

Myth of Cars in Literatures in English

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Abstract

Several writers have used technology and cars in particular to invent experiences to make the unbelievable seem believable. It all started with Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) representing one of the earliest examples where a car appears. The book heralded the presence of cars in literature which have ever since become part of many novels' plots, while serving not only as the protagonists' means of transportation, but have also helped them in terms of character development.

I will argue that the presence of cars has become more and more important throughout the 20th century, which makes me agree with what John Dale says, "For me, leaving out cars in contemporary literary fiction is like leaving out the horses in westerns." To support my point I will bring up some interesting examples, including Connie's car ride in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which is quite remarkable, especially if we consider the strikingly dramatic contrast Lawrence created with Sir Clifford's ride on his motor-wheelchair. Virginia Woolf too in the opening pages of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) writes about cars and planes as a reference to the aftermath of the Great War, when people were very disappointed by the misuse of technology.

But then came the death toll of technology, owing to the innumerable car accidents which often foreshadow death and break of relationships such as in E.M. Forster's *A Passage To India* (1924). Likewise, if we turn to American literature, the first instance that comes to mind is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) where the Rolls-Royce that kills Myrtle Wilson leads through a sequence of events to Gatsby's death.

Back in Britain, in 1964, Ian Fleming wrote his only children's book, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang: The Magical Car*, which can even fly. Indeed, this is just one of the kind of cars associated to the James Bond novels, the mythical secret agent 007. But the car in these sort of futuristic books is also seen as a metaphor for technology out of control, as is the case with J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973), a story about a group of alienated people who, having had a car accident, wish to experience what the narrator refers to as "a new sexuality, born from a perverse technology." So, as suggested by the title, car accidents represent a warning of the dangers of technology. Another 'evil' point in case is Stephen King's *Christine* (1983), the story of a killer car, possessed by supernatural forces. By contrast, here is another children's story of a rusting turquoise 1962 Ford Anglia, Harry Potter's 'flying car', *Harry Potter and the Chambers of Secrets* (2002). J. K. Rowling gets technology to play an unexpected role, that rusty car has magic properties, including flying, which are triggered by a silver button on its dashboard.

In post-colonial novels, the car, virtually taking the role of a 'character', often represents the evils coming from the world spreading of the American cultural model and of globalisation itself. I will just mention the Australian writer Matthew Reilly, whom I think best conveys the impact cars have had on Australian literature: "Maybe that class of authors writing more cerebral works don't find the car interesting enough on the human-condition level. But thriller and horror writers are happy to embrace technology and cars are the dominant technology on earth."

Following the lead theme of the conference, let me say that if at the beginning was God ... now is what D. H. Lawrence calls in one of his poems, "Oh wonderful machine, you who are man's idea of godliness."

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