Traveling the Road through Stories

The use of “the road” as a story motif.

SLIS 5440
Fall 2002
Road work: Rational Behind this Project

- This presentation will examine the use of the road as a motif in stories by comparing its use in novels, movies, poems, songs, and urban legends.

- As with any motif, a road is only a small element of a larger picture, but in the examples examined in this presentation a road is a driving force in the success of the story.
On the Road: Researching this Project

- Fascination with the symbolism carried by the road began with the reading of Anse’s stream-of-conscience ponderings in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

- This led to noticing other materials in which the road plays an important role in the story.

- To locate materials for this project:
  - Consulted:
    - Irland’s Index to Fairy Tales.
    - MacDonald’s The Storyteller’s Source Book.
    - Ebscohost Online database.
  - Found Materials In:
    - Personal collection.
    - Public Library.
    - Online Resources.
Road Stops: Resources In this Project

- The following slides list:
  - The bibliographic information for the resource.
  - A short synopsis of the work.
  - The genre.
  - Symbolic interpretation of “the road” in the work.
  - Excerpts from the texts or supporting materials that reflect the symbolic role that the road plays.
As I Lay Dying


A truly bizarre tale of the Bundren family’s trip to Jefferson to bury their wife and mother Addie. Faulkner uses a stream-of-consciousness dialog to let each family member—including Addie—tell their private responses to Addie's life, death, and to describe the ordeal the journey becomes.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ♦ Novel

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ♦ Avenue for a Journey

♦ Possible symbolism of the road in the work:
  ♦ Modernization
  ♦ Change
  ♦ Pathway for trouble or bad luck
As I Lay Dying - Continued

Anse: “Darn that road. … - A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it. I told Addie it want any luck living on a road when it come by here, and she said, for all the world like a woman, “Get up and move, then.” But I told her it want no luck in it, because the Lord put roads for traveling: why He laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man. And so He never aimed for folks to live on a road, because which gets there first, I says, the road or the house? Did you ever know Him to set a road down by a house? I says. No you never, I says, because it’s always men cant rest till the gets the house set where everybody that passes in a wagon can spit in the doorway, keeping the folks restless and wanting to get up and go somewheres else when He aimed for them to stay put like a tree or a stand of corn. “

Winnie Foster’s desire for adventure is fulfilled one hot summer day when she meets the Tuck family in the woods near her home. What starts as a kidnapping turns to friendship as Winnie learns the secret that the Tuck family guards.

♦ Genre of the work: Novel

♦ Central role of the Road: Frames the story. Action starts and ends here.

♦ Possible symbolism of the road in the work:
  ♦ Adventure
  ♦ Change
  ♦ Choices
  ♦ Pathway for trouble or bad luck
Tuck Everlasting – Continued

Chapter 1, First Paragraph: “The road that lead to Treegap had been trod out long before by a heard of cows who were, to say the least, relaxed. It wandered along in curves and easy angles swayed off an up in a pleasant tangent to the top of a small hill, ambled down again between fringes of bee-hung clover, and then cut sidewise across a meadow. Here its edges blurred. It widened and seemed to pause, suggesting tranquil bovine picnics: slow chewing and thoughtful contemplation of the Infinite. And then it went on again and came at last to the wood. But on reaching the shadows of the first trees, it veered sharply, swung out in a wild arc as if, for the first time, it had reason to think where it was going, and passed around. On the other side of the wood, the sense of easiness dissolved. The road no longer belonged to the cows. It became, instead, and rather abruptly, the property of people. And all at once the sun was uncomfortably hot, the dust oppressive, and the meager grass long its edges somewhat ragged and forlorn.”

Eugene, an expiring young blues player gets more than he bargained for when he breaks the aging blues legend, Willie Brown out of prison. Willie has to get to the Crossroads to challenge a contract he signed with the devil - his soul to be the best blues harmonica player. The journey leads to friendship, freedom, and an understanding of the blues.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ♦ Movie

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ♦ Avenue for journey
  ♦ Destination: Crossroads

♦ Possible symbolism of the road in the work:
  ♦ Choices
  ♦ Pathway for trouble or bad luck
  ♦ Supernatural elements
Crossroad Blues by Robert Johnson

I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroads, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above, have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please

Standin' at the crossroads, tried to flag a ride,
Whee-hee, I tried to flag a ride.
Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by
Standin' at the crossroads, risin' sun goin' down
Standin' at the crossroads baby, the risin' sun goin' down

I believe to my soul now, po' Bob is sinkin' down
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, baby I'm sinkin' down

- From the November 27, 1936 recording session in San Antonio, Texas.
Glinda instructs Dorothy: “It’s always best that you start at the beginning, and all you do is follow the Yellow Brick Road.”

Sound clip: “Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”
A young couple ventures out to park on lover’s lane. While there, they hear that a lunatic has escaped from a local asylum. They decide to head home, but the car will not start, so the boyfriend goes for help and never returns.

♦ Genre of the work:
   ♦ Urban Legend

♦ Central role of the Road:
   ♦ Escape or route to privacy

♦ Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
   ♦ Choices
   ♦ Pathway to trouble or bad luck
The Road Not Taken


Thoughtful reflections on a point in a journey when a traveler encountered a split in the road and the results of taking the road less traveled.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ◆ Poetry

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ◆ Avenue for a Journey

♦ Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
  ◆ Choices
  ◆ Life’s Journey
The Road Not Taken - Continued

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And it has made all the difference.”
The Highway Man


Bess, the Inn Keeper’s daughter had a secret lover, a Highway Man who is betrayed to the Soldiers by the ostler for a ransom. The Soldiers use Bess to trap the Highway Man. She sacrifices herself to save her lover, but to no avail.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ♦ Poetry

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ♦ Frames the story: Action starts and ends “on the road”

♦ Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
  ♦ Pathway to trouble or bad luck

First Stanza:
“The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—riding—riding
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.”
The Road Goes Ever On and On


This short poem uses the road to explore the transitory nature of man and the choices he must face during a lifetime.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ♦ Poetry

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ♦ Avenue for a journey

♦ Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
  ♦ Choices
  ♦ Life’s Journey

“The Road goes ever on and on Down from the door where it began. Now far ahead the Road has gone, And I must follow, if I can, Pursuing it with eager feet, Until it joins some larger way Where many paths and errands meet. And whither then? I cannot say.”

A joyful tribute to a journey on the cross country highway, Route 66.

♦ Genre of the work:
  ♦ Lyrics/Song

♦ Central role of the Road:
  ♦ Avenue for a Journey

♦ Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
  ♦ Adventure
  ♦ Americana
“If you ever plan to motor west,
Travel my way,
Take the highway that is best --
Get your kicks on Route 66.
It winds from Chicago to LA,
More than two thousand miles all the way.
Get your kicks on Route 66.

Now you go through Saint Looey Joplin,
Missouri, and Oklahoma City is mighty pretty.
You see Amarillo,
Gallup, New Mexico,
Flagstaff, Arizona.
Don't forget Winona,
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernandino.

Won't you get hip to this timely tip:
When you make that California trip
Get your kicks on Route 66.

*Instrumental Interlude*

Won't you get hip to this timely tip:
When you make that California trip
Get your kicks on Route 66.
Come on in -- get your kicks on
Route 66.
Get your kicks on Route 66.”
The story of Sherry and Sonny who escaped from the boring routine of everyday life but soon got caught up in events that quickly spiraled beyond their control.

Genre of the work:
- Lyrics/Song

Central role of the Road:
- Escape

Possible Symbolism of the Road in the work:
- Choices
- Adventure
- Life’s Journey
- Pathway for trouble or bad luck

Final two stanzas:
“They left the lawman dying and they made their getaway,
Got back to the motel just before the break of day.
Sonny gave her all the money, an' he blew a little kiss.
"If they ask you how this happened, say I forced you into this."
She watched him as his tail lights disappeared around the bend:
The road goes on forever and the party never ends.

There's a main street after midnight, just like it was before,
Twenty-one months later, at the local grocery store.
Sherry buys a paper and a cold six-pack of beer.
**Road Caps: Story Analysis by Genre**

- **Five types of items examined:**
  - Novels
    - Realistic Fiction & Fantasy
  - Movies
    - Supernatural Ledged & Fantasy
  - Stories – Urban Legend
    - Horror
  - Poetry
    - Lyric poetry
  - Song Lyrics
    - Country & Americana

- **Geographical source:**
  - The majority of the resources deal specifically with American culture.
  - A number related to the Southern part of the United States.
The Road represents:

- Choices.
- They can be choices made in the past, present, future.
  - Most evident in the poems.
  - Representation of good choices:
    - *The Wizard of Oz*
    - *Tuck Everlasting*
  - And bad:
    - *The Road Goes On Forever*
Symbolic Analysis – Continued

♦ The Road as a pathway to trouble or bad luck.
  ♦ Explicitly expressed in As I Lay Dying.
  ♦ Historically roads have signaled the end of the urban way of life and the beginning of modernization.
  ♦ Elements of the unknown
    ♦ Strange travelers
    ♦ Traveling to strange places
    ♦ Creates a sense of distrust

♦ Cross Roads
  ♦ Supernatural Element
    ♦ Historically cross roads were the place that the bodies of hanged or tortured criminals were left to rot.
    ♦ Religious imagery
# Road Caps: Analysis by Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of work</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Theme related to the road</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As I Lay Dying</td>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Turn of the century American South</td>
<td>A difficult journey to bury a body. Understanding is not achieved, resistance to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuck Everlasting</td>
<td>Novel - Fantasy</td>
<td>Rural Countryside</td>
<td>Road is a path to adventure and with adventure comes danger. Characters achieve a deeper understanding of the basic goodness of the self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads</td>
<td>Movie – Supernatural</td>
<td>Modern America – New York &amp; Mississippi</td>
<td>A journey undertaken to return to a cross roads to bargain a soul back from the devil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wizard of Oz</td>
<td>Movie – Fantasy</td>
<td>Kansas and the Land of OZ</td>
<td>A journey to understand the value of family, friends, &amp; home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Boyfriends Death</td>
<td>Urban Legend</td>
<td>Anywhere USA</td>
<td>Cautionary tale about venturing out alone on a secluded road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Road Not Taken</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>A path in a wood</td>
<td>Reflection on the choices in life. The road not taken represents individualism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Highway Man</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>1800’s on the English Moors</td>
<td>Representation of the unlawful elements that ride the roads. Indication that even the “law” cannot be trusted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Road Goes Ever On and On</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Anytime, anywhere</td>
<td>Personification of a road as life, and the excitement and mystery of living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Route 66</td>
<td>Song - Americana</td>
<td>Untied States</td>
<td>A road that has become an American Icon. This song celebrates the mobile America that existed post WWII.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Road Goes On Forever</td>
<td>Song – Country</td>
<td>American South</td>
<td>A light hearted look at a journey down a dark road.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

Initially, I thought this project would be an easy one to research, but I quickly found while there are many references to journeys or traveling, there is little information in the story or motif indexes about the road itself. The resources that I used were those with which I had previous experiences and had connected the importance the road played within the story.

In reviewing the research process, I wish I had dug deeper to locate additional materials which might have better represented the impact that a road has upon the story. I am happy with the majority of the works included in this project, but there are a few that I think could have been replaced with better choices.

Roads are not only symbolic tools used in literature, they literally heralded a change in lifestyle for all mankind, especially in America. When paved roads began to criss-cross the country, almost overnight we changed from a sedentary society to a mobile one. It is easy to understand why the road has become a well known symbol of change, and of mistrust. The road brings good and bad, we must choose which one to follow.