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# Rebellion and Change on the Road

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Dr. Vogel

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### Rebellion and Change on the Road

Rebellion has been a prominent theme through the course of American history, beginning with the Revolutionary War and continuing up to now. Rebellion is often associated with a large-scale, world changing event such as a war or an organized protest, but to think that this is all rebellions can be is small minded. For those who live normal and orderly lives, a rebellion is taking to the road and doing anything out of the ordinary. Rebellions of this nature are often begun due to a need for a personal change, so while everything starts as a rebellion, change is the end result and is therefore the main focus of a rebellion. The issue with these rebellions is that they tend to end when the journey is over. This raises the question of whether or not it is possible to continue rebelling and changing while off the road, and if so, how does one go about doing that? After closely examining *Free Air* by Sinclair Lewis, Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and *Hope's Highway* by Dorothy Garlock, it has become clear that while the road is a place where anyone can rebel and change, only men can leave the road and continue their rebellion.

The wealthy Claire Boltwood and her father decide to travel to Seattle by car during the 1920s in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Free Air*. After seeing Claire in his garage, Milt Daggett packs everything he owns and follows the Boltwoods across the country to Seattle. During the journey, Milt and Claire become unlikely friends and decide to stay together even after their journey ends. After beginning the long journey, Claire finds herself stuck in the mud and unable to escape.

She comments to herself that she feels “like a woman, not like a driver,” insinuating that she cannot be both a woman and a driver at the same time (1). This was actually a common fear while cars were not as common as they are today. According to scholar Deborah Clarke, as the car rose in popularity, people began asking if “once a woman becomes a driver, can she still be a wife, or even a woman” (11)? This marks the beginning of the changes in Claire. Claire’s rebellion is that she is tired of living up to the societal standards of a woman in the upper class. She wants to escape from the constraints of her gender to live a freer life. She wants to be a person, not a woman. This form of change is crushed after a dangerous encounter with a male hitchhiker. After standing on the running board of her car, the man acts lewdly towards Claire by placing “his right [hand] on the back of [Claire’s] seat. That right hand slid behind her. She could feel its warmth on her back” (69). Even after Claire tells the man not to touch her, he “deliberately laid his filthy hand on her shoulder” and begins to threaten Claire and her father’s lives after being rejected again (70). Thankfully, Milt Daggett was driving close enough behind Claire to catch up and stop the man’s advances.

Just because Claire cannot rebel against her gender does not mean that she is inclined to stop rebelling against traditional gender roles. Despite certain set-backs, Claire is still in the driver’s seat and is still enjoying her journey, and she refuses to let this change. This is an unsettling notion for Claire’s first love interest, Jeff Saxton of the Brooklyn Heights. Jeff informs her of his concerns via telegraph, but when this does not deter Claire in the least, he announces that he is near her hotel and shows up for dinner. While Claire is thrilled and delighted by his visit, Jeff’s purpose was to dissuade her from continuing her journey. Historian Virginia Scharff notes that:

As drivers, women have been characterized as antipathetic to

automobiles. They have often been depicted as incompetent and flighty behind the wheel, helplessly ignorant in the face of mechanical problems, terrified of the rigors of motoring over mud holes or in storms, and timid (though dangerous) on crowded city streets (167).

Like many of the time, Jeff did not want Claire on the road because he did not think she could be on the road. While chatting, he asks "Wouldn't it have been tolerable to have poor old Jeff along, to drive down dangerous hills——" which implies that he doesn't think her capable of fending for herself (173). Granted, there are multiple instances where Claire needs to depend on Milt during their journey, but she learns from each issue and moves on, proving that she is more than capable of being a driver. All these issues comes to a head after Milt's car is stolen, crashed, and the thief is killed. Clare and Milt journey to the thief's home to inform his family of his death and are confronted with a marital dispute instead. Claire, who has become progressively bolder throughout the trip, decides she has had enough and bullies the couple into a reconciliation that benefits all involved parties. It is at this event that Mr. Boltwood realizes that he has had enough of road-tripping and orders his daughter onto a train to Seattle while asking Milt to follow in their car. Before the train departs, Claire begins to panic and pulls Milt aside, explaining that:

"I'm captured! I thought I was father's lord and chauffeur, but ... .

In his mind, he's already back in the office, running things. He'll probably turn me over to Jeff, for disciplining! You won't let them change me back into a pink-face, will you" (152)?

Over the course of the journey, Claire became self-aware. She saw herself for who she really was while in the Brooklyn Heights: an idle, indecisive, flighty thing who was pathetically useless to the common man. After rebelling and realizing her potential, Claire does not have the desire to revert back to her old life. Unfortunately, she does not have a choice and is whisked away to Seattle by train, leaving both Milt and the journey behind her.

The entire narrative changes as soon as Claire reaches Seattle. While anxiously waiting for Milt to join her, Claire is showered with reminders of her life before the journey. She succumbs to the glitters and comforts of her old life and all the changes she made on the road evaporate away without her even realizing it. When Milt catches up and finds her, “it seemed to him, as Claire again passed the window, that he did not know her at all. He had once talked to a girl who resembled her, but that was long ago” (165). Claire was unable to remain rebellious after being thrust back into the luxuries she abandoned on the road.

Claire is not the only one who is sexually threatened while on the road. Dorothy Garlock’s fictional novel *Hope’s Highway* features multiple women who become victims to sexual assault or slurs while on the road. After receiving a surprise visit from her estranged father, Margie Kinnard rebelliously quits her job and joins him and three other families on a migration to California. After a dangerous encounter with a man named Homer, the group continues towards California with Homer in close pursuit. While on the road, Margie falls in love with a man named Brady and quickly becomes Homer’s target for revenge. When the two get married, Homer attacks and both are nearly killed, however the couple has a happy ending and Homer is thrown behind bars. While Margie’s rebellion against her old life begins with the journey, change does not begin in her until the journey is nearly halfway over. Due to past experiences with a horrible boyfriend, Margie lives in constant fear of unwholesome advances

from Brady and abandonment from her father, whom she is completely dependent on. This changes after Margie realizes that “She would gain nothing by sitting here feeling sorry for herself” and that she “ ‘get[s] tired of always trying to do the right and polite thing and letting bitches like Sugar walk all over [her]’ ” (158, 159). After this, Margie rebels and begins to act defiantly against those who have hurt her. She yells at her father and talks rudely to Sugar, the wife and step mother of one of the families in the group. Enraged by her defiance, Margie’s father moves the truck to an obscure location, giving off the illusion that he is gone and gone for good. While Margie is saddened, she is not crushed, reminding herself that all her possessions “were only *things*” and that she would be able to live just fine without them or her father (195). This alone shows that the journey has already changed and strengthen her character in ways she had not expected.

Everything changes for Margie after her father dies. While she remains in control of herself, she simultaneously discovers her feelings for Brady, his orphaned niece, and her desire to stay with them. While looking through her father’s truck one day, Margie discovers her fathers fortune of nine thousand dollars. Margie throws away her dreams of Hollywood and California and settles for Brady’s family and ranch instead. Even in his death, Margie is completely dependent on her father by taking his money and refusing the job she dreamed of. By refusing to continue her dream, Margie becomes stuck in dependence on the men around her, both dead and alive.

There must be a reason for why both Claire and Margie can only be rebellious while on the road and while not in love with men. To fully understand this concept, one must be familiar with Henri Lefebvre’s “the Production of Space,” which speaks into the way that humans have constructed nature around their social needs. He claims that “(Social) space is a (social)

product,” meaning that the creation of space is the result of the need for people to have conversations about specific topics (1). These spaces are mere illusions since anything can be talked about anywhere, but it is more convenient to talk about a certain topic in a location specifically carved out for said topic (29-30). This means that humans need to clear away nature in order to build the location to talk about that topic, so while social space is being produced, the natural space is being diminished (30-31). In other words, there are certain social constructs depending on where the current location is. Claire can be rebellious on the road because there are very few restraints on the road, meaning that she can rebel and change as much as she wants. In the words of Katie Mills, “the road offered them a chance to reinvent their past or maximize their future, the opportunity to escape fates otherwise dictated by region, race, family, class, and ideology” (19). However, once Claire arrives at Seattle, the societal restraints return to her and void all the changes the road helped her find. The same happens to Margie, who lives in complete dependence on men. When her father was no longer an option, she rebelled and became independent, but as soon as she fell in love with Brady, that independence fled and she returned to her previous state.

Naturally, there are people who are told to travel by either their family or their job. Were one to pack up the car and travel after being told to do so, would it still be classified as a rebellion? Dorothy, the main character of Frank L. Baum’s fairytale *the Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, fits into this category. A tornado catapults Dorothy and her dog Toto into the magical land of Oz. She then begins traveling around the land to find a way back home, going from place to place as instructed by the Good Witches and the Wizard of Oz himself. Though Dorothy is faithfully following instructions, her journey is full of rebellions. The first instance of rebellion is the way Dorothy decides to travel. Before setting off, Dorothy asks the Witch of the North if

she is going to accompany her. The Witch refuses, insinuating that this is a trip that Dorothy must take alone. Since Dorothy lived without friends she could talk to in Kansas, this was not terribly off-putting, but it does not stop Dorothy from befriending the Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion and bringing them along with her. The very fact that Dorothy refuses to travel alone is rebellious in itself.

After a short trip, Dorothy and Company enter the Emerald City and demand to see the Wizard who “does not like to have people ask to see him” (Baum 64). Dorothy is able to pester until she meets him and is given the instructions to kill the Wicked Witch of the West. Dorothy does so, but she is calm and gentle. Originally, she actually did not want to kill the Witch since killing is evil, but after accidentally splashing water on and melting the Witch, Dorothy becomes a certified Witch Killer. This is a rebellious act due to Dorothy’s purity and kindness even after killing two Witches and saving the land of Oz.

After watching the women in these narratives, it becomes clear that women are free to be rebellious while on the road, but their rebellions and all the changes they bring are quashed as soon as the ladies return to their old lives. Since it is impossible for the women, it should therefore impossible for their male counterparts as well, but this is not so. Unlike the women, the men of these stories thrive both on and off the road.

Claire Boltwood’s eventual love interest Milt Daggett begins his role in *Free Air* as a successful poor mechanic. He owns a garage in a no-name town that makes him enough money to support himself, and while this was well and good, Milt was not satisfied. He longed for a better education and more sophisticated company, but he was satisfied enough to stay until Claire’s car entered his garage for a repair. After seeing Claire and her car, Milt’s desires for a better life flamed and he chased her as fast as his bug would take him. While following Claire,



Milt began to change. He became aware of his physical appearance and begins the process of looking nicer. He pursues intellectual conversations and copies the fine gentlemen he meets at different rest stops. After Claire and her father depart for Seattle by train, Milt follows in their car. Once he arrives, he enters a college, rents an apartment, and successfully makes Claire his own. Unlike Claire, Milt was able to thrive on change while off the road in Seattle.

Brady, the eventual husband of Margie, begins his journey due to tragedy. After his twin brother caught his wife cheating on him, he shot her lover and accidentally killed her in the process. Unable to cope with life without her, he shot himself and left his daughter to Brady, who is now single and strictly wishes to remain so after witnessing such a tragedy. After meeting Margie, Brady knows that he lusts for her, but he has no desire for a serious relationship. Over the course of their journey, Brady finds himself to be more and more interested in Margie as a person instead of as a body. He eventually confesses his love to her and she confesses her love in return. After this revelation, Brady realizes that “he now had a better understanding of what his twin must have felt for his Becky” to love so deeply that to be apart would literally kill him (Garlock 382). By allowing himself to fall in love with Margie, Brady is actively rebelling against his will to never love a woman seriously. After marrying Margie, the couple adopts his brother’s daughter and the three leave for his ranch to live happily ever after. At this junction, Brady is able to continue loving Margie as fiercely as he did on the road while Margie is seemingly unable to make her

Dorothy’s male counterparts also thrive off the road. After gaining a brain, the Scarecrow becomes the ruler of Oz. After the Wicked Witch of the West was killed, the Tinman became the leader of her minions. While taking Dorothy to Glinda, the Lion became king of the

Forrest. All three male counterparts end their stories in positions of power and authority, which is an awfully big leap from where Dorothy first found them.

Despite traveling on the same road together, the rebellions of men and women are not the same. Three different texts all attest to the fact that men can rebel and change wherever they want while women can only rebel while on the road. Unlike men, the rebellions of women vaporize as soon as they return home. Men can thrive wherever they choose to, but women can only stay in one form.

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