of who will be blamed in absence of a verifiable suspect, the trauma of old oppressions sinks in. When returning to town the following Saturday, the narrator and his family are disturbed by the general lack of urgency and the blind conformity exhibited by the townspeople. The town is carrying on with business as if nothing happened, or as if the events of the weekend prior were

completely forgotten. No one seems to be affected, not even the chauffer, who smokes a cigar nonchalantly knowing he is favored by the whites who still see him as a second-class citizen, but as a second-class citizen who is good enough to cart them around in their fancy automobiles until someone gets hurt.

The story ends with another powerful image of the automobile, one that illustrates the consequences of keeping conservative, racist traditions alive in a small Southern town. Two young, black men stand in the mud after freeing a carload of able, ungrateful white men from the knee-deep mud in which they stand: “At the turn of the Pike there is an automobile stuck in the mud. We slow down. The white driver beckons to two young blacks who are about to pass him without stopping ... They do not speak but come quietly and set their muscles against the weight of the car. Presently it gets away” (169). The white men do not look back, thank their helpers, or offer anything in return. The help is both expected and unappreciated, and these old, Southern manners are dangerous for black Americans who also need help getting out of the mud but are left alone to sink in the earth to a point beyond their ankles in the pouring rain. To the narrator’s surprise, neither the boys stuck in the mud or the white men driving off are affected by what just happened, and that is the real tragedy: as he says, “Apparently there is no pang, no tragedy” (169). Again, Bontemps has positioned cars as one facet of a complicated American Dream, a dream that leaves black Americans stuck in the mud on the side of a road that is, essentially but not quite literally, paved for whites only.

Unlike “A Summer Tragedy” and “Saturday Night,” in “Lonesome Boy, Silver Trumpet,” the car is a mysterious means of transport to a whites-only party where the young, black Bubber will play his trumpet for their entertainment. Except, it seems that the party was all a dream, or, rather, a nightmare. Maybe it was even a “devil’s ball,” as Bubber’s Grandpa

suggests upon Bubber's return home (69). Either way, Bubber gets to the ball by falling asleep in the back of the finest car "Bubber had ridden in" thus far (64). Effectively, the car takes him nowhere, and that is the point Bontemps's text is trying to make: a car cannot allow a black man the same freedoms of a white man in America because America refuses to recognize the black man as free. As Bubber plays at the party, the dancers dance faster, and he plays faster, and the entire ballroom swirls around within the narrative until the "faces of dancers began to look thin and hollow as the breeze," and as the breeze blew stronger, everything "was fading away like a technicolor dream" (67). Here, the American Dream is what fades away: it is not about Bubber's ability to play or the kind of horn he totes beneath his arm. Unfortunately, the inability to pursue the Dream boils down to the color of Bubber's skin, and the end of the story reveals that there is nothing more insidious and dangerous than the racism that lies at the very heart of America's history. Bubber's car ride is just one small, transitional moment of Bubber's experience in this story. It is a fleeting, yet significant scene in this text and in *The Old South* as a whole, linking the automobile with dreaming and a lack of agency for black Americans behind the wheel.

In his poems, short-stories, and novels, Bontemps uses cars as a motif to reveal the injustices faced by black Americans. Whether it pertains to the dangers of driving as a black man, the dream falling in on itself as a hollow idea presented to black Americans, or the ways in which white people use black people in their own pursuits of the dream, Bontemps' texts point out the inequalities and the futile nature of the automobile, as it may provide some temporary and localized autonomy for black Americans but will always leave them stuck in the mud without anyone to help them out. As a motif in many of his short stories, the automobile is an object that represents the best of America, and, sadly, this item is almost exclusive to whites, as was the American Dream at a time when Jim Crow ruled the nation.

CHAPTER THREE

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S CARS AND KILLERS

No one with a good car needs to be justified.

– Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*

Unlike Bontemps' works, the fiction of Flannery O'Connor focuses primarily on white characters, but, like Bontemps, her tales warn of the risks related to the automobile. This epigraph comes from O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, and it is proclaimed by Hazel Motes, a man who starts his own church to avoid, or even escape, redemption by preaching from atop his automobile's roof. Ironically, Hazel's car is in bad shape despite his obsession with it, which suggests Hazel's instability. As a conservative Catholic, O'Connor's take on the new, American infatuation with cars and material consumption is indicative of a need for better moral values, as evidenced by her many texts. Instead of an empty and temporary fulfillment given by material goods, one should rightfully be filled by Christ's grace. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953), "The Partridge Festival" (1961), and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1955), O'Connor uses the automobile as a motif that reveals the spiritual blindness within her characters.

O'Connor lived and wrote during a period of cultural transition in American history. During the early 1950s, the post-war economy established a middle class in which disposable income and time for leisure were commonplace. Because of this economic boom, consumerism flourished, ushering in the Golden Age of the automobile. For O'Connor, this step toward commodification was dangerous as it threatened the theology that underscores her writing. Many of her characters become obsessed with material items, automobiles especially, and this fixation

on consumer culture and the acquisition of goods is what pulls them away from spiritual grace and into a secular, perfidious world. In O'Connor's fiction, the car, a symbol of American consumerism that is aligned with the city life, allows for an escape, as seen in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." However, cars oftentimes lead to or facilitate violence in O'Connor's works: Bailey's entire family perishes when en route to Florida for a vacation, which positions the automobile in a much more negative light.

For O'Connor, automobiles are a necessary evil: they provide characters with mobility and autonomy when used productively, but they can also facilitate evil when misused. In a later story, that O'Connor herself called a "farce," the automobile functions similarly, as a transitory space and an embodiment of commodification that leads ultimately to a violent, jarring encounter that facilitates equally-jarring epiphanies (432). Calhoun, the young salesman and the protagonist in "The Partridge Festival," considers himself an independent "rebel-artist-mystic," even though he is thoroughly entangled in his own materialism (776). His "small, pod-shaped" car suggests a vegetative, undeveloped nature, framing the narrative that ends with Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth coming to the realization that they have severely misread Singleton – a mass-murderer – and his motives (773).

Again, the motif of the automobile pervades the narrative in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Here, O'Connor exposes the truth about postwar American consumers. Shiftlet, the aptly-named protagonist, is an example of the Modern American, a conflicted figure driven to find meaning and satisfaction in material goods, as he is obsessed with the car he restores, rather than focusing on restoring a connection with the people around him. Shiftlet is an unemployed drifter, and his migratory status facilitates an uncertain identity that is magnified once he is able to use a car. His anonymity facilitates his depravity and selfishness, exemplified by his

abandonment of his new “wife,” Lucynell Crater, a mentally-handicapped woman of thirty with the emotional and mental capacity of a teenage girl.

In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the grandmother does not want to go to Florida due to her fear of encountering The Misfit, who has just escaped the penitentiary. However, she is adamant about going, despite her anxieties, and is the first to get in the car upon their departure that morning, bringing along with her a picnic basket containing Pitty Sing, her beloved house cat, and peanut butter sandwiches she had made for the trip. June Star, the granddaughter, says that the Grandmother “wouldn’t stay home to be queen for a day” (137).⁶ As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the Grandmother’s hopes and dreams are projected *from within* the car: “they passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. ‘Look at the graveyard! ... That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation’” (139). This exclamation serves as evidence for an imaginative escape on the Grandmother’s part, because she is able to project her own nostalgia onto the new surroundings provided by the road trip. As they head south, traveling through Georgia, the Grandmother reminisces about the old plantation days, asserting her authority on the matter by speaking in absolutes: “*That* was the old family burying ground. *That* belonged to the plantation” (139, italics added). The car becomes an extension of the grandmother’s domestic space and her home life, which is inherently connected to her Old South, conservative upbringing, which has shaped her worldview.

Certainly, the Grandmother cannot know anything definitive about the small graveyard that they pass on their trip, but the space she inhabits – the car – allows her to project her own ideas onto her surroundings as she and her family travel through them. They are headed to Florida, miles away from any “connections” she may have in “east Tennessee” (137). Still, she

imposes her own fantasies on the images seen through car windows, until they become what she wants them to be. In this widely-anthologized work, the automobile serves as a liminal space that provides the Misfit, as well as the Grandmother and her family, mobility and anonymity which ultimately allows her to deliver such a confident statement.

Cars, symbolizing the consumerism of the post-war era and beyond, often reflect socioeconomic status. The grandmother, who defines herself and her marriage by her husband's early investment in Coca-Cola stock, is certainly aware of the way in which her social status is perceived from the outside world while riding in her son's vehicle. When the family stops at The Tower for barbeque sandwiches, Red Sammy reinforces this idea: "two fellers came in here last week ... driving a Chrysler. It was a old beat-up car but it was *a good one* and these boys looked all right to me" (141, italics added). Red Sammy, like the grandmother, defines good people by their material possessions and outward appearances. For this same reason, the grandmother is able to look outside of the car and judge a poor little boy with no pants on: "wouldn't that make a picture ... Little niggers in the country don't have *things* like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (139, italics added). She feels that she is above him because of his lack of material possessions, which is inevitably tied to his race and the systemic racism of the Old South that she cherishes nostalgically. Despite his position in the doorway on the porch of a shack, which is physically higher than that of the grandmother who is in the car down on the dirt road, she looks down on him. His position in the doorway suggests that he is in a period of transition. Notably, the grandmother wants to frame him as he is, without clothes and in poverty, rather than imagining a better existence for him. She has no creative imagination of her own, which is why she cannot paint. She follows the status quo blindly, like a sheep. Still, her position in the car, as a white woman with Coca Cola stock and white gloves, elevates her sense of self, insulating her

from the reality of the world around her. The days of calling little boys “pickaninn[ies]” is what is truly “Gone with the Wind” (139), but she doesn’t realize it (or fails to acknowledge it).

Because the car is also an extension of her domestic space, it is one in which the Grandmother feels safe. As she gets settled in the back seat of the family sedan, she removes the cotton gloves that she wears when going out in public, setting them on the back dashboard. Pitty Sing and the lunch she made are in tow. The automobile is a liminal space that partially shelters its occupants from the danger of being exposed in public while still allowing them perspective on the outside world. The automobile is a grotesque extension of the domestic space due to the inherent risks of being on the road amongst other drivers. It is a home away from home in which the chances of one being killed is significantly higher, and it does not offer as much privacy as a home does. Having an automobile accident, as the Grandmother suggests, can expose one completely. So, she dresses appropriately, matching all of her accessories on the off-chance that they may crash: “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (138). While she may feel comfortable enough to remove her gloves, the car is a space in which one’s world can be turned upside down, quite literally, revealing all of its contents to the public eye.

The motif of the automobile can be approached from different angles, but at the very core, the family car is being used for a leisurely escape: a modest vacation. While the grandmother also creates a psychological escape for herself – perhaps into the past, into her own memory, into a reminiscent, mythologized history – such is not the case for her grandson, John Wesley. Instead, he uses the image of the automobile to avoid losing a car-trip game in which the two siblings would pick a cloud and make each other “guess what shape it suggested.” When June Star guesses correctly that the cloud is shaped like a cow, John Wesley says, “no, an

automobile,” changing his impression of the cloud at the last minute (140). June Star complains about her brother’s cheating, and the two siblings begin to fight one another. While this semantic cop-out – or escape from a loss – on John Wesley’s part is rather trivial, it is metaphorically significant. He replaces the cow with a car, which is representative of the transition that America underwent during the mid-twentieth century: the drastic shift from a largely agriculture-based economy to one of mass-production and modern industrialism.

The violent Misfit, however, uses the liminality of the automobile to enhance this anonymity and to lessen the chances of being caught on the run from the law. For the same reason that the Grandmother can remove her gloves, The Misfit, and his criminal associates, Hiram and Bobby Lee, can relax and hide within the “big black battered hearse-like automobile”; the fugitives enter the narrative as a collective, riding in this automobile together, before their separate identities are revealed (145). Automobile sales skyrocketed after World War II came to an end, and more cars were on the road than ever before. The Big Three dominated the market, pushing smaller automakers like Studebaker to the sidelines, creating a more homogenous American fleet of automobiles. Thus, the car functions like Hiram’s gray hat: he “pulled [it] down very low, hiding most of his face,” or like the trio’s borrowed clothing (146). With fewer brands participating in the mass-production of automobiles, there were more cars on the road that looked similar. For instance, the 1952 Chevrolet Fleetline sedans looked remarkably similar to the 1952 Chevrolet Styleline sedans. With fewer manufacturers, there was less variety – less individuality – on the road; therefore, the automobile was the perfect mask for murderers and other dangerous people.

While anonymity is a key ingredient in the recipe for a successful serial killer, mobility is also crucial. Even the Grandmother marvels at the technology of the automobile and its

facilitation of travel: “the grandmother recalled the times when there were no paved roads and thirty miles was a day’s journey” (144). As automobiles became faster and more efficient, roads had to be adapted to suit these newer vehicles. In the text, paved roads are commonplace, for Bailey groans when he hears that the road supposedly leading to the plantation house is unpaved dirt. So, while cars provided the mask, the rapidly-developing infrastructure allowed for increased mobility. Logically, the faster cars can move, the less time it takes to get away from a crime scene. In addition, the faster a vehicle is moving, the harder it is to identify the person (or people) in that vehicle, adding to the anonymity factor.

With speed, though, comes danger. And automobiles also prove to be *very* dangerous – fatal, even, in this text. When the family sedan flips, the impact breaks the nameless mother’s shoulder and lacerates her “broad,” cabbage-like face (137). And of course, The Misfit, who arrives in his daunting, hearse-like car, is death personified. What complicates the narrative, though, is the delivery of grace. The Misfit is the one who brings the Grandmother closer to authentic salvation, even though it is catalyzed by her fear of dying and eventual death: “she would of been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life,” he concludes (153). The Misfit kills her, riding off in his improvised hearse, radiating wickedness. But, salvation, in O’Connor’s works, is often delivered via violent, grotesque mediums. Notice, though, that The Misfit is only the medium through which grace *works* in this story. The Grandmother humanizes him in the midst of her epiphanic moment, calling him one of her “own children,” but she is not the medium – she is the recipient. The Misfit rejects any grace available to him, recoiling like a snake – he lacks the faith needed to believe that he is truly a child of God. He ends his killing spree by telling Bobby Lee that there is “no real pleasure in life,” realizing finally that there is nothing “fun” about killing, either. Still, there is no suggestion

in the text that he will stop killing.

The automobile in “The Partridge Festival” functions similarly in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” A description of main character Calhoun parking his tiny car serves as the threshold in this story. He has come down from a flat he shares in the city with the intention to write an exposé on Singleton’s mass-shooting and the town’s culpability in the matter. Clearly, his car serves as a means of transportation that allows not just for an escape, but for individual agency. Even though his car is small, it still provides the same amount of mobility as any other, and this mobility is essential to the narrative. The car provides Calhoun the autonomy to leave his parents’ house and move into an apartment, to drive to his aunts’ house in Partridge to explore the details of the mass-shooting, to take Mary Elizabeth with him to Quincy State Hospital in hopes of visiting Singleton, and to escape quickly that same visit.

Shortly after his arrival, Calhoun listens to the townspeople’s opinions of Singleton and balks at them, judging them for their own materialist tendencies while remaining oblivious to his own ties to and reliance upon materialism. In fact, his agency and ability to escape are facilitated by his material possessions. His car is just one of several examples in the text. While he is at the drugstore, drinking his limeade, Calhoun has a conversation with the fountain boy that escalates rather quickly into a difference of opinion. Rather than trying to understand an opposing viewpoint, “looking ... as if he were mad,” he quickly escapes the situation altogether, avoiding further frustration: “Calhoun put his dime on the counter and left” (779). Later, he repeats this method of escape when he buys his way out of a heated discussion in the barber shop: “Calhoun began fighting his way out of the bib as if it were a net he was caught in ... he thrust his hand in his pocket and brought out a dollar which he flung on the startled barber’s shelf. Then he made for the door” (784). He uses the money that he has earned selling “air-conditioners, boats, and

refrigerators,” items that further exemplify post-war consumerism in mid-century America, to escape situations where his opinion is challenged (776).

The “net he was caught in” is the trap of post-war consumerism (784). Calhoun can never realize his dream of becoming an artist because he is unable to stop being a salesman. He excels as a businessman: “he enjoyed selling. In the face of a customer, he was carried outside himself; his face began to beam and sweat *and all the complexity left him ...* and he was horribly good at it” (777, italics added). The complexities of his isolation and search for a more satisfying role dissolve amidst the thrill of a sale. As a cog in the titillating machine of American consumerism, Calhoun finds satisfaction. The night before the drive to the sanatorium, he dreams of “driving to Quincy to sell Singleton a refrigerator.” Calhoun’s subconscious desire is to sell something to Singleton rather than write a novel about him. Even his diminished enthusiasm for his art is framed in material terms: “his desire to write a novel had gone down overnight like a *defective tire*” (789, italics added). Calhoun is just another part of his car. Like the muffler, the motor, or the tire, Calhoun, is nothing more than a part of the car – he is simply the driver: “The boy sat helpless while the car, as if of its own volition, turned and headed toward the entrance” (791). O’Connor’s text emphasizes the helplessness of those who get caught up in the trappings of consumerism. The car seems to be driving Calhoun, much like the manner in which Americans’ desire for material goods was driving Americans to consume more and more objects that elevate socio-economic status.

Standing in stark contrast to the plethora of blooming azaleas, Calhoun’s “pod-shaped” automobile is suggestive of his isolation and insularity, as he is removed from and opposed to the conversations and events that are happening presently in Partridge (773). His pod-shaped, nearly seed-like, car stands in opposition to the blooming flowers that occasion the festival in town.

Finally, the text ends with Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun sitting in the seed-like car, having come to the harsh realization that Singleton was the opposite of what they had imagined. The two initially think of him as an innocent, sacrificial victim of the town's narrowness and bigotry, but they find that they have been narrow in their speculations about Singleton.

As he and Mary Elizabeth sit speechless in his car after their disturbing visit with Singleton, Calhoun realizes that the materialism that runs in his blood has "claim[ed] him" completely: "he was stopped by a miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles and fixed him where he was ... it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to be waiting there from all time to claim him" (796). The "miniature visage" (796) in her glasses is his great-grandfather, "the master merchant," whose "miniature" photograph was pulled from a dusty box earlier in the story (774). This is the same man who would have either been "one of the prominent men shot" or "the one to subdue the maniac," according to Aunt Bessie (774). By the end of "The Partridge Festival," Calhoun has abandoned completely the idea of being an artist in favor of being a salesman.

Calhoun's car is a means of temporary escape, but the autonomy that comes with it leads to a jarring, almost violent encounter with Singleton, the mentally-ill terrorist who shot five city councilmen. Unlike the family in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun can use the car to escape the criminal because he is locked in an asylum. On the way back, they realize how flawed they were in their initial perception of the shooter. Instead of accepting her presents and offering some kind of revolutionary manifesto, as previously imagined by Calhoun, Singleton had reached for Mary Elizabeth, but, thankfully, she was already in flight and out of his insidious grasp. After the depraved killer exposed himself to them, they hurried,

“scramble[ing] into the car ... the boy drove it away as if his heart were the motor and would never go fast enough” (795). Here, the text not only links the automobile to the most essential organ in the human body, but it also reveals that the car only allows them to physically escape from Singleton. They are also running from their own delusions about Singleton which are internal, like a heart or an engine, and a car cannot aid in escaping such things.

In his analysis of the final scene, Browning, Jr. writes that, “though they are incapable at the moment of fully articulating its meaning, the experience has been nothing less than a confrontation with human perversity in all of its naked horror ... freeing them to acknowledge their own superficial and immature understanding of ... human nature” (157). Their previous judgments about the world have been invalidated, which forces the pair to reevaluate their entire philosophies, right down to the notion of what defines good and evil. Both of them thought that the town was the source of evil, in its condemnation of Singleton, but they were wrong. The evil is innate in Singleton: he is a devilish figure due to the terror that he incites, yet this exact terror is what makes the moment of epiphany possible.

Like Singleton, evil is personified in Tom Shiftlet, the conniving trickster, in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” In fact, O’Connor, herself, writes that Shiftlet is the personification of the devil: “Mr. Shiftlet [is] of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil” (*Collected Works* 1119). Shiftlet’s evildoing is a symptom of a much more serious disease, though: the disease of endless desire that is inherent in consumers and necessary for a capitalist society to flourish. He will do anything to obtain Mrs. Crater’s neglected car. Again, O’Connor crafts carefully the name of her character, here: like a crater, she is shallow and empty. In general, the demand for and pursuit of the material was beginning to take the place of spirituality in American culture, as illustrated by Shiftlet’s lack of understanding in vowing

before God to care for Lucynell Crater – in sickness and in health. Shiftlet has marred the sanctity of marriage, which proves that his pursuit of the material is more important to him than any spiritual pursuit. His moral compass has gone awry: he will soon prove to be shift-less, living up to his name, topping out at a measly 30 miles per hour.

While his spiritual and moral intelligence is lacking, Shiftlet deceives himself further by stating that he has a “moral intelligence” (176). Clearly, his perception of himself and his intelligence is extremely limited. However, he is right about the loss of quality that accompanies the mass-production of automobiles in his conversation with Mrs. Crater. He and the old woman agree that nothing is built like it used to be and that older cars were better cars. Despite his awareness here, Shiftlet’s morality and spirituality become confused by and tied up in his obsession with the car. After he has left his disabled newlywed bride asleep at a travel-stop diner, Shiftlet thinks to himself, “He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others and he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: ‘Drive Carefully. The life you save may be your own’” (182). Shiftlet is unable to see the irony in his belief that one has responsibility for others, when he has just abandoned the helpless, angelic Lucynell at the diner. His priorities and perceptions have become completely skewed by his automobile, and, by extension, consumerism. Cleverly, O’Connor uses billboards, which usually display advertisements for car-driving consumers, to get her message across to a character blinded by that consumerism. The message here is that one must drive the vehicle – that is the soul – with care. The spirit, or soul, of the driver is put at risk when one places his faith in the material.

Shiftlet’s ability to recognize that “nowadays, people’ll do anything,” proves that he knows that what he does to his wife, young Lucynell, is absolutely wrong, which only amplifies his malevolent, manipulative nature. Other than leaving Lucynell for dead at a filling station,

there is no explicit violence in this text. Nevertheless, there is a sense of foreboding that runs throughout. When Shiftlet suggests that his name could be “Aaron Sparks . . . George Speeds,” or even “Thompson Bright,” he emphasizes his anonymity. Old Mrs. Crater even agrees that she does not know anything, good or bad, about the vagrant who has wandered down her road and up into her yard. Shiftlet’s potential anonymity is ominous, just like the mystery of the Misfit’s real name. More importantly, the names that Shiftlet lists are all connected to automobiles, his obsession: Sparks for spark plugs, Speeds for speedometer or the sheer speed of a vehicle, and Bright for bright headlights or high beams. His ability to blend in, to remain anonymous, is tied directly to the automobile. This sense of foreboding becomes apparent once again when Shiftlet picks up the young hitchhiker. The tension of the scene, considering O’Connor’s canon in which most stories build to a climactic spiritual revelation, is suspenseful, and no one really knows who Shiftlet is or what he is capable of considering O’Connor’s wide array of notorious villains.

Shiftlet’s selfishness and obsession with money come at the cost of human life. Considering the grotesque, exaggerated, violent nature of O’Connor’s fiction, leaving Lucynell without aid at The Hot Spot spells certain death or, at least, exploitation. The daughter and newlywed wife has an angelic innocence about her, as articulated by the waiter at The Hot Spot. He says, “She looks like an angel of Gawd!” (181). Evidence of Lucynell’s holiness is bolstered by the only word that she has learned how to say, which is “bird,” a form typically manifested by the Holy Spirit (176). In her innocence and disregard for the material, Lucynell is filled with and radiating the Holy Spirit. Blinded by his fixation on and infatuation with material objects – with getting and spending – Shiftlet abandons Faith, Grace, and Salvation, leaving Lucynell, the embodiment of the Spirit Itself, at a random travel stop on the way to Mobile, Alabama. The

Holy Spirit is at a roadside diner, and this grotesque image is tied directly to driving and road trips.

For O'Connor, the popularity and mass-production of the automobile were methods by which post-war materialism was manifesting itself in modern American culture. Cars in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Partridge Festival," and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" operate as symbols of consumerism while also working as transitory spaces that can provide a means of escape in the latter two. For Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun, their escape is from the town that has isolated and demonized Singleton, but it quickly turns on its head, becoming an escape from the miscreant that they once idolized. For the family in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the escape begins as an innocent vacation, but for The Misfit, the need to escape is nefarious from the start; the automobile facilitates the Misfit's felonious acts by providing previously-unattainable anonymity and mobility, thus enabling his criminal acts. Cars deliver both The Misfit and the Grandmother to a place where they will encounter a spiritual epiphany, and takes Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth to and from that place. The car accident and the obscene encounter were fundamental, though, as O'Connor herself said, "the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those which are all he will have to take into eternity with him" (59). While the violence in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is not apparent in the narrative, it is certainly on its way, as the text ends with "a guffawing peal of thunder from behind fantastic raindrops" that chase Shiftlet's car (183). In several of her short stories, O'Connor employs the motif of the automobile as a symbol of warning against American consumerism, and much of her short fiction can operate as cautionary tales regarding the grave spiritual consequences of mass-production and obsessive consumerism.

CHAPTER FOUR
VEHICLES, VIOLENCE, AND ESCAPISM

Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

– Robert Lowell, “For the Union Dead”

After his work was published posthumously in 1983, Breece Pancake received critical acclaim; in that same year, his collection, *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. His extraordinary use of language, accompanied by forceful, resounding themes, creates a microcosm of the darkest corners of Appalachian culture. The poverty-stricken characters who reside in these grotesque tales express a deeply-rooted need to escape from the harsh, West-Virginian environment that culturally, economically, and geographically entraps them. Throughout Pancake’s collection, the various automobiles operate – or, perhaps more accurately, do not operate – as a motif, and they are linked directly to Pancake’s characters’ ability to escape.

The terminal lines of Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” (1959), provided in the epigraph above, issue a warning to Americans who have bought into the cultural consumerism of mid-century American automobility. The concluding stanza works like a canary in a coal mine: it predicts the decline of the automobile industry in the 1970s while also alluding to the industry’s formidable economic momentum. Still, the “savage servility” of the automobile is a double-

edged sword: cars are necessary agents for increased mobility and freedom, for “servility,” yet the absurdity of their primacy in American culture, and their potential for violence, is nothing short of “savage.”

As noted by Edward Humes, “Oddly, the most immediately devastating consequence of the modern car – the carnage it leaves in its wake – seems to generate the least public outcry and attention” (Humes). Humes’ discussion of automobile accidents echoes back to the final image presented in Lowell’s poem: “giant finned cars nose forward” and slide “by on grease.”

Pancake’s stories are set in the early to mid-70s, when gas prices were rising to unprecedented levels. After OPEC gained global economic influence in the early 1970s, and the organization was able to raise prices on barrels of exported crude oil, the American auto industry applied the brakes, and the Golden Age of the automobile took a nosedive, “slid[ing] by on” the “grease” that was left over by this economic downturn. And because of the petroleum, or grease, market, automobiles slid into new era where fossil fuels are frowned upon and gas mileage specifications valued over horsepower values.

The protagonist of “In the Dry,” who is an on-the-road semi-truck driver, represents one end of the spectrum: Ottie has used his well-oiled rig to stay away from the region that traumatized him. He has his reservations about being on the road constantly, even though his profession keeps him at a necessary distance from home. In “Foxhunters,” Bo dreams of getting out, recognizing that his future in Appalachia will never be fruitful; however, his Impala does not run. He knows that the hills are not suited for him, and he wants to leave after his experience “fox hunting”; however, he lacks the parts needed to get his car on the road. Colly, representing the other end of the spectrum and working as a foil to his former love interest, Ginny, in “Trilobites,” is so deeply rooted in the past that he sees the road and automobility as something

that has simply paved over the railroads. At times, automobiles are representative of broken dreams or past traumas, such as Dawn's Impala in "Foxhunters"; at others, they are presented as vessels for violence when used improperly, as seen in "In the Dry"; and, while rare, some of the cars Pancake uses in his fiction allow some degree of escape, usually with caveats, as illustrated by Ginny in "Trilobites" and Oattie in "In the Dry." Still, most of Pancake's male protagonists have outdated ideas about automobility. Those who have broken cars dream of getting them back on the road, as if a running vehicle is a solution to the traumas they've endured, and most of these vehicles are older models, pieced together with myriad parts. Their obsession with the Golden Age of the automobile is for a good reason: they look back to a better time and hope to improve on the present by making it more alike the past. Conversely, the old cars become anchors to the past that end up hindering many of the characters.

Pancake's protagonists tend to yearn for a physical migration away from the arresting, Appalachian mountain range that they call home; however, they struggle to move forward, even when in possession of an operable vehicle. David Wilson notes that Pancake's male characters fall short because they root themselves in "old ideas ... still held in the '50s" (59). Even though Wilson's article is concerned chiefly with toxic masculinity in relation to these characters, he also argues that "Pancake held to those old ideas," as well, weaving them into his fiction, along with other autobiographical elements (59).⁷ In terms of automobility, Pancake's characters harbor a nostalgic view. The way in which some protagonists dream of an escape that never comes to fruition manifests itself as escapism rather than a productive flight out of the region.

As a story that begins and ends with its protagonist behind the wheel, "In the Dry" examines the opposing sides of automobility. The automobile, a major symbol in American culture and of American consumerism, provides agency. The characters who do not have running

vehicles are acutely aware of this fact; this autonomy provided by mere the idea of a car – of mobility and independence – is what they yearn for. Other protagonists, however, tend to use their operable vehicles to get out, but end up returning. In, “Trilobites,” Pancake’s most widely-recognized story, Ginny uses her sports car to leave in pursuit of a college education far from the Appalachians, but, upon her return, she stands in stark contrast to Colly, who fears moving away to Akron despite the declining conditions of his current environment. Colly’s fear of leaving is driven by the loss of his father and his bond to the family farm; in his grief, he is stuck in the past, unwilling to move forward. Even his dreams of moving forward are circumscribed by his father’s life experiences. Ultimately, automobiles represent the characters’ ability, or inability, to overcome their own, respective predicaments. Through complex characterization, and with the richness of meaning tied to the motif of automobiles, Pancake exposes the various risks and benefits associated with movement and change.

Images of movement provided by automobility can be found throughout the entire collection, but they are especially prominent in “In the Dry.” The first image presented in the text involves fast-paced, momentous automobility: the protagonist is driving a semi-truck. This image works as a threshold for the rest of the story, for Ottie begins to devolve as soon as he shifts to park. Ottie, the protagonist, admits that his occupation as a trucker is what keeps him from remembering his traumatic upbringing in Appalachia: “Then there is no more memory, only years on the hustle with a semi-truck – years roaring with pistons, rattling with roads, waiting to sift out one day” (147). Using metaphor to compare life with pistons, the primary kinetic components of any modern combustion engine, Pancake reinforces the automobile motif, and Ottie, in his return home, stumbles right through this Appalachian doorway to his past.

However, Ottie's escape, which ends up to be one of constant, monotonous vibrations, illustrates how automobiles may provide mobility, but mobility alone is not a solution. He's still waiting to "sift out," to slip right through a crack in the blacktop that rattles him daily (147). Critic Robert Le Blanc comments on Ottie's occupation as a trucker as integral to his escape: "Ottie's way out manifests itself as indeed a physical movement outward ... the restless, unfixed nature of this life allows Ottie to avoid an occupation of that 'dry' zone" that once stifled him (16). Ottie's job keeps his mind occupied with new sights that are just enough to keep his mind from returning to the past. The perpetual "roaring" of the pistons that make all eighteen of Ottie's wheels turn and "rattl[e]" against the pavement tends to drown out most of his memories about the insidious automobile accident that he survived as a young man. Ironically, Ottie's traumatic past is inherently connected to cars, yet, getting back behind the wheel was and is the only way that Ottie is able to escape the toxicity of the Gerlock family and their house.

When Ottie pulls his semi-truck onto the berm by his old foster home, all movement and kinetic description stops, and the ghosts of Ottie's memory gradually start to take over, dragging him backward, into the past. Shortly after the truck motor "sputters" for the last time, it "dies." The psychological protection that his truck provides him "dies" as soon as it stops (148). For Ottie, the mobility that his truck offers is key to his physical and emotional survival. He meticulously examines the shockingly static household where the Gerlock family still dwells, and his mind begins to drift toward the old horrors reflected back at him: "He stares at the knotted purple glow along the curve of his jaw – the wreck-scar – and knows what the Gerlocks will think" (149). In his absence, the melodrama of the incident has festered among the family; now, upon his return, all of the negative memories and emotions that he has moved away from flood his temporarily idle mind: "raspy yells were muffled by saws cutting into twisted metal"

(149). Even though Ottie is waiting to “sift away” on the road, he is certainly doing better than those who stayed behind. Old Gerlock cannot move past the accident and has made no attempt to do so. In the old man’s dated presence, Ottie is forced to recollect each and every perturbing detail of the past.

Mr. Gerlock is attempting to stand still in a time that passed long ago because he is permanently fixed to the accident that paralyzed Bus, his nephew, and left Ottie, his foster son, nearly unscathed. The tension of this mystery drives the plot of this text. The names are significant in Pancake like in O’Connor: Bus’s can refer to a common vehicle that carries passengers and their surname suggests that gears are locked up and unable to move. Mr. Gerlock makes no attempt to move forward. Although Ottie has distanced himself from the physical location of his dysfunctional and tragic upbringing, the terrifying memories of tragic results of automobility remain. Gerlock’s obsession with the crash creates a secondary impression of the suffering that Ottie once endured: “As he tries to find the first thing to turn them all this way, the pieces of broken life fall into his mind, and they fall *without the days or nights to mend them*” (149, italics added). The passage of time has numbed Ottie to his memories and emotions, but the scars remain, and they have now split open again.

As Thomas E. Douglass has suggested in his book-length critical study of Pancake’s life and works, Ottie realizes that his scars will never go away: “since his return to the Gerlock farm, he becomes aware that the wound has not healed and the drought of love and life will continue since ‘what turned them all will spin them forever’” (114). The image from the text that Douglass cites here alludes to the nature of the accident itself: it will “spin them forever.” Like a car losing control on impact, spinning until the friction of the pavement slows it to a stop, the Gerlocks are spinning perpetually, living their lives around the carnage left after the wreck. The

Gerlock family, locked into the past, refuses to move forward. None of them have cars. They don't even have a tractor. Instead, rotted manual plows sit around unused, wasting away like Bus.

For Ottie, time, with his automobility, offers some psychological healing; contrarily, Old Gerlock remains physically and mentally stagnant, and thus, he suffers, and time only deepens the psychological anguish.⁸ The rusty, aged plow that Gerlock commands Ottie to go fetch symbolizes the cultivation of Ottie's memories, and, also, the futility of Gerlock's brooding. Ottie brings the tool to the porch and leaves it there, and Gerlock never uses it, nor does he make further reference to it. There is no use for the plow, and there is no use in tilling the soil of Ottie's mind: it is not going to change Bus's situation or the feelings that the Gerlock family holds for Ottie. The Gerlocks are locked into an older time, with older technologies that have become useless.

When Ottie retrieves the plow from the shed as requested, he observes that the handles have "rotted away" (156). An old, manual plow can't be used effectively, if at all, if it has no handles; a tool once used to develop and cultivate nourishment has turned into an object with no purpose, as a sort of memento or relic. And, the shed itself, like the family, is in a state of decay: "The joists are spotted where Old Gerlock has daubed other holes with *axle grease*" (156, italics added). Axle grease does nothing to restore any type of structural integrity to the wood – it only fills the holes superficially. If anything, it will seep in and make the wood softer and more susceptible to warping. The axle grease is literally embedded in the walls, suggesting that the Gerlocks live within the automotive tragedy that Bus orchestrated, thus damning his family to static frustration. It is also interesting that the domestic space is being combined with the automobile. The dormant and dilapidated nature of the family only leads to further corrosive

damage that can never be properly repaired, just as many of the cars in Pancake's stories cannot be repaired. Not to mention, the old man doesn't use the axle grease for axles. He uses it in his shoddy attempt to repair a semi-permanent structure. It is almost as if he does not know what to do with automobiles and their parts or accessory items due to the accident, which lives in their minds in perpetuity.

Just before Bus kills Ottie's hunting dog, Beagle, he tells Ottie, "I'm going to show you something" (156). He says those exact words a second time, just before jerking the steering wheel at the outset of the debilitating wreck. The eerie phrase haunts Ottie, in a manner not unlike Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.⁹ The most harmless thought of Beagle becomes a reminder of the trauma he endured: "Blue-green flies hum her, but she does not snap them the way beagle had. *Got something, something to show*" (154). The simple image of a dog snapping at flies causes Ottie to reflect on the wreck. Douglass supports this idea by arguing that "the most innocent of encounters are reminders of the wound" (115). Even before he arrives at the farm, Ottie "glances up, and in the side mirror" of his truck "sees his face," obviously scarred, then remembers "Bus's voice from a far-off time, *I'm going to show you something*" (147). Bus's goal was to kill Ottie in the car that day, but he failed. Now, Bus is handicapped, and Ottie is literally and figuratively in the driver's seat.

Ottie is able to grow and move on with his life while Bus withers away. Despite the monotony of the road, his job has afforded him growth, both physical and financial. Ottie rummages through the closet in search of an old shirt and finds that it barely fits: "He puts it on, strains to button it across his chest" (150). Now that he is constantly on the move as a truck driver, he has outgrown his former life in his Appalachian foster home. Metaphorically speaking, he is exercising muscles he has never had to use before: these are the muscles of automobility

and self-sufficiency. Ottie is one of the few characters who uses his automobile in a positive manner.

Contrarily, Bus is literally paralyzed after using his car for the last time: “Bus sits crooked to one side, his hands bone-bunches in his lap, head bending. He is pale, limp, and his face is plaster-quiet” (155). Bus chose to use his automobility to enact violence, and his wrecked, mangled car represents his mal intent: Bus was “twisted” (---). An olfactory description reinforces the consequence of Bus’s choice to drive into the broadside of the bridge: “his hand smells of Bus’s – the smell of baby powder and bedsore salve” (157). Bus is barely living. His own reckless actions have taken away his mobility, and, as time passes, he has no choice but to waste away. The ironically-named character is completely dependent on others: Bus cannot move without someone pushing his wheelchair (155), his mother wipes his chin for him, and Ottie lights his “Cig’ret” for him (156). Bus’s murderous, deceitful motives backfired on him, and now he is stuck forever with his choice: the farm “has sealed it off in time, where he can live it every day” (160-61). He embodies the risks that are associated with cars, while Ottie uses automobility to his advantage. Bus will continue to live his life as a constant reminder of his own malicious and unjustified actions, of a failed murder and suicide attempt – of twisted metal and screams.

Bo, the young protagonist in “Foxhunters,” is more closely tied to the land than Ottie is. His late father knew everyone in Perkins, as Bo sees it. Bo often feels obligated to fit into his hometown, even though he knows that he fails to find kinship with anyone but Lucy, the boardinghouse “whore” (67): “he wondered why he could not claim kin to men by tolerating their music, their cards,” and “their foxhunting” (66).¹⁰ Even his mother, who he has had to care for since his father died eight years prior, is not much of a companion. Her idea of dinner with

her sixteen-year-old son is comprised of “complacently” sagging eyelids and multiple “bottles of colored pills” (74). Even though he has ties to Perkins, the benefits of escape outweigh the consequences of leaving for Bo.

Bo is a novice mechanic who works with older, more menacing guys who ridicule him whenever they get a chance. He ducks and hides in the bushes fearing that if his boss, Enoch, “saw him, he would stop; then Bo would be the ‘crazy boy’ at the garage for another week because he’d rather walk than ride with his boss” or any of his coworkers passing along the road (62). Bo doesn’t want to be driven by anyone else, especially considering that Bo knows that Enoch, Bill, and the rest of the boys are up to something. When Enoch comes in and finds Bo working on Beck Fuller’s Pontiac, he is glad to announce with a smile, that “Dawn Reed and Anne Davis went off the road . . . int’ the creek.” Enoch found them dead that morning, “all scrunched up like raisins” (69). Enoch smiles and offers up Dawn’s Impala for parts, and Bo vehemently refuses to take them. An argument ensues, and Bo quits. Enoch begins to backpedal, guiltig Bo, even citing his friendship with his dead father, fearing that Bo knows his secrets.

Geoffrey Harpham sums situations like this one quite well: “The mind of the Pancake hero is hypnotized by origins and ghosts,” and they often have trouble visualizing “ends or goals” (267). Bo is hypnotized into joining in on foxhunting, a tradition of Enoch’s. Bo rides to camp with Enoch, and he notices the removed car seats that sit around the pile of cold ashes. Enoch and his cronies have removed the seats from myriad wrecked cars, collecting their twisted souvenirs.⁵ Bo takes a seat, and, by chance, he has chosen “the Holy Seat,” or the seat Dawn’s body was in when the wreck occurred (80). Bo gets drunk on the moonshine Enoch gives him for the grotesque ritual, and, in his stupor, Bo can hear the men laughing, joking about digging Dawn up. This moment is the breaking point for Bo. He shoots at Cuffy’s hunting dog to “save

foxie,” a drunken attempt to save the sanctity of Dawn’s memory (81). He passes out drunk then wakes up and “lurches,” like a vehicle would, down the hill, and towards the secondary, determined to get his car running by the following spring (82).

Dawn’s Impala represents not only the violent potential of the automobile itself, but the violence inherent in the economically-frustrated region. Her life, and her automobility were taken from her. Her car, and the freedom it offers Bo, reveals the darker side of Bo’s flight out. Dawn becomes a victim of the freedom afforded by her car and automobility. If Bo is going to leave by spring, he has to use Dawn’s sacrificial Impala in order to get his Impala out of his mother’s back yard. While Bo wanted to “save foxie,” or save Dawn, he realizes that he cannot succeed in doing so, just as he could not succeed in shooting Cuffy’s dog, and Bo knows that the only place left for him is not the “Holy Seat,” but his own driver’s seat (80). He must run the risk to break the cycle and move away from all of this evil. Bo’s hope relies on his plan to get out, which he is finally able to visualize. He will get his Impala running, and he will run as far away from the Appalachian hills that have burned ungodly images into his psyche.

Colly, the protagonist of “Trilobites,” is thoroughly connected to the land because, for generations, his family lived off of the farm that his mother is in the process of selling to an eerie man in a fancy Lincoln. Unlike Bo’s father, who was probably a mechanic, or at least friends with a mechanic, Colly’s father relied solely on the land for income. The death of Colly’s dad drives Colly’s fear and guilt about leaving, causing a trade for a true escape for more escapism. Colly feels responsible for the sale of the farm: “Mom’ll probably sell it, too. I can’t run the place like Pop did. Cane looks bad as hell” (23-24). Colly wants to be able to cultivate the land like his father did, but his is not able to. He can barely operate the tractor, and he certainly fails to use it productively, resulting in the loss of the farm. He often looks into the past, daydreaming

of ancient times: “I look down the valley where bison used to graze before the first rails were put down. Now those rails are covered with a highway, and cars rush back and forth in the wind” (29). Colly wishes he could move backward in time, using this retreat into simplicity as a form of escapism.

Additionally, Colly does not understand why the cars “hiss” up and down the roads like they do (31). Even his description – they “hiss” – reveals that he lacks understanding (31). They speak a language that he cannot understand, and the hissing of snakes is the only comparison he can make. His ideals, out of all of Pancake’s protagonists, are the most outdated. He dreams of the Cambrian period as he looks for Trilobites in what used to be the Teays River: “I lean back, try to forget these fields and flanking hills. A long time before me or these tools, the Teays flowed here. I can almost feel the cold waters and the tickling the trilobites make when they crawl” (25). His nostalgia is rooted so deeply in that past that he can barely relate to trains at the depot. Colly is lost in the past, unable to fathom moving to Akron or taking a job at Goodrich.

Loss defines Colly’s life throughout the short narrative. He has also lost his first love, Ginny. She’s returned home after hearing of Colly’s loss, but now she is just a living ghost who Colly does not recognize and does not understand. He loved her at one time, but now she is no longer the girl that he once knew: “I know the cane is too far gone to worry about the blight. Far off, somebody chops wood, and the ax-bites echo back to me ... Ginny is no more to me than the bitter smell in the blackberry briars up on the ridge” (25). Ginny’s car, along with the passage of time, has caused a loss of connection. She speaks in a new way that Colly does not understand, and when she drives him around, he dissociates: “We drive. I look at the tinged fog, the colors changing hue” (32). He realizes that Ginny has changed and he has not: “‘You look great,’ she says. ‘Haven’t changed a bit’” (32). Colly does not respond to her comment, and after a while

Ginny says, “Let’s park for old times’ sake” (32). Colly is parked, and he has remained parked since Ginny left to college 2 years prior. The rift between him and Ginny has only widened since she left, and it continues to.

Colly knows that his life in the Appalachian ridges is unproductive, but he cannot let go of it. He recognizes his father’s death and his drift from Ginny, but he is slow to move. He does not have a car, does not seem to want one, and does not want to work at Goodrich, making tires for cars. Unlike Ginny, who lost her mother and then hit the road, Colly looks backward, not forward. Now, Ginny is only a red blur, amalgamated with the sonic waves of her horn, as she flies down the road in front of Colly’s place in her red sportscar, aligned with moving, doppler-effect sound waves instead of a still image. In terms of making a successful escape, Ginny is miles ahead of Colly.

Ginny, who has embraced her automobility, has moved on from Colly. She has gone off to college and currently dates a fellow who does “plankton research” (33). Her new beau stands in stark contrast with her former high-school sweetheart. The researcher studies living organisms that drift through the ocean and provide nourishment; oppositely, Colly is focused on trilobites, and he fails to cultivate the farm that has remained in his family for years. Ginny is associated with her new sports car and her flight out: “Ginny’s sports car hisses east on the road, honking as it passes” (31). She works as a foil to Colly, who drives a slow tractor that is of little use to him.

Ginny is a fast-mover who embraces the road and automobility, and she is part of the small fraction of characters who escape successfully. In a critical essay regarding the automobile in Pancake’s fiction, Brian Finnegan continues this idea: “The only character who takes to the road with anything close to a celebratory tone is Ginny in her sports car bound for Florida. These details show how Pancake provides Appalachian variations on flight narratives” (96). Ginny’s

flight serves as evidence for the possibility of a successful escape to a world of self-improvement. Even if Ottie hasn't figured out a definite direction for his flight, or a permanent home, at least he is in flight – at least he is in control of his own steering wheel.

Colly knows that he ought to move on, but he does not let go of Ginny until he forces himself on her at the depot. Because Ginny has continued her life without regard for him, he feels stupid, just like he did when he naïvely thought that they could live on “mangoes and love,” and exotic and ridiculous thought (21). Out of his own pent up frustration and conflicting desire for autonomy, he decides to punish Ginny: “I don't wait. She isn't making love, she's getting laid. All right, I think, all right. Get laid. I pull her pants around her ankles, rut her” (35). After being driven around and to the depot by Ginny, in her new car, Colly must flip the power dynamic in order to realize that being in control is not the key to moving forward. After he's done with her, he realizes that “she is somebody [he] met a long time ago” (35). Then, Ginny is reduced to her taillights: she flies out of the narrative as two “reddish blurs in the fog.” Finally, he understands that Ginny, like the presently passing train, is “too fast to jump” and there is nothing left for him to cultivate in his West Virginian home (36). Trent will drive off in his “dusty Lincoln” with the deed to the farm after the night fades, and his connection to Ginny has been blighted (27).

The tanker wheels that are rusted to the tracks and the old, abandoned depot are representations of Colly and his determination to stay in West Virginia: “The tracks run on till they're a dot in the brown haze ... Some tankers wait on the spur. Their wheels are rusting to the tracks” (33). The tracks that lead into the haze symbolize the potential life that Colly has ahead of him. Their existence provides potential for motion, but roads are quickly paving them over. The train that flies by the immobile, old tanker epitomizes Ginny: “she's just too fast to jump.

Plain and simple” (36). The fast train aligns perfectly with Ginny’s fast car. If Colly doesn’t move up to Akron and take the job at Goodrich, he will end up rusting in place like the tanker cars stuck to the tracks. By painfully observing Ginny’s movement past him, Colly recognizes that he must abandon the land to which he feels so deeply connected. After he comes to this realization, he says, “I wonder what to hell I ever wanted with trilobites” (33).

Initially, Colly refuses to move away; however, by the end of the story, he is determined to “get up” and get out (37). In his essay regarding the spiritual poverty of Pancake’s characters, Albert Wilhelm points out that “Colly never answers the basic question posed by his mother: ‘An’ just where you gonna live, Mister’ (32)” (44). Unfortunately, Colly’s idea of an escape is just another case of escapism: “I get up. I’ll spend tonight at home. I’ve got eyes to shut in Michigan – maybe even Germany or China, I don’t know yet. I walk, but I’m not scared. I feel my fear moving away in rings through time for a million years” (37). Colly does not have a cohesive plan. If he truly had eyes to shut in Michigan, the logical thing to do would be to move to Akron, Ohio, and work at Goodrich.

These male protagonists of Pancake’s fiction, to varying degrees, aspire to move out of the West Virginian mountains, but they aren’t quite as eager about it as Ginny is. Colly may be rid of his fears, but his father’s legacy still influences him: he only wants to go to those places that his father went, and he doesn’t know what he will do there. His fixation on the past continues to determine him, even in his flight out. Ottie realizes that the Gerlocks will never change or evolve, so he makes the decision to keep moving, riding the roads as a trucker without a final destination. The ending of “In the Dry” confirms Sheila’s prediction that Ottie “won’t stick” to “any place” (154). And, stuck in the middle of the two extremes, Bo’s only hope for a productive future relies on using Dawn’s Impala as a parts department. Even though he could not

stomach the idea when Enoch initially presented it to him, Bo will sacrifice the wrecked Impala and his emotions surrounding the incident to get on the road.

Pancake's short stories are full of cars that indicate the progress, or lack thereof, of the characters who are tied to or associated with cars. Some cars, like Ginny's, are fast-movers, and allow for an escape, but this escape does not come without risk. Ginny is still pulled back to her Appalachian home, even after she has established herself at an out-of-state college. Ottie, despite being a trucker who is always on the move, also returns to his hometown. The rest of Pancake's characters are either stuck in their toxic, inhospitable environments due to a lack of automobility or they use their limited means of automobility for evildoing. The characters that Pancake's fiction presents as protagonists are often poverty-stricken and partially dysfunctional due to their lack of financial agency. Cars offer freedom at a high cost – sometimes in dollars and sometimes in morals – that few characters can afford. Part of their dysfunction is their nostalgia for the era of the car boom, because there is a common belief among these characters that their old, dilapidated cars can offer the same freedom that they used to. However, in changing times, where coal mines and fossil fuels are unsustainable, the characters fail to adapt because they fail to accept that the world is changing, and they must be able to change with it in order to survive.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

In the short works of Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor, and Breece Pancake automobiles offer some degree of freedom to the characters, but this freedom typically comes at a price. For the characters in Bontemps' stories, the car, being an essential facet of the Dream for white Americans, complicates the pursuit of the American Dream for black Americans who face the hurdle of systemic racism and inequality. For the black Americans who did have a car, driving came at a much greater risk, for the road is a place where white vigilantes do as they please, hiding behind the disguise of their cars. For O'Connor, the freedom and autonomy that come with the car are juxtaposed with the risk of dying in a crash, or dying at the hands of a road-bound criminal like the Misfit. In Pancake's work, cars are like dinosaurs that rot away without giving the characters a chance to escape their disparate surroundings. While the car may afford more freedom via mobility, this representation can easily be turned in on itself, paralyzing those who get behind the wheel with intent to do harm, like Bus did when he tried to wreck with Ottie in the truck in "In the Dry." Characters who are set in their ways, like the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or the townspeople in "Saturday Night," tend to fare poorly as they have become stagnant beings that exist in their own toxicity with no ability to progress. The freedom and autonomy offered by an automobile can end quickly and fatally, as the trip in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" ends.

Novels – such as *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), or even John Steinbeck's memoir *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962) – about cars on the road have been widely discussed, argued over, and analyzed; however, linking automobiles through various short stories is something that has not been done

relatively as often. Because car trips themselves are episodic, the short story is the perfect genre for the automobile. A novel may feature many cars, on many routes; however, a short story usually has a tighter focus, and one car might be the focus of the entire text, which is useful when comparing multiple texts over a period of years. For this reason, I opted to analyze short stories in this thesis, rather than novels.

The genre is also most appropriate for the discussion of an object such as the automobile because, like the short story, it is a uniquely American invention. In *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, James Nagel explains the history of the cycle, arguing, “the short-story cycle is a rich genre with origins decidedly antecedent to the novel, with roots in the most ancient of narrative traditions. The historical meaning of ‘cycle’ is a collection of verse or narratives centering around some outstanding event or character” (1-2). The term “cycle” suggests progression, and the way the stories build upon one another is the key difference between a collection and a cycle. In both the short-story cycle and the short-story collection, the author has the freedom to explore innumerable possibilities because of the flexibility of the genre. Different time periods, social classes, and situations can be explored in one cycle, which is less common in the structure and plot of the traditional novel (1). Nagel goes on to note that the first short story cycles in America came when the American literary scene was trying to find a unique voice that was separate from English works that were still being read by Americans (3). Nagel does credit episodic works like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, but works such as these are merely precursory influences to what we consider the American short-story cycle to be today, not unlike the way in which covered wagons were precursors to the automobile.

Stories within a given short-story cycle also tend to be linked by a common motif, and all of the authors discussed above have published short-story collections or cycles that present

automobiles as a unifying motif that is suggestive of the American Dream. The analysis of the short texts of Bontemps, O'Connor, and Pancake follows the waxing and waning of the Golden Age of the automobile and the car-boom of the midcentury. However, by the time in which Pancake sets his narratives, it is apparent that the industry is not as sustainable as pioneers of the car-boom had hoped they would be. Gas prices skyrocketed as foreign suppliers of oil raised their prices and created a nation-wide gas shortage in America. Many of Pancake's characters look to older automobiles, which are representative of better economic times, as a way to escape their currently-blighted situations.

In addition to short stories and novels, popular culture also picked up on the significance of the automobile. From music to film, cars have been woven into the fabric of American culture and life. From The Beach Boys' 1963 hit, "Little Deuce Coupe" to Bruce Springsteen's "Cadillac Ranch," which debuted in 1980, American music has paired well with the automobile and all that it represents, both good and bad. So many iconic, American hits are directly related to the car, because driving on American highways is a shared, almost universal, experience. Whether it be Sammy Hagar singing "I Can't Drive 55" or Prince performing "Little Red Corvette," listeners can relate to the freedom and escape that are afforded by the automobile, and the faster, the better. Automobiles that are featured in popular music, even today, are aligned with automobiles from the Golden Age of automobility. No one is singing about their Tesla humming down the highway efficiently. Even Gaslight Anthem's 2008 hit, "Old White Lincoln," is focused on the 1955 Lincoln Capri, a car that represents a better, "easier" time when loving and living was a lot less complicated, at least from a nostalgic point of view.

Certainly, cars have been in the front seat of the film industry since *Thunder Road* (1958), wherein Robert Mitchum plays a young vet working as a transporter moving large

amounts of illegal moonshine. An even more recognizable title would be *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), whose entire plot revolves around a magical car. And, in 1969, *The Italian Job* premiered, featuring a multi-million-dollar heist that would be executed using Mini Coopers. Martin Scorsese's masterpiece, *Taxi Driver* (1976), studies madness, violence, and loneliness as Travis Bickle, played by Robert DeNiro, drifts through the city. The streets become, for Travis, a vision of Hell, and everyone who enters the cab of his vehicle affects his identity. *Mad Max* (1979) tells a story of a societal breakdown where gas is a highly-priced commodity, yet cars are still essential to life. Another recognizable title is Stephen King's *Christine* (1983), an adaptation of his book that shares the same title and year of release, wherein a 1958 Plymouth Fury reveals a jealous, criminal personality and mind of its own. The car, in general, is so deeply engrained in American culture that it may exist forever in some form or another, evolving continually to accommodate our changing and advancing needs as a society.

This evolution is already taking place, as the next phase in automotive innovation looks to the electric option, as companies like Tesla have cemented their place in the market, offering affordable vehicles that have a minimal impact on the environment. Electric cars have been around almost since the very conception of the automobile, but they have never gained momentum among consumers due to their limitations: finding a power source to recharge one's car while away from home, mileage range per charge, and charging time are all major points of concern. It was not until recently that technology allowed for longer driving range and better charging infrastructure in public places. In the future, literature may even focus in on public transportation than it does on cars, as city dwellers opt for more sustainable daily commute options than cars. Electric trains and subways, in conjunction with bicycles, or even electric

scooter rental services for the commuting that pesky, last mile, may become more popular than the conventional automobile equipped with a gas-guzzling combustion engine.

Another direction that the car industry is exploring is the self-driving, or autonomous, automobile – a technology that *Christine* fans may find horrifying. The ultimate goal of the self-driving car is to reduce the number of fatalities on the road. According to the CDC, more than 100 people are killed every day and over 3,000,000 people are non-fatally injured every year in motor vehicle accidents (“Motor Vehicle Injury”). Some of the issues that are presented in the texts analyzed earlier would be solved with the autonomous car. The development of the autonomous car is occurring in stages. Most of Ford’s vehicles being sold today are equipped with the pre-collision assist feature known as Automatic Emergency Braking, which is a system that detects when a driver is too close to another car, be it through a poor decision on the part of another driver or distracted driving on the part of the driver of the Ford, and applies the brakes gradually until the risk potential of a collision has been significantly reduced. So, we see that the first stage – autonomous pedals – has taken hold in the market. Next, wheels will be fully autonomous, and, eventually, a driver will not need to look at the road at all, and the car will be precision guided through GPS, which is a possibility being explored by technology giants such as Google. Thus, cars may come to represent something different, maybe even something safer, in literature of the future.

Today, the huge, steel beasts that dominated the automotive industry during the 1950s and 1960s are absolutely unsustainable and are impractical for the contemporary American car owner. A 1964 Impala in perfect condition would get about fifteen miles to the gallon, a specification that can be beaten by most pickup trucks on the market today. A 2019 Impala gets almost thirty miles to the gallon, which is indicative of this shift in favor of sustainability. The

need for radical innovation in the automotive industry has been greatly reinforced by environmental obligations to reduce particle and greenhouse gas emissions that destroy the Earth's ozone layer, affecting climate. If cars change, the cars that are written about will change as well. In the years to come, increasingly powerful hybrid or electric engines will, ideally, replace the traditional internal-combustion engine, saving our environment from being destroyed by toxic automobile emissions.

In most of the texts analyzed in this thesis, the narratives present cars that do damage. Rather than following texts that present the quintessential American road-trip, as many American novels have done, these short stories present shorter, more simple trips with fewer stops between point A and point B. From the Pattons' Model-T in "A Summer Tragedy," to the Misfit's dented, black station wagon in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," to Dawn's water-logged Impala from "Foxhunters," cars in these Southern, regionally-varying short stories are themselves damaged, do damage to people, or have already done damage to both. Now, in a new era of automobility, where cars do not allow the driver to have total control like they have since the first Model-T rolled off of Henry Ford's assembly line, cars may not do damage as they have in the past.

It may be a while before the meaning of the automobile changes in literature, but it is evident that the direction in which the automobile industry is going is one focused on safety, artificial intelligence, and sustainability. Automakers are no longer participating in horsepower wars; instead, they are competing for J.D. Power safety ratings, excellent gas mileage, and reliability. For now, the changes made to cars on the market have not changed American life drastically. Cars will have pre-programmed GPS routes and no controls for the transmission or accelerator, and at that point, automobiles will come to represent something different. When cars no longer have steering wheels or speedometers, they will no longer represent the same freedoms

or statuses that they represent in the fiction of Arna Bontemps, Flannery O'Connor, and Breece
Pancake.

NOTES

¹ However, as Ford pushed their line workers to produce more, workers began to protest the new production methods, as they led to constant repetitive tasks being carried out by one person – as made famous by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. So, Ford shocked the world in 1914 when he unilaterally introduced his own minimum wage for Ford Motor Company assembly-line workers, for which he is credited by several historians and economists as the father of the middle-class: “The company would pay ... a minimum of at least five dollars for an eight-hour day. The great majority ... had been earning \$2.34 for nine hours” (387). From this rich historical vein, then, the Model-T can be considered a symbol of upward economic mobility – as a seed planted for the middle-class pursuit of the American Dream. In raising dramatically wages for factory laborers, Henry Ford instilled in his work force the idea that hard work would, quite literally, pay off.

In addition to this, Henry Ford had a multicultural vision. Indeed, between 1916 and 1918, about 400,000 black Americans left the crooked farmlands of the South and headed north to industrial cities such as Detroit, a trend accelerated by Henry Ford’s \$5-a-day wage. Ford was the leading employer of black Americans at the time. Ford Motor Company had only 50 black employees in January 1916, and by 1923, over 5,000 were employed there (Krebs). “No other company came near that figure,” wrote August Meier and Elliott Rudwick in their book-length study on black Detroiters.

Ford also worked to unite and improve multicultural communities. After the rice plantations declined in the rural communities of coastal Georgia, Ford invested in those communities: “In the 1930s and 1940s ... just outside Savannah, where the toil and suffering of generations of

enslaved African Americans had made a few rice plantation owners some of the richest men in the nation, Ford created Richmond Hill Plantation” (Wilson). He created jobs, built schools, and worked to unite the community through his own philanthropy.

² The notion of “keeping up with the Joneses” originated from the family of notable and critically-acclaimed author Edith Jones Wharton. According to Hermione Lee’s 2013 biography of Wharton, “the phrase ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ is supposed to have been coined in reference to the great-aunts of Edith Wharton” who were extravagantly rich, thus allowing them to live very extravagant lives (22). They bought the best of the best. This idea was continued in American culture for years, and a comic strip by Arthur “Pop” Momand called, *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, ran in *The New York World* until 1940. Even today, Americans, unfortunately, are *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, this TV series title being an obvious play on the cultural idiom.

³ Sinclair Lewis wrote a novel, *Free Air*, about a cross-country car trip when cars were still a novelty. *Free Air* is one of the very first novels whose narrative is centered around the road trip, a subject that the Beats, and most-famously Jack Kerouac, would build a following around during the mid-to-late 20th century. Lewis juxtaposes railway travel with car travel, positing that car travel is more liberating and democratic than its aristocratic predecessor.

⁴ It is implied, from Jeff’s point of view, that their children have been lost to the harsh conditions of sharecropping: “Jeff thought” Old Man Stevenson’s one-mule rule “killed a good many share farmer as well as mules, but he had no sympathy for them ... he had been taught to have no patience with weakness in men ... a weak man was a curse. Of course, his own children——” (58). After this passage comes to an end, the omniscient narrator begins a new paragraph: “Jeff’s thought halted there” (58). In his old age, Jeff has come to many realizations:

that his hands no longer work as they used to, and he is reliant on Jennie; that sharecropping under Major Stevenson is a pointless venture in which he will never be free of debt or as a man, for that matter; and, perhaps, that his children died as a result of their involuntary entrapment in a system designed to wear newly-freed black Americans down to a nub, regardless of whether the intent is motivated by spite or fear.

⁵ Laurent Poret writes in detail about Ted Bundy, one of the most infamous of all American serial killers, in her book-length study, *Ted Bundy: Absolute Horror*. Like Enoch, Bundy also removed seats during the commission of heinous crimes: “the officer searched the car ... the Volkswagen’s front passenger seat had been removed and placed on the rear seats” (18). Law enforcement developed a theory that this was done for easier loading and more discreet transportation of lifeless, maybe even rigid bodies.

⁶ Here, O’Connor is making reference to *Queen for a Day*, an American radio and television game show debuting in 1945 that would interview female contestants, asking, at the peak of the interview, what she needed most and why she wanted to be Queen for a day. Shows such as this one began the American fascination with prize-giveaway game shows, a genre that is still popular in contemporary popular culture. The studio audience would then applaud, and whoever had the greatest reading on the applause meter would be deemed the winner – the Queen for the day. Most of the time, the prizes were vacations or appliances donated by the commercial sponsors; still, the show is a very obvious marker of mid-century American consumer culture, despite O’Connor’s subtle delivery of the reference.

⁷ Breece Pancake was well-acquainted with the violence that could result from automobility: his uncle died on a motorcycle as he was returning from a race in Ohio; he would write his mother about any wrecks he saw while driving “The Great Blue Whale” (Breece’s nickname for

his 1964 Cadillac) during his commute from their home in Milton, WV, to the University of Virginia; and, most unfortunately, ten days after Pancake's father, Clarence "Bud" Pancake, lost his battle to MS, Pancake's best friend was beheaded in an automobile accident on I-64.

⁸ The phonetic structure of the family name is suggestive of their immobility. Gerlock can be pronounced like "gearlock," and this metaphor of seized gears perfectly applies to the family. The axle grease is being applied in all the wrong areas. They have potential to move, but are stuck because of the automobile accident.

⁹ Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health condition that is usually caused by an intense, horrific event – either experiencing it oneself, or witnessing it. Symptoms often include flashbacks triggered by common, every-day images, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event. Cars, dangerous driving and PTSD are embedded in the canon, cemented there by F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, wherein Jay Gatsby is known to speed in his flashy cars, even after being pulled over, as a release or an escape from his trauma.

¹⁰ Bo's musical interests reveal his intent to get out of Appalachia. He doesn't seem to fit in. After avoiding two passing trucks on his walk to work, Bo is eventually picked up by Bill, a coworker of his. Trying to make small-talk, Bill tells Bo that he heard from Larry that Bo's "faberite song's that damn 'Rockin' Riber,'" referencing incorrectly the "Proud Mary" cover by Ike and Tina Turner that Bo later plays on the jukebox. Bill brings it up just to tell Bo that it's a "stupid song." He laughs, and then trails off: "Now Merle Haggard, he can tell ya . . ." (64).

Ike and Tina released their hit in March of 1971. At that same time, Merle Haggard's album *Hag* topped the country charts. An issue of *Billboard* magazine lists the soul-infused version of "Proud Mary" and Merle Haggard's *Hag* in the "What's Playing?" section (42). The moving rhythm of "Proud Mary" stands in stark contrast to Merle Haggard's Bakersfield country

sound. Considering past hits, like “Okie from Muskogee” and “Fightin’ Side of Me,” Haggard represents a more conservative, static point of view. *Hag* features the song “No Reason to Quit,” which I posit is the Haggard song on the jukebox in the narrative, as evidenced by the March 27, 1971 issue of *Billboard*. Bo wants to quit his job working for Enoch, the mechanic who uses Bo’s father’s memory to guilt Bo into going hunting with Enoch and his crew. After her initial whispering into to “Proud Mary,” Tina Turner bursts into song: “I left a good job in the city / Working for the man every night and day / And I never lost one minute of sleeping / Worrying about the way the things might’ve been.” Bo’s favorite song is the direct opposite of the popular Haggard hit that begins with a completely different sentiment: “There’s a circle of people where / I’m no longer welcome / I’m ashamed to say that I’m no longer fit / I could sober up tomorrow and face my friends again / But I’ve got no reason to quit.” Even after Bill laughs at Bo for his musical preferences, Bo “punch[es] F-6 in defiant remembrance of Bill” (66). Bo knows what he wants, and the influence of others doesn’t seem to shake him much, if at all, and, by the end of the text, Bo knows that he wants to get his Impala “ready to roll by spring” (82). Pancake’s word choice is no coincidence: Bo wants to *roll* on down the asphalt rivers that twist through the Appalachians in his Impala without worrying “about the ways things might have been.”

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