

**AMERICAN PICARESQUE: THE EARLY NOVELS OF
T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE**

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Marc V. Donadieu

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Sandy Utlely has generously offered to place my dissertation, "American Picaresque: The Early Novels of T. Coraghessan Boyle," on her research website on T. C. Boyle. I feel it is helpful to write a short preface about the dissertation to explain its purpose, while acknowledging the frustrations of being limited to formal English while analyzing Boyle's novels, which gleefully abound with slang. Since a dissertation is a lengthy piece of academic research that is the final requirement for a Ph.D., the intended audience is for literary scholars and graduate students. This stylistic format does not exclude casual Boyle fans, but these readers may not find the dissertation to their liking, even though I hope it can be accessible. If I were writing for an audience of Boyle fans, I would loosen up the language and broaden my focus to include more recurring themes while exploring Boyle's creativity and intertextuality, as well as the wonderfully outlandish occurrences which say so much about contemporary American society.

Given the limitations of a dissertation, it is impossible to cover every aspect of Boyle's early novels. To keep this dissertation manageable I chose a topic with a prominent presence in Boyle's early novels -- the picaresque. In the first chapter I briefly explain the elements of the picaresque novel and its long, complicated history, which sets the groundwork for analyzing how this genre functions in Boyle's early novels. The rest of my approach to the dissertation is explained more thoroughly in the first chapter, which also contains a brief introduction to Boyle and his place in American picaresque fiction toward the end of the chapter.

This dissertation was written after a summer and a semester of time consuming research, followed by another semester of intensive writing to meet graduation deadlines. I wish I had more time to let the dissertation settle so I could improve and revise it in minor ways to clarify and enhance some ideas. I have learned that a dissertation is only a beginning, not an end, so maybe someday I'll revise it and try to publish it. Yeah, right. I'll probably climb solo on some dangerous mountains and live with the bears instead. You may agree or disagree with what I have written, which is fine, because it means Boyle's work is being discussed. If you would like to give me any feedback please write to **mdonadieu@hotmail.com**. Thanks, Marc Donadieu.

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T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE**

Marc V. Donadieu

APPROVED:

Mary Ann Wilson, Chair
Associate Professor of English

Joseph D. Andriano
Professor of English

Willard Fox
Professor of English

Lewis Pyenson
Dean, Graduate School

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Chapter One

The History and Theory of the Picaresque Novel and T. Coraghessan Boyle's

Use of the Picaresque Tradition in His Early Novels

Even though the picaresque novel has a long history, originating in sixteenth-century Spain, it is a genre that has repeatedly fallen from use only to reemerge in invigorated form. Robert Alter attests to the genre's vitality and versatility, writing: "The picaresque novel is not simply a long finished episode in Western literature but rather a permanent addition to the storehouse of literary resources, capable of regenerating and transforming itself in a surprising variety of new environments"(ix). As literature developed more complex modes of expression, the picaresque genre followed and gradually changed from its foundation, to readily adapt to new settings and situations while still retaining its original essence and characteristics.

T. Coraghessan Boyle is a prolific, contemporary American writer who has published seven novels and four collections of short stories that have earned the praise of reviewers, yet very little literary criticism has been written about his work. His early novels use many of the protean conventions of picaresque fiction: episodic structure, biting social satire, the themes of alienation, travel, characters escaping their pasts and reinventing themselves, and frequent accidents to show the role of fortune in life, all of which are colored with a late twentieth-century American sensibility. Spanish and British picaresque novels have received reasonable coverage, but the American picaresque appears to be a critically neglected genre in need of investigation and research, especially as it is still flourishing. In *Water Music* (1980), *Budding Prospects* (1984), *World's End* (1987), and *The Road to Wellville* (1993) Boyle uses the picaresque form to generate scathing, insightful and often humorous observations of folly, hypocrisy, and cruelty through a colorful gallery of con-artists, reprobates, social outcasts and other less than heroic characters to explore the darker side of human experiences and the meanings behind them.

Boyle's use of the picaresque addresses the chaos and contradictions of our times and earlier eras to indicate how life is never as stable and affirmative as we like to believe. Rather than

developing morally idealistic and uplifting social themes, Boyle's novels tend to dwell on the sordid aspects of life to show a fuller, more realistic account of human existence that is often overlooked because of its distasteful and uncomfortable implications about the progress, or lack thereof, in the human condition. As Stuart Miller notes: "The picaresque novel does not give us the joy and courage of tragedy, often called the highest genre. The picaresque novel is ugly; it speaks of the possibilities of human degradation rather than human triumph. Yet it is just as 'true' to human experience"(72). The picaresque is a satiric and ironic structure that comically portrays an alienated outsider's lack of position and place in society while depicting the experiences, struggles and views that arise from such circumstances. Peter Dunn asserts the value of studying the picaresque when he writes: "At its best, this fiction probes the relation of self, role, and society in totally new ways by finding new ironic or parodic or tragicomic forms of the quest narrative"(15).

American picaresque novels are in need of further critical study, as their portrayal of alienated characters existing on the margins of society offers valuable insight into American life and culture. The picaresque protagonist experiences life outside of mainstream society, so his understanding of reality provides an alternate vision of the positive and negative aspects of American life. These protagonists are often in search of an identity and a sense of self in a confusing, chaotic atmosphere filled with much potential and many pitfalls. Much like their predecessors, American picaresque novels favor unorthodox literary approaches and narratives that are meant to jar a reader's sensibilities into a realization of new perspectives. American picaresque novels typically express the darker aspects of human behavior, such as corruption, cupidity, narcissism, scheming and violence, which run counter to established social ideals, yet exist nonetheless. By satirizing this negative behavior, picaresque novelists comment on what is wrong in humorous ways that may prove to be more corrective than a serious depiction. This perspective gives the reader a multiplicity of views and a fuller understanding of how unstable American life can be.

To understand the evolution of the twentieth-century American picaresque genre and Boyle's place in it, it is useful to briefly examine the original Spanish picaresque novel's traits and the history of the picaresque novel's transformation to clearly define its current status and

characteristics. The picaresque novel's history begins with the publication of four Spanish novels: the anonymously written *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599, 1604) by Mateo Alemán, *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) by Miguel Cervantes, and *El Buscón* (1626) by Francisco de Quevedo y Villages. These varied novels established the picaresque genre's identifying traits: episodic structure, first-person narration, social satire, travel, master and servant relationships, the uncertain parentage or orphanhood of the picaro combined with marginal social status, the role of accidents and fortune, and the pragmatic, often desperate struggle for food and survival. Dunn observes how the Spanish picaresque novel's inclusion of the events of daily life from a common perspective was a significant development: "These works have long been regarded as a highly sensitive mirror of the social conditions and mode of life of the time in which they were written, and this incorporation of material from the world of everyday has been seen as a formal rejection of the mode of romance and thus as an important step toward the institution of the modern novel" (3). By no longer focusing on the ideals of prosperity and romance, Spanish novelists were able to portray how ordinary people lived their lives and the problems that arose. These novels typically reflect the vast contrast between prosperity and poverty by showing the effects such conditions have upon an individual's behavior and attitude toward life and propriety.

The Spanish novelists used picaresque devices in creative, flexible and original ways without imitating previous works. These mercurial qualities allowed the genre to flourish in later years, but frustrated critics and scholars in search of a unified definition that is neither too exclusive nor too inclusive. Walter Reed points to the inherent difficulties of writing a conclusive definition of the picaresque novel: "The term 'genre,' as applied to the picaresque in particular and the novel in general, is misleading. . . It implies a more stable set of rules than in fact ever pertained, and a greater commitment to the idea of such rules than can be discerned from the texts" (56). The picaresque novel's dynamic properties and penchant for breaking conventions, combined with its ability to absorb a wide variety of influences, cultures and settings, have made it elusive and difficult to comprehensively define. For every rule or tendency there is almost always an exception

and picaresque novelists are always finding ways to subvert established traditions to yield new meanings and possibilities.

W. M. Frohock observes this dilemma by writing: "The awareness of the picaresque as a sub-genre of the novel dates from a moment when the form had already gone into decline. . . . By the time the nature of the picaresque novel had become visible to critics, at the dawn of the Age of Criticism, the form had gone through so many mutations as to make it uncommonly hard to see steadily and whole ("The Idea" 44). Too strict a definition inevitably leaves out significant works that contributed to the genre's development, a definition which Dunn criticizes by stating: "The prevailing formalist model of the picaresque has had the effect of restricting the canon to a very small handful of works"(14). An overly broad categorization renders the term vague and useless by applying it to novels that are clearly not picaresque. Since these novels have so many variations, the only critical consensus is that any comprehensive definition must have flexibility to encompass the genre's continual evolution. As Harry Sieber notes: "The word 'picaresque' seems to have shared the same fate as other literary, critical and descriptive terms such as conceit, irony, satire, naturalism, classicism and romanticism, in that attempts at precise definition have produced more confusion than understanding"(1).

The most effective definition is offered by Claudio Guillén, who classifies eight essential characteristics of the original Spanish picaresque while insisting: "No work embodies completely the picaresque genre"(72). What follows is a brief summary of Guillén's main argument.

1. The picaro and how he is defined is the main focus of the novel.
2. The narrative style is pseudoautobiography.
3. The narrative has a deliberately subjective viewpoint.
4. The picaro questions social norms and values and never stops learning or observing.
5. There is a constant drive for subsistence because of the lack of food and money.
6. The picaro is a close observer of the various conditions from all areas in life and as a result, his observations satirize the prevailing social conditions.
7. The picaro is often involved with travel and adventure through all spheres of life.

8. A picaresque novel has an episodic structure that depicts the various experiences the picaro. (71-89)

These eight points by Guillén serve as a general guideline that allows for adaptability and changes within the genre without resorting to many exceptions or contradictions. Robert Scholes concurs: “Guillén’s characteristics are not meant to be an elaborate litmus for testing the quality of various picaresque novels but a scheme for following developments in the literary system” (“Structuralist Poetics” 141). While there is no strict formula to determine how many of these eight elements must be contained in a novel, it is necessary for a majority of them to be present in a significant manner for a novel to qualify as picaresque. A novel may have picaresque aspects, but simply having one or two of the above qualities, such as autobiography and travel, does not qualify it as a picaresque novel. These characteristics were derived from the earlier examples of the genre, yet their influence is still relevant and pervasive in defining picaresque literature, especially when showing how the genre has changed. The only characteristic I would add to Guillén’s system is the protagonist’s comic misadventures in life, which gives a picaresque novel its essential flair and zest. These misadventures contribute to the genre’s humorous, lively tone in its realistic depiction of the unpredictable and unexpected twists of life, which is why this form has persisted. What makes these comic misadventures significant is the varied reactions they cause in the reader, ranging from shock and disbelief to outright laughter. The latter is more typical as the reader is more prone to laugh at a protagonist’s predicament rather than sympathize with him, which distinguishes the picaresque from tragedy and romance.

While the picaresque novel’s primary characteristics are essential in defining it, there are quite a few secondary characteristics that are evident to some degree in many of these novels, though nonexistent in others. These secondary features do not qualify a novel as picaresque but they frequently recur, so it is useful to point them out, as they lend such novels their characteristic feel and gritty outlook on life. First, picaresque novels attract attention through their unorthodox narration of events and attitudes that question social assumptions and practices to show how reality is often different from appearances. Second, picaresque protagonists occasionally break laws

and defy social conventions as a means of survival, which is related to their adoption of disguises on occasion and their use of scams and trickery to deceive others. Next, picaresque novels are usually deterministic and naturalistic in their depiction of the protagonist's misadventures and only later do these characters show any degree of free will. As fortune's playthings, these protagonists are subject to frequent accidents that guide their fate while showing their resilience in all situations. Finally, picaresque novelists often make use of caricature, the grotesque and scatology to graphically portray the unpleasant aspects of life while satirizing it. "There is in picaresque fiction," Scholes notes, "--from its earliest beginnings--a special relish for the grotesque details of contemporary life and an appreciation of the fact that there is always a catch. The satirist often has his vision of Utopia. The picaresque writer expects that there will be catches even there" (*Fabulation* 165).

In some respects, it is easier to categorize the picaresque by stating what it is not since it borrows many devices and techniques from other genres without fully subsuming those generic characteristics. Miller explains: "The picaresque novel. . . is a genuinely distinct genre. We recognize in it a group of formal devices directed toward projecting a unique sense of life. It is not a 'realistic' rendering of historical circumstances nor a sloppy precursor of the realistic novel. It is different in form and content from comedy and the comic novel"(132). This ability to absorb influences while still remaining distinct is a prominent feature of many picaresque novels.

If finding an acceptable definition of the picaresque seems complicated, then explaining its application as a term can be more problematic:

It may be useful to distinguish between the following: the picaresque genre, first of all; a group of novels, secondly, that deserve to be called picaresque in the strict sense -- usually in agreement with the original Spanish pattern; another group of novels, thirdly, which may be considered picaresque in a broader sense of the term only; and finally, a picaresque myth: an essential situation or significant structure derived from the novels themselves. (Guillén 71)

Guillén describes four different but related uses of the term picaresque, which incorporate the developments this type of novel has taken over time. Picaresque serves as a useful, categorizing term, but its application to specific novels is tricky. Guillén's intricate yet inclusive definition acknowledges the genre's many changes while recognizing the distinct features of the original Spanish novels. Initially, these novels were influential, but their power to shape the novels that followed gradually diminished as other countries took up the tradition and made their own contributions to it. This development is where the latter half of Guillén's definition comes into play, as it points to the British and American adaptations of the form. Some critics feel that if the Spanish pattern is not closely followed then a novel is not truly picaresque. Guillén acknowledges the differences in the genre's later adaptations, hence the broad usage of picaresque to cover later novels. Guillén's interpretation of the picaresque myth allows for novels to have picaresque elements or to be clearly influenced by the genre without needing to adapt too many conventions for generic purity. A novel may have significant traces of picaresque themes, situations, narratives or characters, without the entire novel being devoted to following these features.

When the picaresque novel moved to France and then England, the spirit of the Spanish novels remained intact, but the cultures, settings and literary traditions were altered. This gradual evolution expanded what could be called picaresque by allowing for fresh concepts in new environments that kept the genre from stagnating and becoming repetitive. Picaresque novelists felt no obligation to adhere to all of the genre's founding traits and made alterations to suit their artistic purposes. The most evident example is the shift from first-person narration to third-person, which changed the tone and perspective of the novel while allowing for more narrative possibilities and experimentation.

An important early picaresque trait is the connection between the picaro, who works as a servant, and his master. The picaro's service to his master is a revealing relationship, as the latter, despite pretensions of respectability, is abusive and uncaring, especially during famines and other hard times. Because the picaro depends upon his master for food and shelter, he must endure a great deal or be dismissed to fend for himself. This dependency leads the picaro into any number of

humiliating, and often hilarious, situations from which he must extricate himself or face the consequences. James Adams illustrated this point in his dissertation on the picaresque by stating:

In an early scene in *Lazarillo*, his blind master suspects, rightly, that Lazaro has stolen a sausage and sticks his nose into the picaro's mouth to sniff out the evidence, inducing the culprit to return the master's goods in a disagreeable manner. After this auspicious beginning, vomit and excrement continue to play important, usually comic, roles in the sordidness of the picaros' lives (J. Adams 16).

This instance is one of many reminders of the unpleasant indignities a picaro must face in his sphere of life. Lazaro stole the sausage to ward off starvation during a dire food shortage. He was not taking undue advantage of his master or acting out of gluttony. He was trying to live. Lazaro's inadvertent response serves as both justice and revenge to punish the master for his pettiness and mistreatment of his servant. The master and servant motif is one that faded out when the genre left Spain, but it would occasionally reappear in later picaresque novels. Boyle uses this element of the picaresque in his early novels but in a much different social context and setting, showing how an employer and employee relationship can be similar.

The most significant element in defining a novel as picaresque is the behavior, personality and characteristics of the picaro or protagonist, who has unique fictional functions. A picaresque protagonist may be either heroic, antiheroic or neither. Alter asserts how picaresque novels contributed to development of fictional techniques: "One of the chief innovations of the picaresque narrative was to make the narrated episodes pivot upon a 'real' individual--real because he was an anti-heroic hero, a plebeian, a resourceful but limited human being who had to face the human problem of getting food in his stomach and, if feasible, a roof over his head"(31-32). Though a picaro is a fictional character, he has a realistic dimension, as he represents the many dilemmas and problems one may confront during difficult times in life. Picaresque novels may also be considered precursors to naturalistic novels where a protagonist's life is controlled by fate or other outside circumstances that directly influence actions and behaviors. His vividly drawn characteristics and behavior are indicative of the baser, more desperate aspects of humanity that are

seen during times of stress and are quite true to life, not merely a fictional construct meant to shock or dwell upon sordid behavior for its own sake. Picaresque characters serve to subvert the established order by showing its shortcomings and injustices, which is why they frequently break laws, traditions and social order or find a way to work around it. “The *picaro* as such (or if you wish, the hero when he is a *picaro*) can be distinguished readily enough from three older types: the wanderer, the jester and the have-not” (Guillén 75). Though he may have the characteristics of these one dimensional character types, he never fully becomes just one of them. The *picaro* transcends simple definition by being a dynamic amalgamation of these static figures to form a new type of character. In general, his origins are from the lower social classes, but this is not a strict requirement.

Critics of the picaresque novel are not in full agreement as to what the most essential defining elements are. Alexander Parker claims: “The distinguishing feature of the *genre* is the atmosphere of delinquency. This begins in a setting of low life but generally ascends the social scale; the origins of the protagonist are usually disreputable; he is either born or plunged as a youth into an environment of cheating and thieving, and learns to make his way in the world by cheating and thieving in his turn” (6). Even though a picaresque protagonist often participates in criminal behavior, it is usually to subsist in a corrupt world and not out of sheer avarice. He is typically forced into crime by circumstances such as starvation, as he does not break laws for pleasure or out of degeneracy. Though starvation was one of the classic motivational traits in Spanish picaresque novels, this theme shifted as the genre migrated to other countries.

When one must rely solely on cunning to survive, necessity dictates conduct, so what constitutes right and wrong takes on new shades of meaning. A picaresque protagonist’s code of ethics is based upon expediency, not what someone in respectable society would do and this is where many of his conflicts arise. He is always on the lookout for an advantage or opening to exploit for his own benefit. W. M. Frohock explains: “All definitions insist he is a ‘rogue,’ a scamp, a scalawag who lives by his wits with scant respect for the law. He is a thief, and a clever one at his trade; by preference he steals through trickery” (“The Idea” 44). His ethics are also informed by the

knowledge that appearances are deceptive and respected, upper-class people may not be what they seem. Because a picaresque protagonist has experience interacting with all levels of life, he often has the ability to see through and penetrate the facades projected by others. This trait makes him a threat to social order, as he can deliberately or inadvertently expose other characters for what they are. He knows first-hand that corruption exists in all levels of society and that none are immune to it. In his diminished position of an outcast, adhering to social norms and ideals is more than simply impractical, it can also be dangerous. While his behavior certainly is not admirable, it is not reprehensible either.

An important distinction of this criminal behavior is that it is not malicious and it does not involve thuggery or murder. Picaresque narratives are more than mere criminal autobiographies or biographies. There is substantive purpose and meaning behind this deviant, unlawful behavior, as it is geared toward survival. A picaresque protagonist is not a villain or purely evil character and he does not resort to pointless violence. Because he lives in a hostile world, violence does occur, but it is typically in self-defense. Alter offers an interesting reason for portraying violence in a picaresque novel: "The typical social background for the picaresque novel is a world where the old social order is disintegrating but is still regarded as though it were continuing undisturbed. It is not surprising, then, that violence--occasionally sadistic violence--is a pattern of behavior congenial to the picaresque world" (63). Because social dislocation is an integral component of these novels, there are bound to be conflicts between the protagonist and society or other individuals and some of them inevitably turn physical. In these novels, violence is another aspect of the human experience and it should not be ignored because it is disturbing or unsettling. It is an accurate reflection of society's inhumanity and indifference toward others. These harsh moments are tempered by pleasurable episodes when the protagonist's life is enjoyable to show how it is not always a constant struggle, thus picaresque novels are not utterly negative or pessimistic. They strike a balance between pleasure and adversity.

Despite the continual setbacks and mishaps faced by a picaresque protagonist, his outlook on life usually remains constant. His empirical and pragmatic behavior is necessary for his survival in

an often brutal world that shows no concern for his existence. According to Alter: “One of the distinctive features of the picaresque hero is his attitude as a sturdy, competitive fighter without rancor, an outcast who does not imagine society as his enemy. He can be abused without feeling persecuted, unfortunate without feeling sorry for himself” (130-31). Picaresque characters deal with life’s experiences as they occur, without trying to fit them into any sort of ideal since their lives are too chaotic and unpredictable. This attitude is an important feature because this character type is always resilient when confronting the misfortunes which regularly occur in a picaresque novel. A picaresque protagonist may be battered and bruised by the world’s malignant forces, but he is never defeated. A characteristic trait is his incomparable ability to overcome difficulties, while at the same time, learning from his mistakes and misery.

The episodic structure of picaresque novels serves as an effective and necessary device to firmly anchor the novel’s depiction of disorder. Regarding the episodic structure, Miller writes: “The discrete fragments into which its events are broken express anything but order. The infinite possibilities of the picaresque plot express total openness. Since there are no limitations of probability, the door is left open to the fantastic, the improbable, and even the weird. The picaresque plot expresses an intuition that the world is without order, is chaotic” (10). As Miller shows, the episodic structure allows for almost anything to happen, which is also an accurate reflection of the unpredictable realities of life where accidents, the unexpected, fortune and misfortune happen without warning. A classic example which best demonstrates the preceding ideas is Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, whose eponymous protagonist is thrown into all sorts of embarrassing and untoward situations that test the mettle of his character. Even though Jones finds himself in some unlikely circumstances, they are amusing and convincing. The picaresque novel is realistic at its core, not improbable or unbelievable. The events that take place may seem unusual and even bizarre, but they are not outside the realm of possibility, even if they occasionally dance on the fringes. It is the number of events that bombard the picaresque protagonist that borders on the fantastic. The idea that the world lacks order can be disconcerting, but this situation is where a picaresque protagonist thrives. His nature is particularly suited toward adapting to whatever

undesirable circumstances come his way, which ensures his continued survival. As an outcast, he has no integral part in the social hierarchy that depends on order to maintain the status quo, leaving him free to seek opportunity whenever it presents itself and make the most out of adverse conditions that would destroy weaker characters.

While the episodic plot gives a picaresque novel a supporting frame it can also be a weakness. Frohock points out this potential liability: "Adventure is multiplied by adventure. This informal simplicity admits, from the beginning, the most noteworthy flaw of the genre, the tendency to add episodes *ad infinitum* even when they have little to do with the fortunes of the principle, so long as they show promise of amusing the reader" ("The Idea" 46). These rapidly occurring episodes can be all that moves the story along, which at its worst, can lead to forced or meaningless narrative development that adds nothing to the novel. Miller offers a similar criticism of the plot structure: "In the picaresque, we start with life's chaos assaulting the picaresque hero in one event after another and we watch it continue to do so. Characters appear and disappear to no effect, forever, forgotten. . . . In the picaresque plot viewed as a whole, nothing strictly *happens*. The picaresque plot merely records fragmented happening after fragmented happening" (Miller 12). In the hands of lesser novelists, this technique can quickly become stale and predictable, while at the same time, more capable practitioners find new ways to invigorate it. This idea may account for the cycle of success and decline when the picaresque novel moves into different countries and literary traditions.

Besides giving the novel form, the episodic plot effectively portrays the hectic nature of travel, particularly in unfamiliar places. Traveling and living on the road shapes and defines picaresque characters by giving them a much different level of awareness of the human condition as they move about from towns to cities and through the countryside. They see how people live first-hand, which introduces naturalistic aspects by describing scenes and behaviors that were considered distasteful. Alter explains the effect such descriptions have: "The picaresque novels send their protagonists traipsing down all sorts of twisting, garbage-strewn byways that have in general been considered off-limits for the more respectable heroes of traditional narratives. The attention that they give, then, to the coarser aspects of existence, is not only a comic convention, but also a

genuine extension of the frontiers of realism for fiction” (62). A classic example of this point is when Roderick Random, of Tobias Smollett’s novel of the same name, is innocently walking along the street when suddenly the contents of a chamber pot are carelessly thrown from a window and land upon his clothes. Though this scene may be disgusting, it is certainly not out of line with the unsanitary conditions of life in eighteenth-century England, yet few, if any, novelists would note such an occurrence.

Travel offers a picaresque protagonist many varied opportunities and possibilities, both good and bad, and this scenario is an important contribution to the episodic structure. It also brings out the trait of self-reliance, one of the most significant features of a picaresque character. Frederick Karl observes, “Yet despite commercial pressure, city life, like that on the road, was so impersonal that the citizen had to fall back on himself. The individuality of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* . . . is the result of this fact; survival meant fending for oneself and establishing individual values. In the city, everything was possible and everyone was predatory” (200). Traveling offers the protagonist a number of other benefits such as freedom, escape from the past, anonymity, and it might also serve as a rejection of established society with its laws, codes of behavior and hypocrisy. Traveling also presents a protagonist with any number of dangers and difficulties as well. There are always disreputable people more than willing to pose as a trustworthy friend to set the picaresque protagonist up for a robbery or swindle. He encounters many lawless situations where anybody is fair game and justice and pity are nowhere to be found. Deception and trickery are essential skills in such a heartless world. He must be alert at all times, but this is no insurance against harm, just protection and prudence.

The theme of travel offers more than just setting and backdrop, it is essential to character definition. In a picaresque novel, episodic structure and character development work together to produce a character who does not grow or change the way a traditional hero does. The rapidly shifting episodes do not allow much time for reflective introspection. When a character transgresses legal or social codes of behavior, he becomes the cause of his misfortune, while at other times he is fortune’s plaything, subject to accidents and other unpredictable twists of fate, both good and bad,

showing how little control he has over his life. In many situations, the protagonist is forced to react quickly to a situation rather than think it out or contemplate a responsible course of action. His goals are to succeed, to survive and to avoid getting caught.

One of the criticisms of picaresque characters is that they have many details but lack depth. Miller argues how this possible deficiency actually works in the character's favor: "The picaro is neither a round or a flat character. . . . The picaro differs from the flat in having many traits, from the round in having shifting traits that present no order, that seem random in their appearances and disappearances and connections. While most literary characters speak for the ordered side of our personalities, he speaks for the disordered side"(45-46). A picaresque character's lack of stability and indeterminacy of personality accurately reflect his recurring dilemma of how to fit into any given situation, much like a chameleon, and if possible, emerge or escape unscathed. By representing the disordered, less flattering side of the human personality, picaresque characters show aspects of existence that are all too real, such as immoral behavior and base motives, in a fair manner to reveal the complexity of human behavior instead of a condemnatory one that conceals the truth. This abundance of detail does serve a specific purpose in portraying the actualities of the protagonist's life, which Ulrich Wicks observes by stating: "Picaresque fiction, because it does not give a structured vision of life, tends to be basically antiphilosophical and antithematic because it focuses on details, on surfaces, on fragments, and on discontinuous and fleeting experiences and reactions"("Picaresque Narrative" 246). The life of a picaresque protagonist passes by in rapid fashion and the mass of accumulated details are the result. He lives life in the present, learning what he can from his past experiences but rarely considering his future.

Even though a picaresque novel usually deals with illegal behavior and disorderly scenarios, it is typically done in an amusing fashion, which is a characteristic trait of the genre. In these novels, comedy, dark humor, and grotesque occurrences are essential elements which may account for their popularity, yet these features are often overlooked or neglected. Alexander Blackburn offers this assessment of the picaresque novel's place in literature: "Picaresque literature belongs, for the most part, to comedy. Appealing to a wide variety of senses, from a sense of the ludicrous and absurd, to

a sense of liberation and celebration, to a sense of justice and equilibrium, picaresque literature is meant to be entertaining”(187). Just because these novels have pleasurable aspects does not mean they lack a serious side as well. Riggan observes: “The picaresque narrative unfailingly provides a largely or wholly enjoyable reading experience via its lively, raucous accounts of adventures or misadventures through all levels of society. But it just as unfailingly provides serious social, moral or cultural satire or parody in varying degrees of severity”(78). This latter point is critical in understanding these novels because they deftly critique the reprehensible behavior of individuals and society, pointing out their cupidity, contradictions, ineptitude, phony posturing and other negative features that many simply choose to overlook or ignore. Alter discusses another important aspect of these novels: “Satire, of course, is also one of the most essential properties of the picaresque novel. . . . the picaroon’s marginal position in society allows him to be a keen and unprejudiced observer of human foibles and hypocrisies” (94). If such a task were undertaken in a serious tone it could become grim and depressing. One of the charms of these novels is how they maintain a comic tone while confronting these individual and social dilemmas.

Due to a low social standing, a picaresque protagonist feels the full brunt of society’s disdain, but as he is not an innocent figure, he brings some of his problems upon himself. Ronald Paulson observes the purpose of this circumstance: “Satiric punishment . . . can expose the knavery of the punisher or the folly of the punished. The picaresque is at its most characteristic when the two movements appear together”(65). Satire in a picaresque novel functions on a number of levels and not just in one direction, to reveal the complexity of human interaction in less than ideal circumstances. This satire is at its best when it uncovers flawed, and often cruel, features of human nature. A protagonist’s continued survival is dependent upon sharp insight into human behavior and motivation, particularly the darker aspects of it, and an uncanny ability to use this knowledge for his benefit. His experiential understanding of the world leads him to satirize it, as he readily perceives the often hidden differences between appearances and reality.

How a picaresque protagonist views the world is one of the defining features of the genre. The Spanish picaresque novels pioneered it through the use of the autobiographical narrative. This

convincing and entertaining perspective contains deliberate subjectivity that may have faulty recollections, distortions and occasional dissimulation. Despite these unreliable qualities, narrative credibility is not an issue. Guillén puts it succinctly by writing: “The picaresque novel is, quite simply, the confession of a liar” (92). The first-person allows the picaresque hero to share the events and misfortunes of his tale from his precarious social position as an outsider, which inevitably shapes what the reader perceives. Guillén mentions another function of first-person narration: “This use of first-person tense [sic] is more than a formal frame. It means that not only are the hero and his actions picaresque, but everything *else* in the story is colored with the sensibility, or filtered through the mind, of the *picaresque*-narrator. Both the hero and the principal point of view are picaresque” (81). This autobiographical structure lets the picaresque hero control the flow of information from an imperfect viewpoint that is partial to himself while accurately depicting his adaptability to almost any given situation.

According to Blackburn’s *The Myth of the Picaresque*, the first-person, autobiographical narration of a picaresque hero who is completely alone in life is the essential defining feature of the picaresque. Without it, a novel cannot truly be picaresque. Blackburn’s restrictive definition asserts that the picaresque novel exists only in the past. He asserts that contemporary picaresque novels are simply an impure and diluted myth that has been watered down through the years. Although first-person narration is the most commonly used point of view in the picaresque novel, Alexander Parker counters Blackburn’s definition in stating: “The autobiographical form, although adopted by the majority of picaresque novelists, is not essential” (6). Parker feels that the narrative viewpoint is helpful but not crucial for labeling a novel, as it can express distinctly picaresque themes and situations from a third-person perspective without harming its generic integrity. The personality of the protagonist still remains intact, but third-person narration allows the writer more freedom and opportunity to develop ancillary characters and events that are germane to the novel.

The social isolation and alienation a picaresque protagonist experiences within society are aptly conveyed by the events of his narrative, but he seldom, if ever, complains or ponders about his lot in life. Alter elaborates on this point: “The picaresque novel is fundamentally an antisentimental

mode of representing reality. . . . The picaresque hero is oriented toward action, not feeling. In his rough world, he has neither leisure nor the interest to relish the nuances and degrees of purity of his own emotions” (79). This notion is another reason why some feel these novels lack depth and are content to dwell on surface details instead of probing the depths of the character’s inner thoughts and feelings. Picaresque protagonists accept life for what it is and move on without giving it much thought, which may help explain why they can endure circumstances intolerable to others. A picaresque protagonist’s independence and ability to persevere through any circumstance often creates distance between this character and the rest of society.

The theme of social isolation is pervasive in picaresque novels. Protagonists regularly confront rejection and exclusion from a society they would like to enter, not because of shared beliefs, but for the status and advantages that go along with a rise in social standing. This outsider status vividly reflects a displacement of conventional value systems, as the protagonist does not believe in or have the need to follow codified social standards. He recognizes these standards as unjust and exclusionary, yet he still wants to be a part of them. Because the protagonist has nothing to lose, he freely defies laws and conventions that would cause a loss in social status in others, while pursuing a life of expediency and pragmatism without much concern for the consequences. He is not concerned with what people may think about him, which gives him the opportunity to reinvent himself according to his needs and situation. The flexible, resilient nature of picaresque characters is one of the major contributions the Spanish novels offered to the genre. These traits allowed the picaro to endure many transitions, not only in his own life, but in literature as well.

After leaving Spain, the picaresque novel took on new settings, styles and subjects to increase its narrative scope while broadening the original characteristics. Frohock mentions the critical problems this circumstance created: “When the picaresque moves out of Spain and is grafted on to other fictional traditions, a real ambiguity arises. The hybrid nature of the fiction of other countries, and, perhaps even more, those differences in the spiritual and moral climate. . . put the term under unremitting pressure to expand. With each expansion it becomes less clear” (“The Idea” 48). This

observation is especially true when it is related to the development of the contemporary picaresque novel. The picaresque novel's cultural shift renewed its vitality as writers discovered the genre's potential for growth and experimentation, while incorporating their own literary traditions. The Spanish novels were useful models to imitate, but over time, their spirit and characteristics were all that remained as the genre progressed.

The influence of the earliest Spanish examples of the novel was never absolute. . . .

Nevertheless, during this time *Don Quixote* and the picaresque continued to be paradigmatic of the way that the bulk of European novels situate and define themselves within the larger literary culture, ironically displacing the established rules and values of a professedly classical tradition. (Reed 162)

Picaresque novels justly acquired a rebellious reputation for their willingness to absorb the devices and techniques of other literary traditions and genres while flaunting their deliberate defiance of social conventions and attitudes to satirize society by showing its appearance to be shallow and false. This unflattering exposure of reality, combined with classical techniques, caused as much shock as it did laughter.

Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594) is credited with being the first picaresque novel written in English. It features the deliberately rough, unorthodox, first-person narration of its protagonist Jack Wilton. "It has elements of the jest book in it, and of the 'picaresque' tale as typified by *Lazarillo de Tormes*, translated from Spanish in 1586, though whether Nashe's hero Jack Wilton is a fully-fledged *picaro*, or rogue, is questioned by more fastidious critics" (Nicholl 154). The novel is an episodic recollection of pranks, adventures and travels through Europe and it is one of the first novels to combine fictive events with historical facts and people. What unites the disparate narrative fragments is the brash personality of Wilton telling his stories. He is clearly not meant as a representative of Elizabethan England and as an outsider he does not feel bound to uphold its standards. As a narrator he is unabashedly drunk and digressive. Miller discusses some of Nashe's narrative innovations, stating: "The reader, used to the usual conventions of fiction, expects the narrator to get on with his tale, but the narrator instead takes a

swig from the bottle on his desk. It is an amusing device, but unsettling, contributing greatly to the emotional effect of the novel”(104). Wilton’s narrative is meant to be disturbing and disruptive to keep the reader off balance and unprepared for whatever may occur next.

Wilton openly revels in mischievous behavior and life’s chaos. This attitude is a notable departure from the Spanish picares who usually repented or regretted their behavior by the end of their novels, but such atonement is attributed as being a justification for the colorful depiction of deviant behavior and as a practical means of an author avoiding censure. Many readers find Wilton’s carefree reaction to violence and other horrible acts shocking. Miller points out that: “*The Unfortunate Traveller* is full of sick jokes, full of attempts to make the horrible funny. Jack the narrator keeps reality at a distance with his wit, stylistic brilliance, and drink, because reality is simply too horrible to contemplate seriously”(105). *The Unfortunate Traveller* was not very influential and this type of narrative persona does not reappear until much later in twentieth-century American fiction. It would take about 128 years before another British picaresque novel was written.

In 1715, Alain-René Lesage published the first part of *Gil Blas de Santillane* in France and the picaresque novel’s transformation began. *Gil Blas* was clearly influenced by its Spanish predecessors but it also brought in new characteristics, situations, and social perspectives in a French setting, which began to universalize the genre. Alter makes this important observation about the picaresque novel’s development: “As the picaresque novel moves away from its Spanish origins, the stress tends to be more on the ingenuity and less on the struggle”(31). Lesage’s narrative technique allowed him to include discerning observations and insight from a young country vagabond and still maintain believability as a character. He has sharp perception of the surrounding social world, which is reflected by the narrative satire derived from his position as a servant to various masters. Lesage began the trend to make picaresque characters more fully developed, with more complex, multi-dimensional traits than previous picares. Alter indicated the result of this development: “In this way a modern novelistic interest in character emerged from the narration of adventures, and the fixed features of the protagonist began to relax, revealing a

creature susceptible of serious development”(32). Blas is not as devious as his Spanish counterparts, yet he is able to maintain his relative innocence in a world filled with corruption until his later transformation in subsequent chapters added in 1724, when this novel moved away from the picaresque.

It is probable that Daniel Defoe was aware of *Gil Blas*, but it is quite unlikely that this novel had any influence on his writing. There is conflicting critical debate over the picaresque status of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722). This novel and its heroine contain picaresque elements, but its overall tone of seriousness, firm moral purpose, and a lack of comic misadventure and satire make for a difficult case. Whether or not it is fully picaresque, it was influential in expanding the genre. Much like the Spanish picaras and picaros, Flanders' father is unknown and her mother is only discovered later in the novel. Through good fortune, she is taken in by a middle-class family and offered a stable life. Miller explains Defoe's innovative contribution to the picaresque novel: “By first setting Moll into a middle-class environment and then showing her still made chaotic by it later, Defoe profoundly enriched the technique of the picaresque novel for projecting its central truth: chaos is universal” (53). Defoe's depiction of Flanders' life and misfortunes shows how there is never a guarantee of stability, even amidst a setting of supposed social order, and this circumstance leaves her to fend for herself as best she can to achieve her aspirations. Flanders takes no real joy or pleasure in her illegal activities, as they are used to improve her lot in life and, in most cases, not for subsistence. Her prime motivations in life are profit, social climbing and the maintenance of a respectable appearance, quite opposite from that of a traditional picaro. As each side of the debate over labeling *Moll Flanders* picaresque has worthy merits, it will never be resolved. Alter puts forth a good argument to show why he believes the case is settled:

It would seem, then, more misleading than instructive to call *Moll Flanders* a picaresque novel. It has one general, coincidental similarity with the picaresque narratives--it is the episodic fictional autobiography of a 'roguish' figure--but it derives from the English criminal biography, not from the line of *Lazarillo*; and its sense of life, its imaginative

atmosphere, and its moral feeling are in the most significant respects antithetical to those of the picaresque novel. The profound difference between Moll's single-minded discipline and the distinctively picaresque mode of existence becomes strikingly clear when a quarter of a century after the publication of Defoe's novel, the continental picaro makes a full-dress appearance on English soil in the person of Roderick Random. (57)

Alter makes a convincing case stating why *Moll Flanders* is not a completely picaresque character. Surprisingly, Alter does not mention Jack Wilton as a picaresque figure, even if only to argue against such a designation. In any case, through Tobias Smollett's efforts, the picaresque novel gained a firm place in British literature. *Gil Blas* and *Don Quixote* were translated into English by Smollett and he used his understanding of picaresque literature to write two novels which made significant additions to the genre, *Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753). Sieber notes the effect of Smollett's novels upon the picaresque genre: "From almost every viewpoint *Roderick Random* is an example of the already disintegrated picaresque novel. Smollett does salvage a few of the conventions, but even they are redefined within the context of his satiric aims" (57). Smollett's adaptation of the genre signals renewed possibilities and fresh approaches, but some critics find Smollett's novels to be a corruption of the original form. Roderick Random's character broke convention by being born into an upper-class family. His mother died during his birth and his father died a few years later. Random's stingy, cantankerous grandfather rejects him by refusing any type of support, which deprives him of his birthright and leaves him to fend for himself.

Random's elevated social status suggests he should have an easy life, yet his circumstances imply he is subject to life's unpredictable forces as much as anyone else. Random's first-person narration reflects an intelligent, mischievous character who, when subjected to the arbitrary events of the world, must find a way to cope. Regarding the innovation of *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, Blackburn states, "Smollett, in his interesting but neglected third novel, *Ferdinand Count Fathom* drew a criminal to human scale, and sympathy for the confidence man becomes possible" (130).

Here, the protagonist is more like the Spanish picares. Smollett also incorporated picaresque elements in *Peregrine Pickle* and *Humphrey Clinker*, but not enough to qualify them as picaresque novels.

Shortly after *Roderick Random* was printed, Henry Fielding completed the final volumes of *Tom Jones* (1749), which expanded the potential for third-person narration in a picaresque novel by allowing an author to use a much larger perspective to show the complexity of the world a picaresque character inhabits. According to Alter: "In Fielding's great novel the picaresque tradition merges with--or rather, is assimilated by--a way of apprehending and reporting reality quite distinct from the mode of narrative first developed in the Spanish novels of roguery" (81). Along with Smollett, Fielding toned down the picaro's roguish features to present a more agreeable, acceptable character less likely to offend. Fielding has firm structural control over the events of his novel, so that whatever happens to Jones, though seemingly accidental, is quite deliberate and his responses define the true, moral nature of his character. Though Jones may incidentally be associated with disreputable people or situations, Fielding's narrative stance and language are seen as socially respectable. The satire is aimed at the respectable hypocrites who continually misjudge Jones solely on the basis of his appearance, which exposes them for what they are.

Since Jones is not a true rogue, his qualification as a picaresque character is problematic, but he is the novel's central focus during his episodic journey and he must rely on his wits to pass through this part of his life unharmed. This position is an obvious contrast to the picaresque tradition's depiction of the less admirable and cruder aspects of life, indicating how humans have not quite escaped their animal natures. The significance and continuing influence is discussed by Alter when he writes: "The case of *Tom Jones* is instructive because it suggests the point at which the picaresque had arrived and what would be happening to it in the future. . . . Writers would continue to attempt what Fielding had done so skillfully in *Tom Jones*: to take important elements from the picaresque novel and to reshape them for new uses in new surroundings"(104-05).

Fielding continued to contribute to the development of the picaresque novel with *Joseph Andrews* and, to a lesser degree *Jonathan Wild*, but these novels only contain aspects of the picaresque tradition, which had reached the apex of its classical period by 1750 before vanishing from the literary map. Miller offers one reason to explain this disappearance:

One may speculate at some length about reasons for the disappearance of the picaresque novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. From the point of view of literary history there is no doubt that the triumph of the realistic novel drove out most of the other subgenres. . . . Whatever the reason, the picaresque novel seems to disappear between 1750 and 1900, but undergoes a revival in the twentieth century. (133)

There are no simple reasons to explain the picaresque's displacement in literature. Smollett and Fielding developed new strategies for these novels but nobody seemed interested in following their example. Another reason that may have contributed to the picaresque novel's decline in nineteenth-century Britain is the prevailing social attitude. The great novels of this period were adamantly determined to be socially uplifting models of propriety and respectability. A picaresque protagonist's rejection of conventional social values, status as an outcast and willingness to break the law when necessary, had no place in such a restrictive social climate. His presence would have been too shocking a reminder that however much society progressed, many negative human qualities nevertheless still existed.

The picaresque novel has not completely disappeared from the British tradition, but there are only a few examples in the twentieth century. The publication of Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* in 1944 brought the picaresque novel back into British literature. The narrating protagonist is Gully Jimson, an incorrigible yet talented artist continually short of money, who lies, steals and fleeces wealthy art investors to continue painting. He justifies his eccentric misbehavior as necessary to his creative process and his distorted perspective contains much insight into the world despite running counter to the social norms of his day. An artist's struggle to produce work and subsist is the subject of Iris Murdoch's first published novel *Under the Net* (1954). She is one of the few British

women to write a picaresque novel. The protagonist is Jake Donoghue, a writer who has lost his ability to write while living a declining, meager existence in London. His subjective narration, self-centered personality and strange behavior further define his status as an outsider, that only increases as he fails to produce or sell any of his work. In 1954, Kingsley Amis also published *Lucky Jim*, his first novel, which is a pointed satire about British university life and how it shapes people. Since Boyle cites this novel as an example of a picaresque novel, a synopsis will clarify his meaning. *Lucky Jim* comically depicts the struggles of Jim Dixon, a graduate student in history who is always at odds with his fellow students and faculty by refusing to adopt their snobbish posturing and other codes of conduct. Despite his many gaffes, mishaps and spirited defiance, he always lands on his feet. Malcolm Bradbury states: "Jim, the comic innocent, trapped in someone else's culture, who always sees that the emperor wears no clothes, receives the comedy's ancient blessing, good luck and good fortune, just like his predecessor in fiction, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones" (320).

The three preceding novels are worth mentioning, even if they are not directly influential on Boyle, because he is clearly familiar with the past and present history of the picaresque novel's development. These three novels have strong picaresque elements, but they also expanded the genre by taking on new subject matter and situations. The protagonists are middle-class outsiders who view their circumstances and culture with jaded eyes and their difficulties in life define who they are and their relationship to society. A close look at these novels reveals how much the genre has changed over the years and how widely their protagonists differ from the Spanish picaros. These novels are certainly episodic and satiric, yet they have very little travel. The picaresque protagonists in these novels are not in such dire straits and they have a more sophisticated understanding of the world. Thirty years would pass before another British picaresque novel would be written.

T. C. Boyle was not influenced by Angela Carter's writing, but since both have written contemporary picaresque novels it is helpful to briefly summarize her contribution to the genre to understand its current state. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* mixed wild fantasy and magical realism

with unabashed feminism under a picaresque framework to write a novel that has shattered boundaries and, hopefully, pointed to new directions this fiction may take. Bradbury asserts that: “Fantasy was the form of freedom, worth taking seriously, and she made it serious; her new way of writing was to find its finest expression in the two large novels that came toward the end of her career, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991). Female and feminist fantasy was becoming one of the strong voices of the decade” (387). *Wise Children* has picaresque features but it is not fully picaresque, unlike the former novel which features Fevvers, a winged woman who travels through Europe as a trapeze-artist in a circus at the end of the nineteenth century. As a crafty and deliberately deceptive female picaresque protagonist who can hold her own with the picaresque characters who have come before her, Fevvers represents possibility in the new dawn of womanhood. As an orphan with wings, she had an isolated upbringing in a whorehouse, which for many reasons influenced her position as an outsider. Despite many offers, she never becomes a prostitute. She has a much different knowledge of the world, particularly its bizarre margins, and she uses it to her advantage as she spins seemingly improbable tales and deliberate lies about her life.

Bradbury describes this novel’s significance: “The book is an extraordinary fantasy, filled with an overplus of characters and creature, a refusal of fixity, a willing redundancy, a feeling that Carter’s writing--like Fevvers herself--is alive with an invention that has no need to ever stop” (441). In her adventures, Fevvers must overcome all sorts of strange circumstances and elude curious men who desire to possess her. Even though she is able to transcend the social conditions of her day to define her sense of identity, her wings and strong personality lead her to choose a life of relative isolation in Siberia, where she is accepted as a blessing from the heavens. Carter’s blend of innovation, stunning imagination, satire and wicked humor, often directed at men and the male journalist who narrates the novel, clearly prove that the picaresque novel is a thriving genre that will not disappear. Even though the picaresque novel has periods of hibernation, the tendency is for it to move to another country to be revitalized.

When the picaresque novel fell into decline in British literature after 1750, it needed to find a

more conducive location where the social setting was less rigid and more accepting of characters who could reinvent themselves, take chances and extract a meager living through guile. The United States was fertile ground for a minor picaresque rebirth, as this new country was still in transition and in search of an identity. Frederick Karl notes how it is a relatively easy shift from eighteenth-century British city life to nineteenth-century American frontier life due to numerous similarities. Early American novels were directly influenced by British literature, and aspects of the picaresque are evident in numerous novels from this era. The picaresque novel offered early American novelists versatility and a freedom to explore various situations, both positive and negative, in this emerging democratic experiment. Because there was no unified vision of how the United States should be run, there were many passionate debates over the direction of the country, and the picaresque novel had the ability to capture these conflicts without necessarily favoring one side over the other. The following quote summarizes the central argument of Cathy Davidson's analysis of picaresque novels in early American literature from her book *Revolution and the Word*:

The picaresque seemed to many to be the perfect form to address the divisive political discourse of the era. The loosest of narrative forms, the picaresque conveniently allows a central character (or characters) to wander the margins of an emerging American landscape, to survey it in all its incipient diversity, to sound out its different constituents from the most lowly, uneducated yeoman to those of high birth and great learning. (152)

By examining all levels of society a picaresque novelist was able to give a fuller, more complete picture of the conglomeration of lives that composed the country, instead of being limited to one or two. Due to the large influx of immigrants and a fragmented social order that was fluid instead of fixed as in the old world, the picaresque novel was opened up to many possibilities unavailable to British novelists.

The United States was an emerging nation with political and social problems and American picaresque novels diverge from their influences by including these various debates and dilemmas in their narratives. Davidson explains: "Early American picaresque novels directly confronted

political controversy, sometimes supporting one side, sometimes another, and sometimes undermining or parodying both” (164). This approach allowed a novelist to cover a wide range of views without necessarily favoring any of them. The picaresque characters in American novels also differed from their European counterparts in another significant way. Bjornson asserts: “In the European picaresque, the self is frequently depicted in the traditional manner as an inherent ‘nature’ which is tested and revealed for what it is during the course of the hero’s fictional adventures” (11). In contrast, in both early and contemporary American picaresque novels, the characters are in search of themselves in a dynamic world that lacks definition and order, which leaves them continually changing as the novel progresses in an attempt to discover who they are and what their place is in a new, expanding country. The old social hierarchy of Europe was displaced by democratic notions, which allowed for a character to rise according to his abilities, if he chose to do so. Much like the new nation, picaresque characters were searching for an identity within a larger world. With the continual westward expansion of the United States, the chances for escape and new beginnings were endless.

This notion of change is especially evident in America’s first but flawed picaresque novel, Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry*, published in segments between 1792 and 1815. Brackenridge introduced picaresque elements into an American setting and satirized the unruly nature of the American frontier. The episodic travels of Captain Farrago and his shifty servant Teague O’Regan capture the early American people and their behavior, ranging from the political and social issues of the day to the problems and abuses of an early democracy. Davidson shows the scope of what Brackenridge was attempting when she writes: “In effect, the narrative, like the hero, is a farrago, a hodgepodge, an adventure in discourse on a whole range of political opinions regarding the operations of democracy and the failures and triumphs of the new Republic, and all bound up in one continuous, shape-shifting saga” (Davidson 178). Unfortunately, Brackenridge’s idea was far better than his execution. The main problem with this needlessly lengthy novel is its repetitive, highly predictable narrative structure. The cyclical episodes offer little variation from one episode to the next and they have no real connection except the involvement of Farrago and

O'Regan. Early American literature was still in a developmental period and the picaresque provided a model to contain the disparate features of a new society.

Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* raises poignant questions about picaresque fiction by asking: "So if the picaresque explicitly celebrates an essentially male freedom, then just where do women come in--as characters, authors, and readers?. . . . One might claim that just as the sentimental novel examines women's issues, why could not the picaresque form fairly be written only for men?" (179). She raises legitimately difficult questions with no easy answers. There are no formal or technical literary reasons preventing a woman from being a picaresque character or author. There have been a few female picaresque characters in the past, and *Moll Flanders* is one, if we consider her novel picaresque. As most picaresque novels feature male protagonists living rootless lives, women don't find much of a place there either, except as one-dimensional characters fulfilling a role. Women do not usually become involved with picaresque protagonists, as their relationships quickly dissolve, but not in all cases. Roderick Random eventually marries his beloved Narcissa, which shows how this genre loves to defy and frustrate easy categorization. This narrative discord is indicative of the protagonist's tenuous relations with the rest of humanity. Miller explains: "The picaro. . . has no fixed emotional position toward anyone or anything. His lack of love expresses a lack of personality. This lack of integrity, of internal order, symbolically reflects disorder in the world and it is also a practical reaction to that disorder" (78). This reluctance toward forming attachments with women keeps picaresque protagonists and their novels in a relatively male world. Picaresque novels do have female characters and even a few protagonists, but the nature of their behavior is much different than male characters.

The Spanish novel *La Pícaro Justina* (1605) by Francisco López de Ubeda was the first to feature a female picaresque protagonist, whom Dunn describes as having female rogue characteristics. He says the novel is uneventful and derivative of its Spanish predecessors, but its parts are interesting. He also goes on to state: "Justina is no more typical of the anti-heroines who come after her than *Lazarillo* was typical of later picaros. Neither of them imposes a fictional stereotype. But the very fact of being female imposed new roles and eliminated others from the narrative; a *pícaro* is not, and

could not be, simply a female *pícaro*” (Dunn 232). This novel is widely credited with beginning the picaresque trait of conscious intertextual references to previous picaresque novels, as it often referred to the three original picaresque novels, which establishes a familiarity with the tradition as well as showing a point of departure. Some critics believe *Justina* to be overly derivative while others find it imaginative. About all critics can agree upon with this novel is that its language is dense, difficult and very much rooted in its time period, which requires an extensive commitment for any reader to comprehend. Dunn notes that the most interesting feature of *Justina* is her deliberately manipulative behavior to extract what she wants from society and men, which satirizes the dent it puts in their machismo. Nina Cox Davis concurs with this point in her contemporary reassessment of *Justina*:

This anomalous autobiography strives to accomplish its goals with a disconcerting flair, by making them serve the autoinventive purposes of a brilliantly iconoclastic *pícaro*--a femininely engendered counterpart to the scheming trio, who is presented as being both better at artifice and a worse denigrator of her society's norms. While she is made to appropriate their discourses in the literary composition of her life, López de Ubeda's *Justina* does not in the narrative of that life ape the political behavior and values of her social betters in the male power hierarchy, as do her *pícaro* counterparts; she gleefully besoils her betters and rubs their noses in it, figuratively castrating and usurping male authority as she sows deception with her words. (138)

Justina uses the power she has to her full advantage in a way that scathingly examines the flaws of her society and the restrictions it unnecessarily imposes on her. Wicks offers another insight into *Justina* when he states, “In a curiously ironic way, social oppression in the real world gives rise in a literary form to more freedom of expression in the portrayal of private experience, opening the way for the more subjective characterization and the serious treatment of everyday life that will come to be the primary domain of the literary form we call the novel” (*Picaresque Narrative* 288). The rebellious opposition of *Justina* toward her society gained a small following in a few subsequent

Spanish novels featuring picanas, but her influence did not extend into British or American picaresque traditions.

Unfortunately, the social distinction of gender and its prescribed roles plays a critical function in what a female picaresque character can and cannot do in a novel and still be plausible. At the time these novels were written, women did not have the same mobility or freedom as men, and they faced many more dangers wandering alone in the world. Davidson offers an insightful observation about the lack of female picaresque characters:

To create a female picaresque novel in which a woman on horseback traverses, assesses, and describes town and countryside almost necessarily, given the culture in which it is read, devolves into self-parody. The female simply does not have the same freedoms--to journey, to judge, to have her judgments heeded--as does the male, and that is a fact of picaresque fiction almost as much as it is a fact of sentimental fiction. (Davidson 179)

The social limitations imposed upon women prevented a fictional way of working around them, except by adopting a disguise, yet in the end, the character could only escape temporarily. Because social conditions have changed, it is far more possible in the twenty-first century to have a viable female picaresque character written by a woman. Conditions are ripe for a woman's picaresque perspective to satirize her world, the limitations it places upon her, and its social customs, while attempting to manipulate them to her own advantage. Davidson mentions a few early American novels that borrowed aspects of picaresque fiction and combined them with the techniques of the sentimental novel to find popular success.

The anonymously written *The History of Constantius and Pulchra; or, Constancy Rewarded: An American Novel* (1794) and *The Female Review* (1797) by Herman Mann, are not fully picaresque, despite Davidson's labeling, but they adapt some of its conventions to enhance their episodic plots by engaging their heroines in tangled scenarios. Davidson points out dilemmas these female protagonists were unable to escape and the larger meanings behind them. The only way for a female character to act out the picaro's traditional role was to do it disguised as a male and this circumstance draws attention to the social position of women.

A feminized picaresque fiction, consequently, requires both justification and narrative deception. While the reader is in on the ruse, the characters the picara meets are not, and most of the interest of the book derives from a continual but covert textual dialectic of knowledge and ignorance, of male and female, of power and powerlessness. For once the picara's true (i.e., female) identity is revealed, her power no longer exists. In short, her very role in the fiction is specious and surreptitious, is conditional upon its being asserted in ways that challenge neither the status quo nor the double standard.

(Davidson 179-81)

This situation is a precarious position for picaresque heroines and their authors. It clearly reveals how much of life was kept away from them. While they do deceive the social structure for their own ends and experience a life denied to them, they never question these circumstances and eventually return to their same positions in society. These disguises allow for a temporary escape from confining social conditions, and even a brief fulfillment of fantasy, without confronting the reality behind the mask. A significant problem that arises with the crossdressing heroines is one of plausibility. On occasion, these heroines confront rugged characters, difficult circumstances and narrow escapes that push the limits of believability, which brings up questions about the adequacy of their disguises, their abilities to impersonate men and respond accordingly on the spur of the moment, all of which run counter to one of the firmest tenets of picaresque fiction: it must be believable, no matter how strange the circumstances may seem.

One novel that realistically probed women's dilemmas without sentiment is Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801). Some have labeled the novel as picaresque, but the heroine is far more quixotic, as the title states.

While *Female Quixotism* is structured episodically, like *Don Quixote* and the popular picaresque novels of the mid-eighteenth century, the similarity between individual episodes is limited by the fact that the protagonist in *Female Quixotism* is a woman: respectable women at this time did not have the kind of footloose mobility characteristic of the picaresque hero. One situation common in the picaresque

novel is the use of masquerade by a friend in order to lead the protagonist away from his or her delusions. (Niencamp and Collins xx)

Female Quixotism has brief elements in common with the picaresque tradition but Dorcasina, the heroine, simply lacks the requisite qualities of a picara, as she compliantly leads a comfortable life in want of nothing but a man to truly love her. She engages in silly behavior to feed her overly romantic notions of ensnaring a husband, but she does not break any laws, does not stray far from home and she does not question the society around her or satirize it.

In her analysis, Davidson reveals the inherent problem faced by a female picaresque character: “The picaro adventures on the margins of social possibility; the picara either ends up ensconced in domesticity or, like Dorcasina, never really leaves it, which makes the female picaresque a fictional form fundamentally divided against itself” (188). This statement shows the contradictory dilemma faced by female picaresque characters and their authors and the difficulty of finding a satisfactory solution. Tenney’s novel candidly depicts the difficulties and desperation unmarried women confronted. These themes run counter to the status quo and the popular sentimental novels of the day that featured the heroine eventually overcoming all obstacles to get married. Tenney realistically demonstrates this theme, which is fine, but a picaresque novel would treat it satirically. Calling *Female Quixotism* a picaresque novel is misleading and does a disservice to the novel and the genre. Davidson contends that Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* is picaresque and other critics have claimed Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* as such also, when these novels clearly belong to other literary genres. This mislabeling only adds to the confusion of trying to trace the picaresque novel’s history.

After this beginning in early American literature, the picaresque novel was left aside for other forms and in the nineteenth century there are very few examples, but some of its features were being put to use by writers. Johnson Jones Hooper’s *Simon Suggs* (1846) is more of a collection of short stories than a fully realized novel, but it blended the picaresque with Old Southwest humor and episodic accounts of frontier life and travel. James Adams mentions the significance the Old

Southwest humor had in influencing the American picaresque novel: "The picaresque did not begin to become Americanized until the evolution of the Old Southwest humor in the 1830's and 1840's. This humor is filled with backwoods rogues scheming and stealing to survive or for the sheer fun of it. The rogue's enjoyment of being a rogue may be seen as one of the American contributions to the development of the picaresque" (53). Suggs thoroughly enjoys his mischievous way of life as a con artist who concocts a variety of schemes with a distinctly American frontier flavor to fleece people, which accurately conveys the lawlessness of such a setting as well as its boundless possibilities and opportunities, legal or otherwise. This development certainly influenced Mark Twain.

Blackburn suggests that Melville's utilization of picaresque traits in *The Confidence-Man* (1857) showed the genre still existed in diminished form as a myth, even if his novel was not created or intended as picaresque. This circumstance allowed Melville to selectively use picaresque devices without having to closely follow its tradition to benefit from it. "The European picaresque novel does not provide a significant paradigm for *The Confidence-Man*, then; it contributes some elements, but it does not seem to provide a real form or formula for Melville's complex creation" (Reed 206). Melville's novel anticipates the dark directions contemporary American picaresque novels would take, Boyle's included, as it opened new possibilities and themes about the downside of the American experience and predatory opportunism, even if it was not directly influential or fully picaresque. This type of behavior is a dramatic contrast to this country's founding ideals and it suggests the limits of personal freedom in a democracy, as there will always be somebody to exploit the gullibility of others. Melville clearly had other intentions in mind when writing *The Confidence-Man*, but his adaptation of picaresque features to his own creative and literary ends shows how the genre continued to influence novelists. This novel expressed the themes of social disintegration and a loss of faith in society and individuals in a grimly satirical manner through a carefully ordered episodic structure. The novel's protean protagonist subsists by using a variety of disguises to prey upon the gullibility and trust of other passengers to obtain money under false pretenses while traveling on the Mississippi River. The protagonist's exploitative behavior and attitude

toward life are some of this novel's main features, which were used to express Melville's deeply cynical vision of American society and human nature that ran counter to the prevailing optimism of his time. Melville also incorporated a number of picaresque elements into *Typee* and *Omoo*, and it has been suggested that *Moby-Dick* begins as a picaresque novel before shifting into a more dramatic direction.

When Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) he was fully conscious of writing it in the picaresque tradition and as a result, created America's first picaresque novel of major significance. In a letter to William Dean Howells, Twain states the genesis of *Huck Finn* and the approach he intended to take: "I believe it would be fatal to do it in any shape but autobiographically--like *Gil Blas*. . . . By and by I shall take a boy of twelve and run him on through life (in the first-person) but not Tom Sawyer--he would not be a good character for it" (qtd. in Reed 217). To varying degrees, *Huck Finn* contains all of the classic picaresque features discussed by Guillén, and Twain's narrative strategy allowed him to observe and satirize his society through the perspective of an orphaned, occasionally delinquent boy who is learning the often contradictory and confusing ways of his world. This autobiographical approach allows Twain to depict how Huck's existence is, in part, governed by necessity and survival under adverse circumstances, which forms a character who is resilient and pragmatic in his decision making. As an outsider to his society, Huck has not been conditioned or tainted by its beliefs and behaviors, a circumstance which allows him to freely ponder and question what he sees around him from a perspective of relative innocence. With first-person narration, Huck convincingly provides his own justification for his thinking and actions, even if they are occasionally wrong or immature. This novel established the American picaresque as a viable literary form, even though no writer took up the challenge until later. Twain also wrote *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court* (1889) as a picaresque novel, but it is an unevenly sustained novel that was not as successful or as influential as *Huck Finn*. After Twain's novels, the picaresque once again went into hibernation. American

novelists chose to focus their talents on realism, naturalism and other literary forms. It was not until after World War II that another picaresque novel appeared in American literature.

Twentieth-century American picaresque novels have added their own unique characteristics to enhance the genre while exploring the myriad of possibilities and variations it offers. There is no codified picaresque movement in contemporary American literature and patterns of influence can be difficult to trace, yet novelists turn to this genre as a means of expression. The picaresque novel allows for an extensive examination of society through commentary, parody, and satire through its depiction of a protagonist's chaotic existence and movement through life. Just as societies and literary traditions have grown and changed, so has the picaresque to show how a picaresque character must still struggle for survival and acceptance in modern civilization. While society has progressed, the adversity still remains, as the picaresque protagonist stands apart from the rest of his society.

American picaresque novels employ many of the same conventions derived from the Spanish and British traditions, but they are quite varied and individual in their subject matter, style and thematic scope. When W. M. Frohock was asked in an interview to state the differences between the European tradition and American picaresque he said: "I would say that the obvious split between the two has to do with the American's being a more comic novel" (qtd. in Gerber and Gemmett 191). American picaresque novelists strive to make novels that have serious themes combined with observations and circumstances that create laughter with their portrayal of life's ridiculous aspects. There is also a conscious inclusion of the benefits and burdens of living in a twentieth-century American free society, as well as the use of original cultural details and observations that are firmly grounded in this time period to indicate how perplexing it can be.

Contemporary American picaresque novels attempt to make sense of an often incomprehensible world where the established customs and boundaries from the past have disintegrated to leave a puzzling ambiguity in their wake. The most notable examples of this genre include Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947), Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1965), Hunter S.

Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), and John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1981). These eight examples provide no unified approach and elude easy categorization, but they each have expanded what an American picaresque novel can be to show how this genre is still thriving. Of these examples, the most relevant ones to Boyle's novels are Barth's and Thompson's. Ellison's novel warrants discussion as it was the first fully picaresque American novel since Twain's and it began the American resurgence of the genre.

Because these novels can readily absorb so many influences and traditions there are almost no limitations to the themes and cultural circumstances they can cover, particularly when it comes to an individual's sense of identity as well as a sense of alienation from society.

The twentieth century's dissolution of social and cultural order and its concomitant depersonalization of the individual have led to an ever increasing internalization in literature and philosophy and to a concern with individualized activity and the problem of personal identity. Hence, though many modern works are spoken of as 'picaresque' in nature, their debt to the tradition of those novels. . . is often tenuous and their concerns are more consciously reflective and existential, as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. (Riggan 41)

Ellison's publication of *Invisible Man* in 1947 began an American revival of the picaresque novel by showing its viability and relevance in a modern setting. Though this novel has no direct influence upon Boyle, it expanded directions and themes picaresque novels could cover. Ellison's novel is a complex creation that addresses many challenging social issues within a picaresque framework. The unnamed protagonist in Ellison's novel is an alienated, directionless individual who undergoes numerous tribulations in his search for identity before ultimately withdrawing from society altogether. His discovery of his self at the novel's end is significant, because until that point, he was an outsider who refused to succumb to society's rejection of him, despite his bungling efforts to please.

It is interesting to note how this African American protagonist is not just rejected by the white society, but his own people as well as a Communist organization, and these circumstances teach him difficult lessons in self-reliance. Ellison adapted all of the original picaresque features and updated them to fit into a modern American setting to portray the plight of African Americans and their search for equal footing in a racist society. Sieber explains:

Ellison takes picaresque conventions to their fullest and most profound development by revitalizing their original functions. The picaro's "tainted" ancestry defines him as an outsider in the same manner that a black man's colour determines his position in twentieth-century America. The picaresque novel finally becomes what it had pretended to be all along: the autobiography of a "nobody" and his adventures in a "repressive" society (74).

Ellison's protagonist and his misadventures in various locations offer a pointed commentary about the nature of the African American experience in the United States and the universal nature of social alienation and individuality. Ellison used dark humor and penetrating observations to reveal how the United States failed to live up to its ideals and this development added more thematic depth to the picaresque novel. Ellison's achievement still remains unmatched by other novels in this genre, except by Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which also redefined what the picaresque novel could be and Boyle openly acknowledges this influence.

To show Boyle's development as a writer and his place as a contemporary picaresque writer it is useful to briefly examine how he was influenced by contemporary writers and literary developments, as well as ones from the past. This discussion will be followed by an examination of his fictive techniques and the major recurring themes in his novels.

Boyle has frequently cited Barth as a primary influence and *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a direct predecessor of Boyle's early fiction. Barth's deliberately complicated novel is consciously derivative and parodic of the literary traditions that preceded it, especially the picaresque. Walter Reed mentions Barth's literary influences and his acknowledgment of them: "Fielding is the primary model - Barth said that he wanted to 'make up a plot that was fancier than *Tom Jones*'--but there are

also significant traces of Smollett, Defoe, Cervantes, and Rabalais also” (253). Barth accumulated and included so much material from literature and history that his novel can be overwhelming while pointing out new, imaginative directions literature may take with a thorough understanding of the past. His novel contains every picaresque trait except for first-person narration. Barth’s questioning of the veracity of history and the acceptance of myth in place of fact was a significant development in the picaresque novel, which had a major influence on Boyle’s examination of history and how it is perceived.

Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* was one of the most important novels in influencing Boyle’s technique of incorporating history into his novels. Alan Holder states Barth’s approach toward depicting history: “For *The Sot-Weed Factor* displays a strong tendency to debunk the past, finding in colonial America not a spirit of courage, admirable endurance and daring, but seeing our early history made up of selfish motives and unheroic behavior, conceiving its participants as a collection of scoundrels and perverts together with their victims” (124). Barth’s novel places the received history and myths of America’s past under heavy scrutiny through satire, parody and ridicule to expose their discrepancies for all to see. Barth’s novel fictionalizes the life of the poet Ebenezer Cooke to restore a more accurate picture of what colonial life may have been like instead of being weighed down by idealistic myths. The American colonies had their share of less than admirable inhabitants, yet little is ever heard about their deficiencies and the effects they had on life. Barth’s point was not to attack the formation of the United States, but to enact a more complete understanding of it by examining its rarely discussed flaws. Manfred Puetz defends a novelist’s creative manipulation of historical facts:

The point of such parosodic [sic] games with historical materials is a simple one. Since some versions we assume to be historical truth are themselves dubious and colored by imaginative concepts, the novelist has every right to add his own speculations to the interpretations of events. After all, who is to say which version is ultimately true or which one is more useful to help us come to terms with the past? (Puetz 142)

Since what we know as history has been flavored with biases, distortions, incompetence, lies, and speculation it is only natural for a novelist to use these rifts as a starting point for creating fiction that seeks new perceptions on what we think of as historical truth.

Whether or not Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* had any influence on Boyle's protagonists is debatable. *Budding Prospects* has a number of verbal flourishes that echo Thompson's writing but Boyle does not remember if he has read it. "I can't recall exactly, but I believe I must have read *Fear and Loathing* (copyright 1971) prior to writing BP [*Budding Prospects*] (written '82-'83)--don't know if he influenced me or not, though of course all we read becomes our own in the wonderfully assimilative process of creation" ("Humble Plea"). What is notable about the first-person narration of Thompson's Raoul Duke is his deliberately debauched attitude toward living, twisted humor, and defiance of social norms that seem to recall Nashe's infamously drunken narrator Jack Wilton. Duke lives on the fringes of life, working as a disorganized reporter barely able to meet deadlines or cover stories. He has an unquenchable thirst for alcohol and a penchant for consuming massive quantities of illegal substances. Duke's relentless search for the American Dream allows him to candidly observe and satirize American culture and its ideals just after the end of the 1960s in the utterly garish setting of Las Vegas. This novel is also considered to be a breakthrough in the possibilities of New Journalism. The novel's various episodes are shown through Duke's distorted viewpoint as he attempts to cover his stories and discovers the vast emptiness and tackiness of Americans in search of quick fortunes in the desert. Thompson pushed the boundaries of first-person narration in his depiction of Duke's intoxicated perspective of the world.

This fictive search for new aspects of the truth is closely related to some of the techniques used by the pioneers and practitioners of New Journalism, who adapted their skills to write novels that combined the methods of journalism with the traditional devices of fiction. Boyle's fictive methods are a synthesis of many styles across the literary spectrum and there appears to be a connection to New Journalism. A British reviewer made this observation of *Water Music*. "Boyle's prose owes much to the New Journalism (it often reads as though it should carry the subtitle 'Fear and

Loathing in the Heart of Darkness') and shares its qualities: a style punctuated with fire-cracker metaphors, a showy extravagance with obscurities of language. . . and an easy mediation between hard fact and invention" (Sutcliffe 224). Boyle's artistic approach to his historical novels is carefully researched yet deliberately subjective. Both Boyle and New Journalists seek to expose hidden aspects of what is the truth, what actually occurred and how to interpret events and their discrepancies.

There are obvious differences between New Journalistic novels and Boyle's historical novels as well, namely that Boyle's novels are overtly fictive and invented and the events he describes are in the relatively distant past, unlike a journalist's first-hand observation or interview of a primary observer or participant. Also, a novelist has many more gaps to fill due to the remoteness of time and a reliance on secondary sources. Scholes draws an important distinction by stating: "The writer of fiction who would deal with historical realities (as opposed to journalistic immediacies) must confront many of the same philosophical doubts without recourse to the solution of personality. For the novelist, personality is not enough" (*Fabulation* 199). Boyle's approach to history and his willingness to knowingly deviate from it for aesthetic purposes points to the difficulty of writing anything that is purely objective, including historical sources themselves, and this circumstance opens up new narrative possibilities. In his study of New Journalism, John Hellman points out some of the variables in the act of writing that hinder pure objectivity by saying: "External facts may be presented in various modes, because the text is clearly a construct of an individual consciousness; i.e., the ultimate ontological status of the work is clearly not as an objective representation of the actual world, but as the personal construct of a shaping, selecting, interpretive mind" (33-34). This understanding offers a writer a wide degree of artistic freedom when creating fiction that makes use of history.

The development of imaginative responses to actual events allowed New Journalists to represent the truth of events with deliberate subjectivity, which has similarities to novelists adapting history to their own fictive ends. Hellman observes how: "New Journalism and fabulist fiction are not only creative responses to the same problematic state of realism, but also significantly

related approaches to its possible solution. Rejecting the same assumptions and concerns of realistic fiction as no longer tenable, they have for the most part pursued strikingly similar techniques and aims”(11). When I asked Boyle if any of these similarities had any effect on his fiction, he offered a noncommittal reply:

Remember, though, that the “New Journalism” of Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson et al., arose because journalists wanted to break the what, when, where and who shackles of their trade and steal some fire from we [sic] novelists. I think, with regard to the novels of mine you’ve mentioned, you’d have to posit a postmodern take on fiction and its concern with levels of meaning, versions and the accuracy or inaccuracy of received opinion and even historical fact. (“Another Question”)

While it is difficult to claim New Journalism had any direct effect on his writing, an indirect influence is plausible as he is admittedly familiar with their work. In reply to a question about Tom Wolfe on Boyle’s website he wrote: “I tend to like Wolfe, especially the journalism and *Bonfire [of the Vanities]*”(“A tangent”). There is another similarity as well. “From his use of point of view to his choice of descriptive words, Wolfe is continually seeking to *respond* to the actuality, not just to represent it. . . . Even his insistent choices of hyperbolic, kinetic, or baroque words and phrases make his descriptions as much an assault as a representation”(Hellman 105-6). The choice of language and the vigorous energy of Boyle’s descriptions are meant to catch a reader off balance by defamiliarizing events to provoke a new conception of them. This notion includes the portrayal of his characters’ subjective realities and their incomplete or flawed understanding of the world around them.

T. C. Boyle is a writer who has made significant contributions to the picaresque novel revealing that it is still a viable genre. He is clearly aware of the literary traditions that came before him as well as contemporary British and American fiction. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Iowa where his major area was nineteenth-century British literature, which would seem to be the antithesis of much of his subject matter and style. When I asked him why he was so attracted to this literature he responded: “I initially became attracted to the period (rather than, say, American

Lit.) because it represented a wide field of what I didn't know, and once I became ensconced, the entire period--from the Romantics to Matthew Arnold to the *fin de siècle* aesthetes and Forster and Joyce et al., really spoke to me. I can't say why, except that the richness of the period speaks for itself" ("A Question"). Boyle also stated how his "novels like *Water Music* and *World's End* seek both to employ and subvert the conventions of the nineteenth-century British novel" ("A Question of Influence"). Boyle has a wide range of influences and he usually cites John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon as sources of inspiration for his fiction. In an essay Boyle wrote about his experiences in the University of Iowa writing program he noted some other early influences:

We'd been reading the absurdist playwrights in another class, one I attended sporadically and failed miserably, but which featured amazing material in the required texts: "The Bald Soprano"; "Waiting for Godot"; "Rhinoceros"; "The Balcony." I was attracted to these works in particular because it was readily apparent that their authors were wise guys just like me--albeit very sophisticated, very nasty and very funny wise guys ("This Monkey" 5).

The latter part of this quote reveals one of the characteristics of Boyle's narrative voice, which, at its best, embodies these three traits. His wry detachment from his characters allows ample room to engage them in a variety of unusual yet believable circumstances that provide insightful commentary about our times and previous eras. He sets his characters in motion and steps back to watch their mishaps unfold without interfering by including judgmental commentary, which leaves the reader to form his or her own opinion about the nature of the situation.

Boyle's fiction has received almost no notice from critics or the academic world, despite his work being taught in classrooms, many positive reviews, and praise for his various skills. Part of this neglect may be due to the fact that much of his work is recent and it simply takes time for the critical world to catch up. Still, he published *Water Music* in 1980 and *World's End* in 1987; these are considered to be his best novels, and almost nothing has been written about them. Boyle suggested one possibility when he said: "A lot of people don't quite get sophisticated humor anymore. It

seems that we're in this kind of grimly realistic phase, where if it's not straightforward naturalism, people don't think it's any good, or don't get it, and I'm trying to work with all different types of humor'" (qtd. in Rettburg). While Boyle may be grumbling a bit, it may be that some people are just turned off by his brand of dark humor and don't see any validity in his honest and scathing observations of lives outside of the mainstream. His methods produce disturbing scenes that can make readers uncomfortable while often causing others to laugh. Some critics feel Boyle's frequent use of comic devices, satire, and grotesque disproportion interferes with in-depth character development, which means they do not feel he is worthy of serious consideration. Boyle explained his extensive use of comedy when he replied to a question about it on his website:

Comedy is my mode of dealing with tragedy and despair. What do we call it - - gallows humor? Black humor? Sardonic, bleak, stripped-to-the-bone humor? I do feel that the tragic and poignant can be made even more powerful, more affecting, if the writer takes the reader by surprise, that is, puts him or her into a comic universe and then introduces the grimmest sort of reality. Flannery O'Connor taught me this, in stories like "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and especially in a novel like *Wise Blood*. ("Questions # 23")

This type of dark humor has long been a staple of the picaresque novel. When I asked Boyle what drew him to the picaresque form he responded, "The picaresque novels appeal to me (think of Fielding. . . or a more contemporary example like *Lucky Jim*) because they offer flawed, sympathetic heroes whose function is to stand in for all of us in undermining the bewildering status quo. This, it seems to me, is a marvelous engine for comedy" ("Humble Plea"). By depicting a picaresque protagonist's inability to exist without trouble in conventional society, Boyle examines the themes of alienation and exclusion combined with the conflicting desire for acceptance and entry into a world of prosperity and success. With the long history of the picaresque novel, it appears that an outsider's conflicts with the status quo of society is a theme with universal qualities, as it readily applies to every culture and time period. The inability of picaresque characters to conform to social norms and their flawed natures only makes them more real and believable, as an ideal protagonist

in perfect sync with his society does not offer similar insights. Through the picaresque form, Boyle's characters embody the uncertainty and instability of their times, as well as our own, to dramatize the universal dilemma of an individual's identity and place within society.

In a brief overview of Boyle's career, Maril Nowak raises a pertinent question by asking: "Where are the women and children in Boyle's books?" (40). This often raised question reaches to the core of Boyle's greatest liability as a writer. While two of his later novels feature significant women characters--Ruth Dershowitz of *East is East* and Catherine Dexter McCormick of *Riven Rock* (who was a prominent figure in the early women's rights movement)--most of Boyle's female characters seem cursory and meant to fit a part instead of being fully developed. The same complaint has been raised about his male characters. Nowak does not seem troubled by this absence though and grants Boyle his premise by observing: "Money mumbles, dumb luck conquers all, scoundrels sleep soundly, and women and children are last. No offense intended, it's just how things go" (40). While there are a few children in his short stories, they are almost nonexistent in his novels. It appears that Boyle's talents are at their best when depicting the foibles and inadequacies of males and their sphere of existence. For what it is worth, Boyle has been happily married for over twenty years and has three children, so it is not as if he is completely unaware of women and children. If his satiric bite were aimed at them, it is doubtful he would have a positive reception.

Boyle has received many positive reviews of his novels and his potential as a writer, but many critics still feel he has yet to reach the limits of his abilities and wish to see it fulfilled. Jane Smiley recognizes his talents when she writes:

Throughout his career T. Coraghessan Boyle has shown a special affinity for dirt and a special relish for depicting the feckless self-absorption of the post-war generation Mr. Boyle has excelled at holding up a mirror in which our own faces grin foolishly against the very dark background of a world we don't comprehend and don't even try to comprehend. (1)

This thematic approach by Boyle, combined with a sharp, insightful comedy, is what places him in the company of contemporary writers such as Barth and Pynchon. Boyle is not afraid or reluctant to

tackle subjects that make readers squeamish and he is at his best when he takes on narcissistic characters who are oblivious to the larger world around them. He points out some of the flaws of American culture to hold them up for examination. If that disturbs readers, so be it. Michiko Kakutani notices this about Boyle's technique: "Rather than using his gifts to create polite mirrors of contemporary reality, he has chosen, like Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, to mix up naturalism with large doses of hyperbole and metaphor to create storybook collages that comment on older forms of literature even as they reinvent essential American myths"(C27). Boyle's picaresque novels are an attempt to shake the status quo of American society out of its self-centered complacency to see life as it is rather than casually accept it with a *laissez-faire* attitude and a shrug of the shoulders.

Boyle's style uses imaginative language, frequent and clever intertextuality and pop culture references, combined with the traditional picaresque elements--comic misadventures, the grotesque and the scatological--to create a defamiliarized environment while generating insightful observations about the overlooked aspects of existence. He uses these devices not just to create shock or humor for the reader, but to reflect on the harsh realities, bizarre experiences and imposed cruelties and abuses that compose the lives of his characters. Boyle's dark humor, which is as insightful as it is funny, and style are significant features of his writing. He acknowledged as much when he says: "Most of what I've written is in this comic-absurdist mode"(qtd. in Weber 70). Boyle's use of cutting humor and outlandish scenarios is also a way of representing a jaded view of the world. Scholes describes the meaning behind the use of black humor by postmodern novelists when he writes: "Progress is not seen as a conspiracy but as a joke. The black humorist is concerned not with what to do about life but with how to take it. In this respect black humor has certain affinities with some existentialist attitudes, roughly distinguishable in terms of the difference between seeing the universe as absurd and seeing it as ridiculous--a joke"(146-47). This attitude in perceiving the world is one that has been a staple in picaresque novels and it further defines a picaresque protagonist's conflicts within society. Boyle's style includes this cynical

attitude as a way of reflecting the disintegrated order of American society, the failure of many attempts to impose such an order and the social disruptions that result from both circumstances.

Boyle consciously strives to attract the attention of a highly distracted reading public whose social awareness has been blunted and numbed as a result of continual sensory and informational bombardment. Kakutani observes: "Mr. Boyle uses his quick, ironic command of sociological detail to both evoke and satirize a disturbed America in which, as he once wrote, 'rape, murder, cannibalism, political upheaval in the Third World, rock-and-roll, unemployment, puppies, mothers, Jackie, Michael, Liza' are incapable of inducing a reaction"(C27). Aware of the competition he faces with a fickle modern reading public, he seeks in his fiction to elicit a response with his portrayal of strange circumstances. Even his public appearances are known for his exuberance in putting on a performance rather than a quiet reading. In an interview, Bill Rodriguez asked Boyle if his flamboyant style in his writing and public readings had its origins in teaching difficult high school students, combined with "the desperate necessity to communicate by entertaining" ("Confessions"). Boyle replied:

'Certainly when I look back on why I like to stand before an audience and present my work and how I'm able to do it and how it accords with my personality, I definitely have to go back to that point, where it was vital to command an audience. Humor is a way to deal with it, and I always had an outlook on life that is a little disarming and I'm sure that that helped me get through too.'(qtd. in Rodriguez)

One of the ways Boyle catches a reader's attention is through his astute use of language. His sentences are not especially complicated or dense, yet they are effectively sprinkled with a variety of complex, obscure words that lead to vivid, unforgettable descriptions. In a review of *Budding Prospects* Eva Hoffman stated about Boyle's language: "The verbal energy is almost too insistent, too manic--as if Mr. Boyle were dancing on the edges of language, afraid that if he slowed down for a minute, he might fall into a vacuum"(A10). What is interesting about his elevated use of language is how it frequently stands in contrast to his descriptions of low subject matter and vice, areas he is clearly expert in. His writing has many ironic twists of language, as he takes words with usually

negative implications and uses them in ways that suggest mirth and pleasure rather than detriment. For example, in *World's End* Tom Crane quits college to live in a shack in the woods, much like a modern day Thoreau. Most people would peg Tom Crane to be a bum, but Boyle's depiction shows the pleasurable aspects of this character's situation rather than emphasizing the negative ones:

Sure it was nippy, and yes, necessity forced him to trudge out to Van Wart Road and hitch the two miles to his grandfather's for a hot meal and the occasional ritual peeling of the long johns and immersion in a steaming tub, but he was doing it. Independence was his! Self-direction! The joy of sloth! He lay in bed all morning, wrapped in his sleeping bag, his arms pinned beneath the weight of Indian blankets uncountable and an old reeking raccoon coat he'd found in his grandmother's closet, watching his breath hang in the air. (*World's End* 71)

The key word in this quote is 'sloth' because it is almost always used in a negative fashion to express an undesirable human trait, as it is considered to be one of the seven deadly sins. For Tom Crane though, sloth is the fulfillment of his wishes and therefore positive. He is living life on his own terms and nobody else's. Despite the drawbacks, he thoroughly enjoys the time to himself, even if it means infrequent bathing due to the brutal cold.

Boyle frequently relies upon grim irony, hyperbole and caricature as a means to examine the farcical and unusual elements of life and to distance the reader, at least to some degree, from the horrible circumstances he often describes and the reprobative features of his main characters. He says: "'Well it's true that none of my characters are admirable. . . But maybe I'm primarily a satirist, and a satirist needs to hold up what's not admirable'" (qtd. in Friend 68). Some of Boyle's minor characters, such as Tom Crane, do have positive traits, which offers a contrast for the negative aspects of other characters. Boyle uses his characters to carefully and humorously probe humanity's deficiencies to show that however much society has progressed there are still many flaws in the human character that remain unchanged. One of the reasons for this unflinching portrayal of negative characteristics and behaviors is to make people more aware of the world

around them to provoke change. Boyle acknowledged the influence satire can have when he said: “Satire . . . can be corrective. It can hold up certain attitudes as being fraudulent, and in doing so suggest that the opposite might be an appropriate way to behave. And I hope that if my work is socially redemptive, it is in that way” (qtd. in Stanton 32). One of the interesting features of Boyle’s satire is its position of amoral neutrality that leaves the reader to make decisions instead of the narrator offering judgments. Boyle is not interested in satisfying conventional morality and the expectations of the general public by rewarding the good and punishing the bad. That would be too formulaic and untrue to reality, where the good suffer misfortunes and the bad get away with their misbehaviors without any repercussions, but not always. Boyle’s picaresque protagonists readily break or defy social conventions and laws to get by in life, but eventually they pay a price.

A recurring theme in Boyle’s early novels is the failure of the American Dream and what people will do to achieve it. With the exception of *Water Music*, which deals with elements common to the American dream but in a British and African setting, these novels are a satire of the American dream. His characters desire to achieve prosperity quickly through corrupt means because they do not believe an ethical approach is a guarantee of success. Boyle’s picaresque protagonists concoct a variety of schemes that continually backfire and derail their quest for easy money. His novels suggest that the American Dream is only achieved by a fortunate few, as the subsequent demise of his characters leaves their aspirations unfulfilled. When I asked Boyle about this theme in his novels, he replied: “As for the American Dream: I subscribe to it. In my case it has proven a reality (humble origins, singing that democratic tune, a rise in social class, the freedom to pursue my art), but I believe in it not in terms of greed or scamming to get ahead, but as a way of self-realization. Thus, the satire directed at such types as the hustler and various types of scam artists” (“Humble Plea”). His picaresque characters are governed by necessity and desire, which influences their behavior as they attempt to achieve their ambitions.

Although Smollett wrote the following quote as part of his introduction to *Roderick Random*, Boyle shares the same idea for creating characters:

Though I foresee, that some people will be offended at the mean scenes in which he

is involved, I persuade myself the judicious will not only perceive the necessity of describing those situations to which he must of course be confined; in his low state; but also find entertainment in viewing these parts of life, where the humorous and passions are undisguised by affectation, ceremony or education; and the whimsical peculiarities of disposition appear as nature has implanted them. (Smollett xlv)

Boyle's picaresque characters are not created to reflect social norms and ideals, as they often revel in vice and other devious conduct. Consequently, they have many of the negative behaviors, misjudgments, and lack of restraint associated with living on the squalid social fringes of life. These features allow Boyle to explore his characters' adverse circumstances and the effects of their bad decisions. Despite their errant ways, his picaresque protagonists have a better grasp of how life truly functions through hard-earned experience. Tad Friend notes the complexity and depth of Boyle's cynicism and his representation of it: "But Boyle's scorn for man's 'doltishness, racism, unconsciousness toward the environment and history, gluttony and greed' is coupled with a febrile interest in the etiology of those flaws; he is that rare cynic who remains alive to the world" (68). Boyle doesn't condemn or condone his characters' misbehaviors but his tone can be critical and judgmental when his favorite targets are in sight. Boyle's novels seek to comprehend the reasons for social misconduct and its persistence in the face of progress rather than simply denouncing it. The catalog of details about his characters' quirks is one of his methods for achieving an understanding of deviant human conduct.

One of the criticisms of Boyle's characters is that they have many vividly drawn details but lack depth and substance. Regarding this point Boyle stated: "I feel that I've been working hard to improve my concept of character from the beginning. Character in satires often isn't as relevant as it is in a more conventional narrative, because what's more important is the overview" (qtd. in Rettburg). This is an important point because his characters serve as vehicles for satire, and an in-depth self-examination of his conscience would be out of character. It is not the nature of picaresque protagonists to reflect too extensively, as they are continuously moving forward to the

next situation. They absorb all they can quickly and move on, which is why caricature is an effective device in picaresque novels.

Picaresque novelists frequently employ caricature as a way of showing how their protagonists perceive the world. At its best caricature unforgettably enlivens comic and satiric situations but if it is overdone, the novel will seem unrealistic and contrived. This technique must be used carefully, as it walks a thin line. If the deliberate distortion and exaggeration of caricature is used judiciously, it can accurately depict how others are perceived. Caricature allows a writer's imagination to run freely and focus on the less flattering physical and mental features to portray a character in a humorous but negative manner. A picaresque protagonist relies on a quick, careful examination of the external features of the characters he encounters as a way to navigate through life.

This rapid observation and assessment is done for many reasons such as avoiding danger or spotting potential dupes to enact a scam. Boyle's most effective use of caricature is evident when he describes the cruel actions villains often perform upon his picaresque protagonists. The deliberately heightened description enhances the reader's understanding of the protagonist's sense of fear and misfortune for being in that situation and the vicious nature of his tormentor. When interviewing Boyle, Benjamin DeMott elicited a useful statement about a feature that is often present in Boyle's novels: "In his novels Boyle always has a 'monumental character who embodies fate, who you throw your character up against, a supermaniac who punishes naiveté by giving no quarter'" (68). This notion of innocence as a liability and experience as a virtue is an important feature of the picaresque tradition at work in Boyle's novels. It unforgivingly depicts the consequences of a character being unaware of his environment or the repercussions certain types of behavior may have.

The grotesque is closely related to caricature as a literary device used to enhance a picaresque novel's depiction of the chaos and perversity of life. In his *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* Bernard McElroy states: "The modern grotesque is not merely an assault upon the idea of a rational world; it is an assault upon the reader himself, upon his sensibilities, upon his ideals, upon his feeling of living in a friendly, familiar world or his desire to live in one" (27). The grotesque thrives in settings

that portray social instabilities which challenge a reader's safe, ordered perceptions of reality. Boyle finds delight in pointing out the ridiculous features of life and he uses the grotesque to make his audience face the harsh, inescapable realities of existence and perceive them in new ways. Paula Uruburu observes how novelists utilize the grotesque to closely examine American society when she writes, "The aim of the American Grotesque writers is to force both their characters and readers into a confrontation with the inescapable, terrible realities of our amorphous American culture"(25). Since Boyle's characters live on the margins of society, the grotesque allows him to humorously explore the various social dislocations and struggles in their lives to reveal a fuller picture of the inherent confusion and instability of American life. This is when Boyle's observations are at their finest.

Uruburu asserts how the grotesque: "produces writers who utilize and themselves embody the characteristics which define the American character that are so intimately related to the genre-- an irreverent wit, a penchant for the outlandish, for satire, a comic resilience in the face of adversity, and the use of an impassive mask when describing something frightening, shocking or terrible" (28). As a satiric device, the grotesque is highly effective with its deliberate exaggeration, yet it is still grounded in reality to keep its descriptions believable. Boyle's use of language, authorial tone, and comic touches mitigate the full effect of horror or disgust by creating distance between the reader and the scene being described. A novel's grotesque features point out the tension and struggle between a form that limits and content that refuses to be confined. As both are the primary focus of a narrative, the result is distortion and disproportion, usually for comic effect.

Perhaps Vladimir Nabokov described this inherent conflict best when he explained his method for creating a chess problem in *Speak, Memory*:

Deceit to the point of diabolism, and originality verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing the form to bulge like a sponge-bag containing a small

furious devil. (qtd. in Harpham 7)

This quote offers useful insight into Boyle's fictive approach for creating strange scenarios that strive to show what society and its people are really like instead of accepting their concealing appearances. What is fascinating about this technique is the visceral effect it generates. Deferring a reader's typical response and provoking an antithetical one in the form of laughter is what the grotesque does at its best. It allows a reader to come to terms with circumstances that ordinarily would not be funny and view them from new angles to see what can be gleaned from them.

One aspect of Boyle's humor is derived from the German concept of *schadenfreude* or bad humor, which, in many instances, causes the reader to laugh at a character's uncomfortable predicament and even pain, instead of sympathizing with him. There is little place for sympathy and sentiment in a Boyle novel, which is also a trademark of picaresque novels. McElroy explains the function of *schadenfreude*: "Closely allied to the use of the grotesque for exposure is the *schadenfreude*. . . the spark of the perverse glee that is part of the play element in the grotesque The grim joke in the modern grotesque is often a way of jarring the sensibilities into grasping the terrible or the pathetic by excluding the commonplace sentiments of revulsion and pity" (20). By stripping away or preventing the usual reaction to a given set of circumstances a writer is consciously creating a new perception for the reader through a much different understanding of the world. Part of the humor of Boyle's early novels is derived from the fact that the protagonist is often slow to recognize his mistakes and the trouble he may be causing. When his picaresque protagonists are punished for their various transgressions there is a sense that they knew the risks of their behavior, and the punishment they receive is part of accepting the consequences.

Grotesque devices are useful for examining the beliefs and practices in American society to show what those ideals are and the many ways Americans are incapable of fulfilling them. Uruburu discusses the role the grotesque has had in exploring the inescapable contradictions of American society:

In their attempts to create a truly American literature, certain writers have discovered the crucial, unresolvable conflict embedded in the American mind and experience

which makes their vision grotesque. It is the inevitable confrontation between Adamic innocence and terrible self-knowledge, between a realistic and an idealistic view of life combined with the collective belief that we can create heaven on earth through the American Dream (3).

In pointing out these unresolvable societal dilemmas, writers like Boyle can fictionally show, through the experiences of his characters, how reality often falls short of expectations. Most Americans would like to live in a state of innocence because it would be a realization of one of this country's ideals but such a scenario is impossible to implement. The cost of naiveté is too high in a corrupt, predatory world. The use of grotesque scenes vividly dramatizes the vast disparity between what life is like and how it is expected to be in Boyle's novels. During an interview Boyle mentioned: "The most valuable thing about the whole human experience is innocence. . . and you get disabused of it in childhood" (qtd. in DeMott 68). Boyle doesn't claim to have any answers to these difficult problems but his characters persevere nonetheless, even if their expectations are diminished. If he is suggesting anything, it would be that pragmatism and a realistic outlook on life--not corrupt approaches--are necessary if one hopes to find the American Dream. Boyle's use of these various techniques is a way of drawing attention to thematic dimensions of his novels, which probe and analyze the unusual facets of life to expose the deceptive nature of surface appearances in the individual and society

One of the most interesting themes of Boyle's picaresque novels is how he views history and incorporates it into his narratives. It serves a much more specific purpose than surface detail. He claims:

'In *Water Music* and *World's End*, as well as in my short stories that are historically based, I like to use history as a part of the myth that informs what we are now, rather than reproducing factually what might have happened. I do the research and I think I know the history, but what I want to end up with is a story that uses the history, the characters and the place as elements in a satisfactory artistic whole. . . . I'm more concerned with how the facts become fictional in the memories of people.' (qtd. in Brisick 72)

One of Boyle's main concerns is how history is perceived, particularly its distortions and the effects they have. He uses the historical past as a means of showing the unreliability of written history. What is recorded and interpreted in written form and what really occurred can be worlds apart, depending on the perspective. If history is inaccurate or false, what should anyone believe? Boyle uses this indeterminacy as a starting point for creating fiction that explores selected episodes from the past that are frequently overlooked to reveal, in fictive terms, new aspects of history to reexamine it in imaginative ways while showing its influence and relevance in contemporary society.

'I don't just write a conventional historical narrative, because they [sic] never work.

The historical impulse overwhelms the aesthetic impulse, and you wind up with a rather dull read that seems to replicate the way people lived in the past, or the way they spoke, or what they ate, and all that kind of information, which isn't necessarily germane to a novel. I'm interested in writing novels that reflect on how we are now,

how we got to be what we are now. ' (qtd. in Rettburg)

In his novels, Boyle is not trying to recreate past eras. While he may evoke them, he views them from a twentieth-century perspective that sheds light on what has occurred so readers can understand how such events shape society. In her essay on historical fiction, Linda Hutcheon explains one of its functions: "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (59). Boyle views history as being cyclical and desires to prod the awareness of his readers so that they can understand their place in history and the direction it may be headed. Boyle's fictive reinterpretation of the past allows him to knowingly depart from the facts and use anachronistic words and phrases to write novels that search for the deeper truths and meanings that can be obtained from such events.

Boyle fictively demythologizes historical figures to show who they were from a new point of view, an unflattering one, but without malice. Boyle mentions: "'I've always been interested in deflating heroes'" (qtd. in Harshaw 28). This approach allows Boyle to take individuals from

history who were formerly heroicized and knock them off of their pedestals to offer a more complete portrayal by scrutinizing their flawed human side, which is frequently overlooked, ignored or unknown. Boyle writes: "The joy for me in using these figures is in holding up their beliefs and attitudes to the scrutiny of our time, for good satiric fun, yes, but also to demonstrate how we've arrived here from there" (Letter 4).

Boyle uses the picaresque form as a means to question the received facts and truths of history and probe beneath this sometimes daunting facade to unearth deeper meanings along with concealed realities. Hutcheon asserts the varied and complex effects derived from a postmodernist examination of history when she states: "It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive versus historical representation, the particular versus the general, and the present versus the past. And its confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to cooperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is willing to exploit both" (56). Boyle claims neither an objectivity when examining historical subjects nor the assertion of new truths in his representations. What he does is reveal new insights into what is already known by blending historical fact with fictional devices. It is not so much the fact itself, but rather an understanding of the fact, its meaning, and its relevance to our world. That is why Boyle's novels dig beneath the surface appearances of history to demythologize it and communicate its importance. Boyle uses history in this manner to restore the earthier, overlooked aspects of previous eras to exhibit humanity's less flattering side and to view those times from a number of perspectives rather than a single and incomplete one.

A number of lesser themes frequently appear in Boyle's early novels, so it is useful to provide a quick summary of them to show their importance when analyzing the novels in subsequent chapters. The complicated relationship between an employer and employee, particularly when an illegal enterprise is involved, is a contemporary treatment of the traditional picaresque theme of the servant and master relationship. In many ways these characters are inextricably bound to each other through a mutual interest in the outcome, usually gaining money, as well as the shared liabilities in getting caught. This idea is also closely related to relationship between predators and

prey, which is typically enacted through scams where con men take advantage of the gullibility of their victims, just as employers exploit their workers. In Boyle's novels, innocence is always a liability in a corrupt world filled with far more experienced characters looking to exploit that innocence. Boyle also makes extensive use of the theme of alienation, as his picaresque protagonists are never comfortable in their environments and this sense of dislocation acts as a means for probing the shortcomings of his characters' surroundings and the problems that inevitably arise. Boyle's picaresque characters also take on a variety of roles and disguises to either earn money or attempt to slip beneath the notice of those who can create trouble for the protagonist, which demonstrates their flexible identities and resourceful thinking.

Picaresque novels and protagonists are traditionally controlled by fate through accidents, desire, misfortune, necessity, and mistreatment by others, which shows them to be fortune's plaything. How these unexpected occurrences affect a picaresque protagonist's life and how he responds to these problems is a theme that addresses the eternal dilemma of determinism versus free will. Boyle's novels contain many aspects of determinism to show how his characters' lives are, to a strong degree, beyond their control. When an interviewer asked about his deterministic views he replied: "You can't escape certain biological features, ethnic features. And I think that there is a--it's not a predestination, it's a hopelessness to human existence. There's no reason for it that we're aware of. And you're a pawn to forces you're not aware of. Accident, for instance, seems to control everything. No wonder people are so superstitious. No wonder people believe in gods"(qtd. in E. Adams 57).

What is interesting about Boyle's characters is how, despite being mostly governed by deterministic principles, they also have elements of free will that allows them to steer their destiny to some degree. For example, when Ned Rise puts on his live pornography show or when Felix decides to participate in the marijuana farm, these characters actively make decisions, which are usually bad and often humorous. A deterministic view would claim that these characters' actions are simply being guided by their needs and desires without any sense of free will. It appears more likely that these characters are performing a poor exercise of their free will and the results speak for

themselves. To an extent, these characters have some degree of responsibility for their bad fate, but accidents and unpredictable misfortunes also play a key role. *World's End* is Boyle's most overtly deterministic novel to date as it traces the fictional histories of a number of families from the Dutch colonial period in New York. At the end of this novel Walter Van Brunt is fully aware of his family's ugly history and the detrimental effects it has upon individuals, yet he is unable to stop himself from slipping into the same trap. Through his characters' behavior, Boyle shows the consequences of self-defeating and self-destructive behavior as well as poor decisions, to show how they can affect an individual as much as accidents and bad fate.

None of Boyle's picaresque protagonists are heroic and only Walter Van Brunt from *World's End* can qualify as an antihero. Smiley notes: "In a Boyle novel, there are major characters but no true heroes or heroines" (28). Boyle's protagonists elude clear labels such as good and evil, as their actions are mixed or neither. His characters inhabit the murky gray areas between these poles to reflect the ambiguity and indeterminacy of their lives and their struggle to exist. Tom Crane qualifies as an exception because his behavior in *World's End* is consistently positive, though not heroic, which is as close as any Boyle character comes to being a hero. Nowak shows another dilemma Boyle's protagonists face: "Awash in American humor's traditions--brawn, bravado, and ineptitude--the Boylean male sideslips every chance to be a hero" (40). Boyle's picaresque protagonists lack the ability and desire to be heroic. They are interested in living life as it presents itself. They are not seeking to rise above it and stand out. Mungo Park from *Water Music* is the exception, but his drive is hardly matched by his execution and misjudgments, which prohibit him from realizing his dream of becoming a renowned explorer.

To demonstrate Boyle's place in the picaresque novel's tradition I have selected, in chronological order, *Water Music* (1980), *Budding Prospects* (1984), *World's End* (1987), and *The Road to Wellville* (1993), which offer prime examples of his techniques at work. The last novel is not a truly picaresque one but it does contain a distinctly picaresque character in Charlie Ossining, who has a significant role in this large book. I have excluded *East is East* (1990), which has a picaresque

character in Hiro Tanaka, because I don't feel it is Boyle's best representation of the picaresque, despite the warm critical reception it received. I have also left out his two most recent novels, *Tortilla Curtain* (1995) and *Riven Rock* (1998), as they are a departure from the picaresque and have other fictive objectives and techniques at work.

Chapter Two

Imaginatively Recreating History: *Water Music* and the Picaresque

Boyle's *Water Music*, his first novel, was consciously written in the picaresque tradition with a postmodern awareness of how the versions of history we receive are never as authoritative and objective as they claim. These historical recollections provide limited perspectives of a given event but they do not offer a full account of conflicting perceptions. Boyle uses this notion as a starting point for a fictive reexamination of the life and significance of the explorer Mungo Park. Boyle subverts the traditional role of an explorer as a hero by creating Mungo as a picaresque character. Instead of being an integral and essential part of his expeditions, he is a lucky bumbler who somehow manages to survive during most of the novel, despite his ineptitude, in instances when he should have died. As a leader, he is incapable of commanding an expedition party through west Africa. It is the secondary members of the expedition, Ned Rise and Johnson, who are of far greater value in critical situations, even though Mungo does not recognize the significance of their role. As the head of the expedition, he takes the credit himself.

This novel contains two distinctly different picaresque narratives, concerning the characters of Mungo and Ned Rise, that merge near the novel's end. A novel with two picaresque characters, since it is unprecedented in the history of the genre, expands the possibilities of what a picaresque novel can be. Boyle's innovation of using two picaresque characters allows him to fictively explore the varied, but infrequently discussed behaviors, customs and other significant features of African and British society before and after the turn of the eighteenth century. By using third-person narration, Boyle incorporates into his novel many stories and viewpoints which would not have been available if he had chosen to use the more traditional first-person narration. The inclusion of Ned in Mungo's second expedition is a useful fictional device that allows another picaresque point of view to explain what went wrong and why so many people and livestock perished. As a resourceful, shifty character who perseveres through many misfortunes, Ned represents the rising British underclass of the early nineteenth century with his unflagging determination to leave London's slums and make a fortune. His presence in the novel allows for a lower-class perspective

of events, which is quite different from Mungo's middle-class values and understanding of life. At the novel's end when both characters are together, each one has a vastly different interpretation about what is happening with the expedition and why they are afflicted with so much death and disaster.

Through Ned's participation in the expedition, Boyle can also fill in some of the historical gaps, because Mungo's mind is unstable at the novel's end and he cannot clearly assess the dangers his party must confront. In the 1995 symposium on Boyle's fiction at SUNY Potsdam, Matthew Henry read a paper about *Water Music* in which he said: "Ned Rise becomes Mungo Park's fictional counterpart in the lower-class world of London and the novel's other central figure. . . . Ned's final interaction with Park establishes the foremost contrast in the novel, in essence pitting the fictional against the historical" (2). When it comes to discerning the truth about events, not simply the facts and their interpretations, Boyle's view seems to favor fiction over history because fiction is open about its subjectivity, whereas most history is not. Where a historian is often constrained by the static nature of facts and their gaps, a novelist is liberated by imaginatively interpreting these facts and gaps, and deviating from them, to suggest truths that may be concealed by facts. As a novelist, Boyle uses fictive devices and techniques to probe beneath the surface of historical facts to discern larger meanings that are not always readily apparent.

Since *Water Music* is so grounded in history, particularly the life of the actual explorer Mungo Park and the journals of his African experiences, it is useful to review who he was and what he accomplished to shed insight into the character of Mungo. (To avoid confusion, I will refer to the fictional character as Mungo and the historical person as Park.) This background information about Park will delineate the fictive contrast Boyle provides with the character of Mungo, as well as reveal Boyle's methods for incorporating history into his novels. Due to the sheer volume of detail in a Boyle novel, it is difficult to discuss elements of character without recalling the significance of the plot, as both are so intertwined. My discussions about the various characters in *Water Music* will be connected to selected episodes to provide useful examples to make my analysis clear. In the examination of Mungo's role as a picaresque character, Dassoud's place in the novel will be

included because his actions toward Mungo contribute essential picaresque episodes to the novel. From there, I will discuss the role of Ned to show how he is a fully developed picaresque character who offers a vastly different and thoroughly picaresque perspective of nineteenth-century London and Mungo's second expedition. I will conclude by examining the shifting positions of Ned and Mungo at the novel's end to show the meanings of their respective fates.

The history of Park's life plays a significant role in *Water Music*, as it was the blueprint for many of the novel's episodes. Park was a relatively obscure Celtic explorer who was raised in Scotland. He searched for the course of the Niger River on two separate expeditions, from 1795 to 1797 and 1805 to 1806. The Niger River was only known to Europeans through myths and speculation. There had been many unsuccessful attempts to find the river, but they all failed due to the tremendous obstacles, natural or otherwise, that interfered and almost always caused death. Boyle describes his initial inspiration to write about Park by saying: "I was doing my Ph.D. in nineteenth-century British Literature and was reading John Ruskin, who mentions that Mungo Park was a terrific hero who went to discover the Niger River, but look what he did to his family: he left his wife and kids behind, took off on this adventure and died! So I thought I would examine that" (qtd. in Heebner). Park was in search of empirical truth to illuminate this forbidding knowledge and open the area to further exploration and trade. For Park, it was a mystery to solve and a feat to accomplish. If he returned to Britain with this knowledge his name and fortune would be secure.

Boyle's objective is to reexamine Park's life by exploring the unknown gaps in our knowledge of his life from a twentieth-century perspective to obtain a more complete understanding of who the historical person was, with his flaws and achievements on display. Boyle freely admits to making up some of the African words and languages as well as including anachronisms to provide a resonance of reality to Park's expeditions from a modern perspective. Boyle explained his purpose when he stated: "I invented some of the African languages in the book, and part of the fun was to mix contemporary vernacular with period terminology since the object of the book is to be self-reflexive. It's an adventure you're sucked into, but it also makes fun of adventure stories and it's written by a wise guy in the twentieth century" (qtd. in Heebner).

In the opening pages of *Water Music*, Boyle wrote a disclaimer about his artistic approach to writing a novel that deals with history. He revealed his techniques to avoid misinterpretations or accusations of carelessness:

As the impetus behind *Water Music* is principally aesthetic rather than scholarly, I've made use of the historical background because of the joy and fascination I find in it, and not out of a desire to scrupulously dramatize or reconstruct events that are a matter of record. I have been deliberately anachronistic, I have invented language and terminology, I have strayed from and expanded upon my original sources.

Where historical fact proved a barrier to the exigencies of invention, I have, with full knowledge and clear conscience, reshaped it to fit my purposes. (ix)

Boyle's aesthetic approach seeks to uncover fresh perspectives from other eras that have not been previously considered or are unknown. There are very few documented facts about Park's exploration of west Africa and his search for the terminus of the Niger River except for his journals and two additional journals from his African guides. The first journal, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, was carefully revised by Park and published in 1799, while the second one, *The Journal of a Mission to the Interior of Africa*, remained unpublished until 1815. Since Park died, it was an incomplete account, but it was supplemented by the accounts of his two guides, Isaaco and Amadi Fatouma. The differences between Park's two accounts are fascinating and a comparison reveals just how much unpleasantness was left out of the first one. This disparity in perspective from a single person raises many questions and interpretations about what actually occurred and led to Park's demise. What was left out or screened from the first journal at its publication? What was omitted from both journals? All we have are Park's subjective accounts, two brief journals from his guides, and the context of his time to define his achievement, which leaves our knowledge incomplete. Because the facts will never be fully known, Boyle chose to recreate Park's adventures from a fictive, twentieth-century viewpoint to see what they have to offer to the modern reader's understanding of the world. Park's journal only discussed what he wanted the public to see, which

causes a modern reader to wonder if he was concealing any information, especially unflattering details that would tarnish the reputation he was trying to cultivate.

The published journal of Park's first expedition featured him as the brave hero, who represents the British people, nobly triumphing over the dangers of Africa. Little else is known about his first expedition. In his preface to the first journal he wrote: "As a composition, it has nothing to recommend it but the *truth*. It is a plain unvarnished tale, without pretensions of any kind, except that it claims to enlarge, in some degree, the circle of African geography" (xxiii). While Park's claim of not embellishing his African experiences seems valid, that does not address what he had left out to make himself appear better to the public. His purpose for publishing the journal was to sell his story and make money, which required him to edit his adventures to meet public tastes by omitting details that would be considered boring or unsettling. He deliberately narrowed his journal's focus to limit it to specific topics rather than offering a complete picture of everything that occurred, which was not an uncommon practice.

Park's main objective for the expedition was to map the region and determine the feasibility of trade routes. He was an explorer examining the land to exploit it for its natural resources and other commerce, not an anthropologist in pursuit of cultural knowledge, though he did record some of the observations he made regarding the natives' customs and practices. If he could return with a solid, factual account of the Niger River's course, the British empire and its merchants would stand to make a fortune in trade. It is important to remember his journey in the context of his times, particularly his imperialistic views about what constituted a civilized life. Even though he says he befriended many Africans along the way, he regarded the majority of them as pagans in need of Christianity to improve themselves. To be fair, without endorsing Park's views, it should be noted that he endured a lot of abuse and mistreatment at the hands of his captors and assorted bandits because he was a white Christian, and his nearly defenseless position made him an easy target. Park's biased viewpoint satisfied the conventions of his contemporary audience's expectations, especially the presumption that he was going to discover the river and its course, as if it and the people who lived there had not existed until a European had confirmed their

existence.

By reading Park's published journals, one can clearly see that much more took place than he recalls. This absence is conspicuous and the parts that were left out are of greater interest to the contemporary reader because they offer unique insight into what these lands and their people were like, as well as offering insight into Park's exploration methods and the unusual circumstance he encountered. Knowing this information gives us a more complete grasp of the nature of Park's undertaking as well as the audacity and daring it required. The adversity and mishaps he experienced when he was forced to wander by himself rarely point to his own mistakes. Park's stubborn determination to complete his second expedition at all costs combined with his refusal to heed the warnings and advice of the local inhabitants led to his downfall. He had a whole expedition party to lead and look after, which was far more difficult than managing for himself. While he is alone, Park does not constitute much of a threat, but a full expedition party bearing weapons does. The natives recognized the negative implications of such a large presence of these intruders and understandably felt threatened. His refusal to recognize his situation as hopeless, even though nearly three-fourths of his party were deceased upon reaching the Niger River after 500 miles of overland travel, represents one of his main failures. Given what we know today about the world and the negative effects past explorers have had with their exploitative methods and underhanded dealings, it would be valuable to have some other perspectives about what occurred on Park's expeditions. Interpreting what Park writes from a contemporary perspective, he certainly was not a villain but he was not a hero either. He occupies a middle ground, which Boyle found to be fertile material for writing.

Despite the historical Park's flaws and biases, we cannot ignore his courage and resilience. During his first expedition he was forced to walk alone a lengthy distance to the closest European outpost when he was robbed and stripped naked by bandits. His journal entry is a poignant assessment of the predicament he was in and it is hard not to feel any sympathy for him at this moment, as he is so far from any friendly help or assistance.

After they were gone, I sat for some time looking around me with amazement and

terror. Whichever way I turned, nothing appeared but danger and difficulty. I saw myself in the midst of a vast wilderness in the depth of the rainy season, naked and alone; surrounded by savage animals, and men still more savage. I was five hundred miles from the nearest European settlement. (Park 186)

The fact that Park managed to stay mentally focused and extricate himself from this dilemma is a testament to his durability and fortitude. Park faced a constant threat of robbery, hostile towns and tribes, wars and attacks by predatory animals. With Islam as the dominant religion of the region, being a Christian made him an easy target for abuse, since he was considered to be an enemy of the prophet.

In many cases, the historical Park had difficulty finding food and water, which left him to beg for survival. Many of the African slaves Park encountered had a higher social standing and received better treatment than he did. An instance where this idea stands out is when Park is extremely dehydrated but the locals refuse to give him any water because their well is not for Christians, which forces him to go to a filthy cattle trough and compete with the cows for water. The poorest people were always the most hospitable to his various plights, yet Park also encountered generous kings who bestowed many acts of unexpected benevolence upon him. This treatment was a startling contrast to the usual shakedown by local kings. Since Park was powerless to stop their plunder he had to pay appropriate tribute to satisfy their rapacity. When it came to trading any paying tributes, Park was always in a bad bargaining position that offered no advantage or protection. All of these negative circumstances gave him understandably mixed feelings about Africa and its people, yet he was still drawn to it a second time.

The entries of Park's second journal are said to be published as they were found, without the polish of the first journal and this difference is informative and revealing. On this second trip in 1805, Park was in command of a large expedition party, the accompanying supplies, and the animals for transporting both, which exponentially compounded his problems and slowed his progress. He was absolutely unaware of the hazards and obstacles, both human and natural, he would face down the river. He pushed forward as always, since turning back was not feasible and

would have amounted to an admission of failure. It is quite probable that Park left out many details either deliberately or inadvertently. This is where Boyle's fictive stance and reexamination of history enters, because the fictive "truth" may be much closer to realistically depicting what occurred than the factual journals, which only recalled what the British public expected to hear, gloss and all, without too much harsh reality. Sutcliffe observes: "With its own purposeful distortions *Water Music* sets about not to put things straight but to restore the mistakes and the dirt to history" (224). This observation is a key point because the dirt and mistakes are not included in Park's journals and there is no other record of them, yet their existence is highly probable from the journal's inferences and what we know today about the exploration of Africa. Boyle's inclusion of the possible errors and distasteful material presents the reader with a different image and understanding of a well known era.

What Boyle does with this discrepancy is show the realities of exploring Africa in contrast to the smooth, polished recitation offered by Park in his first journal. In *Water Music*, after reading the journal, Johnson calls Mungo on his fabrication of actual events to say they are wrong. Mungo defends his writing by stating: "The good citizens don't want to read about misery and wretchedness and thirty-seven slaves disemboweled, old boy--their lives are grim enough as it is. No, they want a touch of the exotic and the out-of-the-way. And what's the harm of giving it to them?" (121). Mungo is more interested in offering a fantasy of Africa, rather than the actuality of it. Where the historical Park would politely say he was sick or had a fever and leave it at that, Boyle embellishes the account to give a better understanding of what had to be endured as a result of Mungo's pursuit, as the following quote from *Water Music* graphically reveals:

The fever came on with a vengeance. It left him enervated and delirious, and it was accompanied by an excoriating diarrhea that so debilitated him he couldn't even muster the energy to clean himself. For two weeks he lay on a mat . . . sweating, and stinking, waking from jarring nightmares to the stark actuality of four walls on an alien planet. At intervals someone bent over him with a damp cloth, or put a wooden spoon in his mouth. (171)

This description brings to life one of the most overlooked aspects of exploration, as sickness is a reality that none are immune from when visiting foreign lands. Exploring the wilderness of a foreign country is not at all glamorous. Many explorers died in pursuit of their dreams. It is difficult and demanding work that often yields disappointments and much hardship through deprivation, suffering, and frequent illness. Park does mention some hardships in his journal, but in a muted tone. Boyle includes a brief descriptive passage to contrast what Mungo believed to be the ideal of exploring Africa to its nasty reality while he is being held captive: "The explorer never dreamed it would be like this--so confused, so demeaning. And so hot. He had pictured himself astride a handsome mount, his coat pressed and linen snowy, leading a group of local wogs and half-wits and kings to the verdant banks of the river of legend" (64). These dashed illusions are revealing about Mungo's character because they indicate an attitude of superiority and a belief that rational thought and perseverance will conquer anything. He had no way of anticipating what he would encounter and his reluctance in adapting to the local conditions by refusing to toss aside his British way of thinking leads him into many conflicts in the African setting.

Misfortune can strike at any moment, and it often does, which contributes to the picaresque elements of *Water Music* to show how little control the novel's characters have over their fate. When writing *Water Music*, Boyle obtained many of his seemingly fantastic and least probable events right from Park's journals to enhance the novel. Johnson, Park's initial guide, had been a slave for seven years in America before returning to Africa; and Isaaco, Park's later guide, was the one suddenly snatched by a large crocodile before gouging its eyes out with his thumbs to save his life. Boyle develops the latter incident, which only has a brief mention in Park's account, as a way to give a modern reader a better grasp of the dangers of exploring Africa. Boyle describes the eighteen-foot long crocodile with anthropomorphic qualities to portray its seeming malevolence toward humans, even though it is purely indifferent about what it kills for food.

Things have gone splashing past him--easy marks--wretched , wet, vomiting things creeping out of the water unawares--but he's ignored them. A mandrill dragging a broken leg and a buttery fat bushpig that would normally have made an exquisite

entrée were especially hard to pass up, but he has his heart set on the pregnant woman, a sort of two-in-one treat. Or the stringy little man. Or that strange, pale newcomer.

(148-49)

The incident lets Boyle show, in fictive terms, the actual threats that Mungo and the natives face from predators. The fact that Johnson was “snapped up like a cocktail olive” shows how helpless these characters are when confronting the sheer brute force of nature and its creatures (149). Total safety is an alien concept in the African wilderness. Misfortune can strike at any moment, contributing to the picaresque elements of *Water Music* to show how little control these characters have over their fate.

Not everyone approves of Boyle’s techniques in depicting Park’s life. One British reviewer wrote: “On every page Boyle indulges and over-indulges his voracious appetite for purulent detail, for vulgar anachronism, heaping over the history of Mungo Park a seething pile of inaccuracies, reportage and invention” (Sutcliffe 224). But Boyle is not content to accept the myth of Park, as historians have. His deliberately distorted and consciously subjective depiction offers a new perception of who Park may have been because our knowledge of him will always be incomplete. Boyle explains: “I reinvented Mungo to suit my own purposes. I make him into a kind of holy fool, when in fact in real life he was quite amazing--physically and in terms of how indomitable he was’” (qtd. in Heebner). Through this significant alteration, Boyle fictively seeks to dispel the image of Park as an unquestioned hero, because by twentieth-century standards, successful exploration takes much more than bravery and courage. Heroism takes responsibility and accountability. Park evades blame for his misjudgments that eventually lead many men to their deaths, including his own. By the end of his life, his judgment had been clouded by many fevers, assorted illnesses, as well as his ego and an unstoppable ambition to succeed, no matter what the cost.

Ken Tucker’s review of *Water Music* shows a much more positive assessment of its merits and a clearer understanding of Boyle’s aim and influences:

With *Water Music*, the picaresque/experimental genre--its convoluted

cliffhanging, its ribald jokes, its existential cynicism--are obvious: anyone plowed through *The Sot-Weed Factor* lately? . . . With *Water Music*, the picaresque/experimental genre that has produced some of the most praised and least read books in the last 30 years, has finally yielded a novel that every schoolchild should love: a ripping yarn smeared with smut, puns and guts. (39)

Boyle has two purposes in mind with this novel, to educate and to entertain the reader with a unique view of the past. He has acknowledged an affinity for researching the most outlandish details he can find about the various cultures and eras discussed in the novel so that he could include them into the storyline. He shows his understanding of postmodern techniques by effortlessly weaving together the crude and the erudite to offer a new picture of a historical era, much like Barth did in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Tucker concludes his review by stating: "The terrific thing about the book, though, is that it shows a complete understanding of how the picaresque/experimental novel became a way to render avant-garde fiction techniques into a commercial form, even while subverting that form to smithereens" (39). In this novel, Boyle has found a way to make the postmodern novel accessible to the general reader without pandering or seeming pedantic.

One of the major questions Boyle asks in this novel is, if all we know of our written history is an inaccurate and incomplete picture, how do we determine what really happened? It is difficult to interpret events or ascertain their possible meanings if our only source is a distorted record. This circumstance is addressed in *Water Music* a number of times, but it is best expressed when the character Lord Twit speaks before the African Association:

"I mean to say that all our cherished histories--from those of the Greeks to that of our late departed colleague Mr. Gibbon--are at best a concoction of hearsay, thirdhand reports, purposeful distortions and outright fictions invented by the self-aggrandizing participants and their sympathizers. As if that were not enough, this hodgepodge of misrepresentation and prevarication is then further distorted through the darkling lens of the historian himself." (98-99)

In this speech, Lord Twit openly challenges some of his contemporary British intellectuals' deepest and most cherished assumptions about the world. By questioning the veracity of these treasured histories he appears to be striking a heavy blow at the very foundation of British society and its education which perpetuates these myths as solid, irrefutable facts beyond questioning. The audience is filled with dignitaries who respond as if he is uttering heresy. Their rejection of Twit's assertions shows their willingness to perpetuate their ignorance in these matters and retain a narrow, restrictive view of the world and its people. They privilege the inaccurate or completely false historical speculations of the ancient Greeks over the much more recent secondhand information from Johnson, Twit's slave from Africa and later Park's guide, who provided fairly current assessments that openly contradicted the accounts of Africa from the ancient Greeks.

Almost all of the African Association's members assume Johnson to be ignorant and inferior, so they readily dismiss his knowledge. One of the novel's ironies is that even though Mungo returns with fresh information about a specific part of the African continent, he can not break free from his own biases, distortions, and misconceptions to learn to examine beneath the surface of his experiences to find larger meanings. It is Lord Twit who helped persuade Mungo to distort the accounts of his travels to make them more appealing and acceptable to the British reading public. Twit might speak out over the inaccuracies of the ancient Greeks' depiction of Africa, yet he has no problem coercing Mungo to concoct a fiction about his African experiences when there is money to be made. Boyle is able to show how all of these elements function in his fictive representation of the past.

One of the reasons Boyle fictionally explores these discrepancies is to show how the concealed or unknown appearances of history are different from the received myths. In *History and the Contemporary Novel*, David Cowart explains another reason why novelists use history as a means of discovering the truth about a specific time period: "By the same paradox that obtains generally in fiction (that the artist tells the truth by lying), the historical novelist can--by judicious (sometimes egregious) departures from fact--provide more insight into historical truth than the historian constrained by fact" (59). The novelist has a much different license to interpret, deviate from, and

manipulate what is understood as historical facts and shape them into a fictional construct to illuminate aspects of truth that would otherwise not be present if she or he were restricted to the surface facts of events. In the 1995 symposium on Boyle's fiction, Matthew Henry noted how Boyle broke from the historical record to offer a more developed representation of people who were mostly left out of Park's journals, even though they had prominent roles in his expedition: "Boyle 'fictionalizes' history in *Water Music* by self-consciously elaborating the roles of persons marginalized by historical documentation--notably, Park's fiancée, Allison, and his two guides, Johnson and Isaaco--and by incorporating invented non-historical figures --particularly Ned Rise, a character fitted into the historical narrative with great precision" (2). By developing a larger role for these historical characters into the fictional narrative, or inventing primary characters such as Ned to accompany Mungo, Boyle is able to present Mungo from multiple viewpoints which are critical to show his life and personality more completely instead of relying solely on Park's journals, which were intended to portray him in a flattering light to secure his reputation.

By understanding the subjectivity of historical accounts, a novelist is free to explore and contribute a fictionally subjective interpretation of the same events, but in the much more engaging form of the novel. Cowart observes: "History cannot escape imprecision because source material, frequently incomplete or slanted, must undergo interpretation by historians who, unlike physicists or chemists, can never neutralize or obviate the effects of their own subjectivity" (14). Boyle uses this understanding of historical accounts as a way to probe past eras to show their influence and relevance in our own times. In the case of *Water Music*, he examines the dangers and methods behind the exploration of west Africa to show how our knowledge of the world was obtained, but he includes the ugly side of this process rather than simply championing the heroism of the accomplishment.

By merging his concerns with history with the literary tradition of the picaresque novel, Boyle creates a new awareness of the past that is both comic and serious, indicating that a spectacular failure can be just as revealing as a remarkable triumph. The typical accounts of explorers detail what they achieved but not how they did it, particularly the abuses, mistakes, and frequent lack of

regard for the indigenous populations as well as their customs and beliefs. Explorers' methods were not considered too important when compared with their accomplishments. By fictively examining Mungo's methods and frequent mistakes while incorporating Ned into the novel as a primary character and observer, Boyle shows the remarkable similarities between London and west Africa, which were believed to be utterly different in the early nineteenth century. While the geographic elements and climates are dissimilar, both the negative and positive human elements share much in common.

Mungo's character has several picaresque features such as traveling and adventure, a drive for survival under adverse conditions, and endurance from being tossed about by the forces of fate and accident, all related through an episodic narrative structure. While he resides in Scotland and London he has a fairly secure means of living and a respectable status as a country doctor, but it is neither exciting nor profitable. Because of Mungo's birth position as one of the youngest males in his family, he does not stand to inherit much money. His restlessness, combined with desires for fame and fortune, leads him into Africa. When he is in Africa, his carefully cultivated respect and security are greatly diminished, as he is subject to a completely different set of cultural customs and social practices. The retrospective view of Mungo allows Boyle to show how characters fare in environments where the rules and principles are completely different from their own culture's.

In many ways, Mungo is unable to look beyond his own culture's assumptions of what constitutes civilized life and regards anything that is not in accordance with British standards as primitive and unrefined. Mungo's inability to adapt to new environments is a major theme that is both serious and humorous. He is unable to manage in most circumstances that challenge his imperialistic perceptions because he is confronted with new reality that he has no knowledge of and his own cultural upbringing fails him. An example of this shortcoming occurs during the second expedition as it moves deeper into the interior. The people and their animals are overloaded with too many material goods for the purposes of trading, exchanging gifts and paying tariffs along the way. The African natives see the sheer volume of these material goods as a careless, flaunting, and excessive display of wealth, so they obtain some of it for themselves by stealing when the

opportunity presents itself. This situation thoroughly frustrates Mungo because he cannot make sense of it or find a solution to deter it. These losses threaten the eventual outcome of his party because it may be left with nothing to exchange or to pay tribute with in later kingdoms.

That's the worst of it: the thievery. The rest Mungo could live with--man against nature and all that - but this unremitting assault by the natives--the very people who would most benefit by his opening the region to British trade--it's exasperating, heartbreaking. Instead of looking on each successive village with relief, as a place of refuge and respite, the explorer has come to dread the approach to any civilized area.

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The African natives in this area have gotten along fine without the British, yet Mungo assumes they are in need of European civilizing and material goods. The British merchants would be the only people to benefit from trading goods in this region, while the natives would only incur further intrusion into their lands through colonization, exploitation of the land for its material resources, and the gradual loss of their cultures and traditions. Once this encroachment begins it is quite difficult to halt, but Mungo is only capable of perceiving how it would serve British capitalism without considering the detrimental influences it would have upon the native inhabitants.

Mungo thought he knew how difficult and dangerous exploring Africa could be, as he was aware of the explorers who had perished before him. What he did not know was how he would have to cope in an utterly foreign world he was wholly unprepared for and confront his beliefs in a neatly ordered universe. These circumstances contribute to the picaresque features of Mungo's character as well as his misadventures and misfortunes in Africa. He must contend with a hot, aggressive climate that abruptly changes without warning and endure an actively hostile environment that is geared toward survival of the fittest. There is little mercy to be found anywhere and death is always potentially present. He is a fairly serious character trying to achieve a reputation in life through the difficult but accepted means of exploration. At every turn, his actions and other mishaps betray his intentions and very little goes right for him. He is a different sort of picaresque protagonist, and by the end of the novel he is no longer a picaresque character. He

becomes a representative of the worst aspects of British imperialism by placing the successful completion of his expedition above all other considerations, including a regard for the human lives that are expended as the expedition moves forward.

The opening scene in *Water Music* is a good indication of what is to happen in the novel and of Boyle's stylistic approach to handling the events of Mungo's life. Boyle exposes Mungo's life, literally and figuratively, for all the world to see. He is being held captive by curious Moors who treat him with absolutely no deference as they strip him naked for a close inspection in front of many people. This encounter is first time the Moors see a white man and they are trying to determine if he is even human, as they are startled by his white skin and green eyes. Sutcliffe refers to the novel's opening and Mungo's pale backside in stating: "it is clear that Boyle's purpose is deflationary and disruptive" (224). Besides exposing Mungo, the scene also shows how the pleasant formalities of a gentleman's proper conduct are far out of place. Mungo's acquired codes of behavior are suddenly useless to extricate himself from this situation. He struggles to learn new rules of conduct that are Darwinian in their implications. The strongest, fastest, luckiest, toughest, and smartest prey upon the lesser with no mercy or questions asked. Those are the rules of survival at their most basic. If Mungo is to survive and accomplish his objectives, he must come to terms with this way of living and adapt himself to it as much as possible.

Mungo's lack of familiarity with the climate, customs and terrain inadvertently leads him into many misfortunes, as these three factors are continually and unpredictably shifting to further reveal the instability of his venture and his unpreparedness for it. Guillén offers this observation about the picaresque novel: "The picaresque *novel*, then, offers a process of conflict between the individual and his environment, inwardness and experience, whereby one element is not to be perceived without the other" (77-78). As an outsider to the African continent, Mungo is unaware of the severity of the climate and the behaviors of its inhabitants, which leaves him in continual conflict, even when he tries to avoid trouble or deal with them on their own terms. Besides contending with undesirable customs, he must deal with an unforgiving wilderness that mercilessly exploits any

weakness to bring about death. Even the Africans are uneasy about passing through these dangerous regions:

The Jallonka Wilderness was an atavism--ten thousand square miles of uninhabited jungles, and grasslands, as pristine and primitive as the world before man. Within its reaches were six rivers that had to be forded, three of them upper tributaries of the Senegal. There was no food to be had along the way, nor any shelter. Predators roamed the brakes and forests as they had for eons, and bandits lay in wait along the borders. It was a dangerous and inhospitable place--a place of shadow and legend, of bad luck and sudden death. (*Water Music* 181)

In the African wilderness, Mungo is part of the food chain and he must be aware at all times or suffer the consequences. Crossing rivers is a very dangerous act that could cost lives. The slow movement of walking through water, combined with tricky, unstable footing, leaves both humans and pack animals extremely vulnerable to attacks by crocodiles. If the water is high, there is the danger of being swept downstream by swift, unmanageable currents and getting drowned, eaten or lost. Even with precautions, these accidents are unavoidable.

Much of the novel's humor revolves around Mungo's upbringing and his inability to adapt to the circumstances at hand or to anticipate the effects his behavior or mere presence may have. It is a feature of his character that breaks from the picaresque tradition and it serves as a vivid contrast to the complete adaptability of Ned. Mungo's inflexible devotion to British imperialism and its supposedly inherent superiority to all other beliefs and customs is a main cause of his problems in Africa. Mungo refuses to heed the sage advice of the native inhabitants because he believes many of them to be improperly informed, superstitious or foolish. In some cases Mungo's assessments are correct, but many of his judgments are not especially astute. Without Johnson, Mungo's guide and liaison, it is probable that Mungo would have perished much sooner. He is wholly unfamiliar with the ways of life in Africa and in every place he stops, the customs and ceremonies are different. He would not accept Africa on the terms of those who knew it best--the natives-- and his reluctance to part from his cultural conditioning and adapt to new circumstances is the source of his many

problems. Everything Mungo has ever been taught about being a civilized and honorable gentleman is put into question and his strict adherence to British standards is, ironically, not as beneficial as he believes.

Only on a few occasions, when his life is in jeopardy, does Mungo act in ways that break from British society's rigid code of conduct. In an isolated kingdom Mungo is granted an audience with a powerful king or Mansong who reciprocates the gifts that Mungo offered by sacrificing the lives of thirty-seven of his slaves as a tribute. To seal the ceremony Mungo is handed a sack with 50,000 cowrie shells (a fortune) and a cup of fresh, warm blood. When the explorer balks at following through, Johnson has to coach him through it and remind him that his life is at stake if he refuses.

“But. . . those damned bloody heathen aborigines are taking thirty-seven lives right under our noses--in our honor nonetheless. Thirty-seven rational beings. . . . Take the money and we condone it.”

“Hey, Mr. Park. This is no time to get sanctimonious. So long as we don't wind up as number thirty-eight and thirty-nine I figure we doin' just fine.” (114)

Despite his understandable abhorrence, Mungo follows through with the ceremony by drinking the blood because he must, not out of endorsement of the Mansong's sacrifice. His reluctant participation in an act of cannibalism reflects a choice of pragmatism over principle. His ultimate desire is the preservation of his life. Since it is no place to take a moral stand, Mungo sacrifices his sense of honor and overcomes his disgust to allow his mission to carry on.

Until the moment Mungo drank human blood, he would have vehemently sworn that under no circumstances would he ever perform such a heinous act, yet the very instance he is placed in creates the exception. With Mungo violating one of his society's strictest prohibitions, he shows his ability to adapt if the stakes are high enough. Contemporary views, from both Mungo's time and our own, might posit that Park's actions reflect a weakness of character by refusing to stand up for principles that should never be compromised, even if it means losing one's life. To some extent, this point may have its merits, but the extenuating circumstances must be fully considered before condemning Mungo's participation. He is not actively engaged in the sacrifice, he only partakes in

the end result of it. Johnson's position on the matter reflects a familiarity with such circumstances and a desire to peacefully negotiate his way through them with his life intact. Though he clearly does not like it, he understands what is taking place, his inability to alter it and the consequences of offending the Mansong.

To reinforce the point about history, and Mungo's journal containing fabrications and distortions, Boyle includes a brief page of the fictional Mungo's journal describing the reception with the Mansong to show how essential details of this encounter have been smoothly and conveniently neutralized or omitted to cover up any negative impressions or disturb any readers. He writes how the Mansong received a portrait of His Majesty King George III.

He sat and contemplated the face and figure of that august monarch for some time, his own features glowing with the incandescence of enlightenment. . . He rose heavily from his chair, embraced me like a lost son, and handed me a sack filled to bursting with cowrie shells--over fifty thousand in all. Imagine my gratitude at so selfless a gesture on the part of this rude but true prince of the jungle. . . Though he urged us to stay, offering up the most princely accommodations and a feast of loaves, viands and local delicacies his servants had prepared in anticipation of our coming, we were anxious to press on, and left that very night, after sharing a firm handclasp and a ceremonial drink. (120)

Mungo's obvious and self-serving distortion of this meeting with the Mansong shows a deep reluctance to stick to the facts. Boyle consciously infuses Park's writing with distortions to make it seem as if he were in complete control of the situation. Mungo inaccurately depicts the Mansong as a generous but primitive simpleton enthralled with the superiority and sophistication of British society and Mungo himself. Of course, Mungo was probably unaware that his king was clinically insane and unable to rule his kingdom without assistance, which only increases the irony of the assumptions at work in this entry. By merely mentioning a ceremonial drink without describing its taste or appearance, Mungo deliberately misleads the readers of his journal to think that some form of alcoholic beverage was consumed, much like in Europe. In this instance, Mungo's omissions

show a real fear of the truth harming his reputation. He appears to be conscious of the fact that he is writing his own myth about himself, that cannot be verified, and he intends to sell it to the British people to make his fortune. By selling off this bogus journal as a factual representation, Mungo is every bit a con artist as Ned when he peddles fake caviar, which is discussed later.

One of the African practices Mungo has a difficult time accepting is slavery, particularly how slaves are forced to walk long distances with inadequate food, water and rest so that they may reach the coast without costing the coffle leader too much money. In the latter part of Mungo's first expedition, he is walking by himself when he is fortunate enough to be allowed to walk along with a slave coffle that is also headed to the coast. While his objective is to find a ship bound for Britain, the coffle's leaders were looking to sell the slaves they had acquired through various means. This situation allows Park to witness first-hand the ugly realities of the slave trade, especially the cruel methods of transportation and general mistreatment of these people. When Mungo sees the truth about this ruthless practice he feels disgust and a helplessness to do anything about it, but he needs the protection of this coffle to return, while they have absolutely no need for him. During a break along the road Mungo has a conversation with one of the chained men who informs Mungo about the notable difference between African and white slavery.

"The black man puts his slave to work, the white man eats him."

Mungo was astonished at the misconception, offended by the accusation.

"Nonsense."

"No one ever comes back."

"Well that's because they put you in a boat to take you to another land, a land like this one, where you work in the fields and --"

". . . a white man's lie." His voice was flat and emotionless. "There is no other land. They take you to where the water goes on forever and hack you into pieces. The fires flare through the night, the kettles boil. They pick at your bones." (182)

There is a bit of irony in Mungo's reaction, and possibly a little guilt, because he has already participated in an act of cannibalism. Mungo also fails to see how his own society has many similar misconceptions about the African people and their cultural practices. His thinking process will not allow him to make this connection.

The chained man's claim about the cannibalistic practices of white people may not be factually true, but it certainly contains figurative truth about how whites regard their slaves and perpetuate their mistreatment by participating in the sale and transportation of humans. The end result is often death, not cannibalism, but this claim also shows an incomplete understanding of how some Africans treat their slaves, as Mungo has already witnessed how readily some owners will dispose of their slaves to suit their whims. These conflicting stories and claims are directly related to Boyle's fictive approach to handling history. Both Mungo's and the chained man's claims have aspects of truth and distortions in them, which means that neither can be asserted as a fact or a fabrication, as they are a combination of both. What these circumstances demonstrate is how there is something dark and primal that resides deep within the human character that allows people to ignore the sufferings and poor conditions of their fellow humans if there is a profit or other use to be gained from them.

Mungo exhibits many of his picaresque characteristics during his numerous conflicts with Dassoud, "henchman and human jackal" of Ali, the Emir of Ludamar (81). During Mungo's times of captivity he must cope with being treated as worse than a slave for being a white Christian, as his mere presence is considered a threat to the Moorish society, even though he does not proselytize. With his life subject to being ended sheerly on the whim of Ali, Mungo envisions the worst that can happen to him:

They'd skin and disembowel him. Cut his throat. Stake him out on the dunes to shrivel up like a fig. His bones would whiten in the sun like the sad remains of the slaves Johnson had told him of, like Houghton's bones, shattered by the years, no longer Irish, Celtic, Caucasian--merely bones, the bones of man, the bones of an animal. He has a quick image of his own skull, wind-burnished, half-buried in sand,

and the slink and shuffle of a spotted hyena, its face blank and stupid, raising an unhurried leg to piss in the empty eyesocket. (63)

Mungo is beginning to recognize his small and meaningless place in the universe at this moment and how out of place he is in this particular environment. Death is a formidable opponent in the desert and the Moors are unforgiving in their adherence to old Islamic codes of justice and punishment. The desert operates on its own system without preference for anyone, and the imagined action of the hyena is Mungo's recognition of his significance. The desert's conditions are harsh and impersonal and to survive them, one must accept their terms or perish. These relentless elements have helped to forge the character of Dassoud into Mungo's main human nemesis. These circumstances draw attention to one of the recurring themes of Boyle's picaresque novels-- the conflicts that arise between predators and prey.

The pursuit and punishment Mungo receives from Dassoud shows how he has effectively mastered the desert's conditions to be the highest predator on the food chain. Dassoud's unrelenting mental toughness combined with the physical endurance to survive under such harsh and unforgiving conditions is remarkable. At age twenty he was the last living member of a caravan crossing the Sahara Desert but he knows how to survive in such an ominous and desolate setting:

He traveled by night, unearthing insect larvae, scorpions and beetles by day. He crunched them like nuts, scanning the wind-scrawled dunes, his head gone light, his life at the far end of its tether. This amused him. The more hopeless it became, the stronger he felt. One night, alone in the universe and hopelessly lost, the *guerba* empty, his tongue sucking at the shell of a scorpion, he realized that he was enjoying himself.

The desert was hard. He was harder. (81)

This is the formidable opponent Mungo is up against. At 6 feet, 4 inches and 235 pounds, equally matched with ambition, brains and fearlessness, Dassoud is a pure predator who is one with the adverse forces of nature and lives where others perish. Life and subsistence are obtained at the expense of other creatures. He appears to be a totally evil character, but he is not. He is an interesting character who has malevolent features, yet he is, in true predatory fashion, indifferent to

those he destroys. As Ali's main henchman, he has a specific role to fulfill as an enforcer in an anarchic, Darwinian setting. After many years of faithful service to Ali, Dassoud desires to be the Emir of Ludamar, so he kills Ali and marries his wife to take control. Dassoud uses his many abilities to hunt Mungo down and capture him, yet he often finds a way to escape, usually through a fortunate turn of luck, and elude Dassoud's grasp. The failure to capture Mungo is the only defeat Dassoud has ever known. Throughout their many encounters, Dassoud has developed a deep, personal animus toward Mungo, which only increases as this novel progresses. Dassoud is driven by a frustration of lack of success in exterminating this person who is so offensive to everything he stands for or believes in. As prey, Mungo doesn't fully understand why he is so ferociously pursued, but he knows his life is in jeopardy during any encounter.

Besides pursuing Mungo because he is a Christian, Dassoud is protecting the commercial interests of the Moors. If Mungo is allowed to succeed and return to Britain with the vital information about trade routes, the Moors will lose their regional monopoly on trade and a good deal of money. The protection of revenue is the main motivating feature of these tribes, which Dassoud turns to his advantage when he sends letters to neighboring tribes to gather volunteers for his final showdown with Park:

And the letter. He laughed to think about it, even then circulating among the tribes of the north, stirring them to blind and irrational peaks of fury, fanning up the sort of deadly, implacable, blood-lusting rage that no assault on religion, cattle--even women and children--could so instantaneously arise: the *Nazarini* were striking at their pocketbooks. What could be more perfect? (376)

In this quote, Boyle is comically showing the universal nature of greed and the lengths people will go to protect their sources of wealth, especially when they are threatened by outsiders. The protection of revenue supersedes all other interests and practices, and obviously has many modern parallels. These characters are not simply acting out of stereotypical bloodthirstiness--a misinterpretation of their fierceness-- they are protecting their capitalistic interests.

Dassoud is clearly manipulating his people with wild tales to rally them against Mungo's encroachment. There is also the implication that outside traders bring new ideas and influences, such as Christianity, that inevitably alter traditional ways of life. If Mungo is successful, more will follow his path. The Moors fear their local culture will be corrupted and many forms of exploitation will surely follow if this threat is not exterminated. These are a few of the reasons that exploring this region of Africa around the early nineteenth century was a death sentence for many explorers. The fact that voracious greed brings out the most vicious behaviors in humans, is one of the predatory subtexts in this novel. Boyle's characters show a willingness to do almost anything to obtain money and keep it from others showing how society has refused to change in some ways. Understanding the darkest sides of human nature from firsthand experience, Ned is fully aware of how base human motives are considered acceptable by their practitioners when there are profits to be made.

As Boyle's most classically drawn picaresque character, Ned Rise serves as the perfect counterpoint to the ever bungling Mungo. Mungo is a middle-class character who is thoroughly unprepared for the difficulties of leading an expedition through Africa, mostly because he is naive and insists on adhering to the idealistic viewpoints of British values. In many respects Mungo's character is a satire of a picaresque protagonist due to his inability to change as the conditions dictate, which is the antithesis of a picaresque character. He only has a limited experience in dealing with people outside of his social class, unlike Ned, who fluidly interacts with people from all levels of life. Fate has placed Ned in a variety of difficult situations that taught him about the dark side of human nature, which he gradually learns to manipulate in his favor. Mungo has had very few challenges in his life and his first trip to Africa indicates his inability to learn from his mistakes. Ned's lower-class upbringing has taught him to be adaptable to nearly any circumstance, particularly a desperate one. He has formed his own set of flexible principles for living life, and they do not adhere to the tenets of middle-class or upper-class respectability and propriety. At an early age he learned the emptiness of such beliefs and how in many cases, people adapted themselves to these ideals for the purpose of posturing rather than truly accepting them. Ned

refuses to be encumbered by this value system so that he may think and act solely for himself and not for the benefit of society and its worship of false appearances and images. On the other hand, Mungo desperately wants entry into this elite world and hopes to gain a respectable reputation by creating an image of himself as a bold explorer who strictly adheres to upper-class ideals to prove that he belongs in this elite British society. Boyle found these aspirations to be fertile ground for satire, which is helped along by pairing Ned and Mungo together to show the latter's many deficiencies.

Ned's character is a completely fictional creation that features every picaresque element except for first-person narration. He is a capable role player who often adopts disguises to deceive others or to save his life. All of his actions are geared toward his continued survival in a tough, competitive environment where the weak do not survive. His wretched upbringing on the streets of London accounts for his willingness to do anything to escape them and find prosperity. He recognizes that living there is not conducive toward achieving success in life. It is important to note that Ned is not a greedy character in search of a large fortune. His dream is to achieve a modest stability to permanently leave the slums, yet in true picaresque fashion, fate and poor decisions continually intervene to hinder his accumulation of money. As Boyle's most resilient picaresque character, Ned is somehow able to deal with his troubles and even avoid death numerous times. Ned's presence offers readers a new concept of what it means to be raised British and destitute, which runs directly counter to the prevailing notion of a progressive British society at the end of the eighteenth century.

Both Mungo and Ned are, to varying degrees, picaresque outcasts in search of social position and success, but Ned must constantly enact scams and other deceptive practices to earn a living. That is the only real option open to him, as honest means that are profitable are unavailable to someone in Ned's low social position. Mungo is nowhere near being as clever or shifty and he, for the most part, adheres to social norms and lives as a respectable citizen. Both characters are seeking to make their fortunes through atypical means in less than hospitable places because the traditional routes to fortune and success are closed off to these characters. The irony of these characters is how

Ned is far more prepared for the rigors of Africa than Mungo, yet the class assumptions of Mungo's culture would automatically assume otherwise.

Boyle's portrayal of both Mungo and Ned reflects the heartless, brutal Darwinian struggles each must undergo to survive in the 'civilized' London and the 'uncivilized' African continent. When asked in an interview about *Water Music* and *Ned Rise*, Boyle responded: "It's a picaresque novel, and he's a survivor and a scamp and a representative, as the name implies, of something that will rise above, you know, the class system and the bureaucracy and all the crap that went down in Georgian England" (qtd. in E. Adams 61). Compared to Mungo, Ned has a vastly different awareness of social corruption and the darkest sides of humanity from firsthand experience, since he was raised in the streets and alleys of London's slums. This hard-earned knowledge allows him to do what he does best, survive anywhere under any conditions despite overwhelming adversity

In creating Ned, Boyle was attempting to reveal an often overlooked aspect of London, its poverty, as a way of showing that, despite the prosperity of the British empire, it still had its unresolvable problems. Regarding Boyle's use of details to evoke this era, Sutcliffe writes: "Like most historical novels *Water Music* is an act of restoration and resurrection but unlike most historical novelists, T. C. Boyle has resisted the restorer's temptation to turn forger, sedulously creating a bogus antiquity" (224). This point is most evident in Ned's various misadventures and schemes. Through the graphic depiction of Rise's horrendous and unfortunate upbringing, Boyle unforgettably shows the seediest side of London's slums around 1771 and the effects living there had upon people. It brought out the worst in human nature, and by restoring these undesirable elements that are frequently overlooked he defamiliarizes this setting. This point is especially evident in Boyle's depiction of the utter filth and danger in the streets of London, which provided a marked contrast to its pretensions of civilization:

Drunks lay sprawled across the footpaths, some dead and stinking and blanketed with crows. Whole families squatted on streetcorners and begged for bread. Murders were committed in the alleys. . . . And as if that weren't enough, the gutters were

generally clogged with horsedung, pigs' ears and other offal, causing the sewage to back up in dark rills and steamy swamps--not only was the pedestrian up to his ankles in human waste, he also found himself dodging the airborne clods thrown up by the wheels of passing carriages. (84)

This fetid portrait of London has some affinities with Smollett's description in *Roderick Random* but it provides more disgustingly vivid details to show an environment few would recognize or even consider when thinking about this time period, yet it was an inescapable fact of living at that time. By emphasizing these scatological elements Boyle is bringing the myth of this once mighty empire down to size. He wants to restore these essential features so that readers may grasp the period in its entirety and understand how ordinary lives were affected. Boyle's descriptions strive to reflect the true animal nature of humanity and its connection to the animal world that many choose to ignore in their inflated self-perceptions. Boyle's scatology is a mixture of satire and humor that is often ironic in tone but not solely for the purposes of creating disgust. It serves as a potent reminder of the human condition and it is a colorful way of examining the less admirable characteristics of humans and their connections to the animal world.

The circumstances surrounding Ned's upbringing are certainly atypical, but they give the reader disturbing insights into how some children were raised to defamiliarize a reader's notions about what it meant to be raised as an orphan in poverty in London's worst slums. As a picaresque character, Ned lives solely by his wits to endure and survive in a brutal, primitive environment. Born to a mother addicted to gin, he was snatched from her only moments after his birth to be sold to an alcoholic couple. Although there are a few overtones of Charles Dickens's portrayal of impoverished London, Boyle uses a darkly comic list to describe what was wrong with Ned's childhood, clearly defining him as a picaresque protagonist:

Not *Twist*, not *Copperfield*, not *Fagin* himself had a childhood to compare with Ned *Rise's*. He was unwashed, untutored, unloved, battered, abused, harassed, deprived, starved, mutilated and orphaned, a victim of poverty, ignorance, ill-luck, class-prejudice, lack of opportunity, malicious fate and gin. His was a childhood so

totally depraved even Zola would shudder to think of it. (34)

Nowak refers to the preceding quote as: “a modern litany of reasons why men go wrong” (40) and it certainly indicates the formative influences on Ned’s personality. But in spite of all of these negative qualities and constant shiftiness, Ned is still a likable character whom the reader wishes to see succeed, even in his schemes. Through Boyle’s descriptions, the reader experiences pleasure rather than disdain when Ned’s hard work and deception pay off. This desire for Ned’s success is, in part, due to his status as an opportunistic and resourceful underdog who continually defies the improbable odds that are heavily stacked against him. Nowak observes how: “Boyle’s characters seem always to be backing toward the crumbling cliff, pushing the envelope of possibility, and refiguring the odds of survival. This would be heroically grim if they weren’t such clowns and bumblers” (40). This last sentence describes a pertinent feature of Boyle’s style that keeps his characters and their plights amusing instead of morose. The most humorous aspect of Boyle’s characters is their often thoughtless or poorly considered behavior that causes or creates self-inflicted repercussions. Many times they have a firm awareness of how life operates but they refuse to exercise good judgment. Ned refuses to succumb to his fate and is always looking forward to his best options. No matter how awful the circumstances may be, he can usually spot the tiniest of openings to find a way out. He may make poor choices but he is no fool, particularly when his life is in jeopardy.

By growing up in a heartless world of predators and prey, Ned learned hard lessons about living on the streets and how to fend for himself. In true picaresque fashion, he learned the value of deception and thievery as his only means of survival. He began with his guardian beating him and instructing him to beg on the streets as an indigent child. To increase the chances of success, Ned’s leg was tied up at the knee to appear as if it were missing. This abuse is when he gets his first lesson in using appearances to strike a sympathetic chord in human emotions in order to deceive others for financial gain. When Ned fails to bring in enough money to satiate his guardian’s greed, he lops off Ned’s right-hand finger tips with a cleaver to inspire more pity and cash, which works.

It appears that mutilation provided benefactors with an unquestionable reassurance of veracity, as a confirmed truth is less likely to be a ruse.

With Ned being raised in the midst of the worst possible human misery, he was determined to escape it no matter what. His only way out was to refine his pickpocketing and other stealing abilities. Living this sort of life at a young age gave him a clear understanding of the basest motives of the human character. He always has a contingency plan in case of emergency and keeps an eye alert for anybody who might steal his hard-earned lucre. He has felt the sting of being the prey of others too many times and his childhood is only the beginning. In reference to the abuses and misfortunes endured by a picaresque character, the critic Stuart Miller asks: "Why is the picaro so randomly punished by the world? In comedy such punishment would come to the comic antihero" (37). Sometimes a picaresque protagonist in Boyle's novels is deserving of his punishment while at other instances he is not, accurately reflecting the nature of life in a world that lacks order. When this notion is combined with the effects of accidents, a picaresque character endures more abuse and mistreatment than any other type of literary figure.

As a picaresque protagonist, Ned is always on the move, bouncing from one episode to the next. Through Boyle's narration, the reader can observe the world from Ned's less than ideal perspective, helping to explain why he takes advantage of others to earn a living. Alter mentions how this point is a key feature of picaresque novels:

The picaresque novel is a form of narrative which is concerned with action and the external world. The tension or "conflict" that keeps this narrative taut is the individual's incessant and ingenious struggle to take a livelihood from a grudging world. . . . The events and motions of this struggle are the principal interest; not the personality of the struggler, which is never even highly particularized. (31)

Due to Ned's worse than lower-class social status he has almost no choice in how he earns a living, unless he operates outside the law, which enhances his possibilities as well as the dangers. This circumstance offers a writer a dynamic vehicle for portraying a chaotic existence. In Boyle's case, it allows him to delve into the past to recall it in amusing and interesting ways. He covers the less

documented aspects of past eras that not only indicate how others lived but also demonstrate that picaresque characters still have vigor and possibilities through fresh details and insights.

Boyle's use of the grotesque is an unforgettable way of depicting the constant conflict between Ned and his surroundings, which is a recurring feature of picaresque novels. In showing Ned to be a product of his environment, Boyle defamiliarizes the past with a barrage of grotesque details and events as a way of representing the unpredictable chaos of a picaresque protagonist's life to generate a specific, unsettling effect. Philip Thompson mentions this intended purpose:

Because of the characteristic impact of the grotesque, the sudden shock which it causes, the grotesque is often used as an aggressive weapon. . . . The shock effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective. (58)

Boyle uses grotesque features often in this novel as part of his descriptive style. These grotesqueries are quite effective in showing the rough nature of Ned's way of life, but with the cumulative abuse and injuries he endures throughout the novel it is a wonder he is still alive at the end. Not once does he ever feel sorry for himself or consider giving up. McElroy explains some possible uses of the grotesque: "In depicting a vindictive, persecuting world, the grotesque can be put to several uses, separately or in combination. The simplest is radical satire, in which the grotesque world is a caricature of the real world accessible to the senses. More effectively, the grotesque can be used as a heightening device by which the conflict between the self and other is intensified" (17-18). Boyle employs these various devices for comic effects as well as a means of defamiliarizing the time period he is writing about. It allows him to portray aspects of society that are infrequently examined and to show the universal nature of the worst features of humanity that are always present no matter how much progress and civilizing have occurred.

By using Ned as a picaresque protagonist, Boyle displays how an enterprising and shifty character might have earned a living. One aspect of early nineteenth-century Britain that is often overlooked is what people did to get money when the traditional professions were closed off to

them. As an orphan, Ned has almost no legal options for working his way out of poverty. He happens upon his best scam to earn money when he makes a target of vanity. His fake caviar ploy allows him to prey upon people's desires created by popular demands, fashion, and scarcity. By appealing to an unsuspecting person's craving for an exotic delicacy enjoyed only by the rich and fulfilling that demand with an inferior imitation, he is able to quickly make a lot of money for almost nothing. On his end, he is essentially salvaging sturgeon eggs that would otherwise be discarded and supplying the public demand for them at a bargain price. He is simply exploiting the naiveté of others for his benefit. They do receive what they pay for but the product is not what it was claimed to be. The unusually low price should have warned them but they either didn't know any better or they were carried away in the excitement of the moment and fell for his guise of credibility when dressed as a Russian. His success in selling caviar shows Ned's ability to play a role and do whatever he must to convince, gullible unsuspecting people to believe in him and buy his product.

Ned's ability to sell fake caviar is a picaresque satire of how easily the public's taste can be exploited. By taking advantage of the desire for status in others, Ned hopes to raise his own social position. Ned is deceiving the public out of necessity, because he has no other choices for making so much money due to his lower-class status. This scam is a reflection of his resourcefulness because he is making an expensive status symbol accessible to the general public, which can be difficult to resist for materialistic individuals concerned about their image and appearance. These circumstances are what gives this picaresque episode its comic touches. One of the pleasures of picaresque novels, and Boyle's in particular, is vicariously sharing the protagonist's thrill in getting away with something. There is a feeling of exhilaration and triumph when a scam succeeds, when all of that hard work pays off, which also serves as an effective contrast to the often grim consequences that must be faced when the ruse is exposed.

The same principle of gratifying the public's desires is at work when he assembles a live pornography show. Since Ned is a picaresque protagonist who comes from low beginnings, he has extensive knowledge about the baseness of human nature. By putting on this live show, Ned hopes

to manipulate this baseness in his favor to make an easy profit. It is Ned's desperate need for money that drives this satirical episode forward. He recognizes a service that the male public, no matter what their social class is, will gladly pay to see so he organizes it for his own benefit. In doing so, he shows a good deal of entrepreneurial skill and vision. Even though he planned for unexpected problems he is still surprised when the show is raided by the constables. In his escape, he must find a way to save himself while on the run and cope with the unexpected consequences his actions generated. Despite all of his planning and efforts, Ned is deeply aware of the risks he takes along with the potential financial rewards, while recognizing the severity of the consequences for being caught. This situation is where the element of free will enters into his decisions, since he freely and consciously makes the decision to enact his schemes. After that moment though, he is all but helpless to control the eventual outcome, and life has taught him to always expect a turn for the worst.

In many instances, the events of Ned's life are determined for him but he occasionally has the ability to influence their outcome through his wits. When his supply of sturgeon eggs runs out, he knows it is best to stop when he is ahead before the public catches on, but he cannot. He is suddenly under the influence of a force beyond his control that distorts his rational thinking. He loves Fanny and want to increase his take while he still can to give them a better start in their marriage. Love interferes with Ned's better judgment and his miscalculation dooms any chance he has of fulfilling his romantic inclinations. It appears that this scenario is a rather grim commentary on the nature of romantic relationships and how they interfere with an individual's life in unpredictable ways. When Ned can no longer peddle a lesser grade of caviar, he resorts to selling a bogus product by treating herring or frog eggs with shoe blacking. His entrepreneurial success and love for Fanny leave him vulnerable. Smirke exploits this position by robbing Ned and setting him up for Lord Twit's murder. Ned's need for Fanny causes him to make bad judgments and his accumulated small fortune being stolen is symbolic of his future with Fanny and his manhood being crushed. That money is essential to his ability to take care of Fanny during their marriage.

Without it he is unable to satisfy her needs, material or otherwise, let alone protect her from the world and the beasts that inhabit it.

The romance between Ned and Fanny is a dark satire of the ineffectiveness of a picaresque protagonist's relationships with women. Such relationships are almost never allowed to develop, as they fall apart due to various factors and forces. If a protagonist is on the run he cannot have anybody hinder his movement. This necessary distance from others, particularly women, reflects his loneliness and isolation. Ned has never had a close relationship with any other woman in his life except Fanny. Even if he hadn't been stolen from his mother, it is doubtful she could have been much of a parent to him. Without money or wealthy relatives, Fanny has no other choice but to sacrifice herself to obtain a lawyer for Ned, which she does purely out of love and devotion to him. Though her society would condemn her as otherwise, she is not a bad or lascivious woman. She was deceived by Adonais Brooks who got her addicted to laudanum and hustled her off to Germany so she would be wholly dependent upon him. Her unfortunate circumstance is a reflection of the limited opportunities for women at this time in history and the tragic results that ensue.

While nineteenth-century British novelists alluded to these conditions, they may not have known or understood the depths of depravity many women were subjected to by exploitative men. If the plight of these women was even mentioned at all by these novelists, it was simply stated that they were fallen women, and nothing more was said. The sad reality of the lives of these women was much more complex than a simple phrase could describe, but social conventions prevented novelists from going into details about these situations. Boyle uses a twentieth-century understanding of deviant sexual behavior to graphically depict Fanny's circumstances and the inescapable dilemmas faced by women who were trapped in similar ways. There were very few people they could turn to for assistance. Ned's inability to protect Fanny or have a successful romance with her is another example of determinism interfering with his desires in life.

Picaresque protagonists are almost always controlled by necessity and other forces beyond their control, a circumstance that is clearly demonstrated when Ned is forced to become a graverobber.

His fate has placed him into the servitude of the corrupt doctor Delp, who has a formidable social standing. The novel explains: "All this, Ned realized, made Delp a very dangerous antagonist indeed. He was desperate. Manipulative, unscrupulous--and he held a knife to Ned's throat. All he need do was drop a word--a single word--and Ned would find himself back in prison, dangling from a rope, dead meat on the dissector's table" (227). Delp's expedient immorality combined with his pursuit of knowledge of the human body brings to light an interesting social dilemma of the time that has no easy resolution. In the nineteenth century, performing dissections on humans was quite illegal unless the corpses went unclaimed at the gallows, yet the information derived from this procedure was highly prized and of great value to many. While society desired the information that was obtained, it despised the methods used to gain it, which made this practice much easier to ignore than to contemplate its implications.

Though these circumstances are disturbing, they are pushed to grotesque proportions since Delp is not the only practitioner and he must compete with other doctors, which only raises the stakes of this morbid contest and the pressure on the graverobbers to succeed before the competition does. Delp's behavior in *Water Music* is a satire of early nineteenth-century medical practices and this satire is assisted through the amoral picaresque behavior of Ned, who has no choice but to satisfy Delp's demands. One of the amusing features of Delp's character is how he is ironically held in the highest esteem by all of society in its complete unawareness of his true personality. The novel describes Delp: "Dr. Decius William Delp, man of science, husband, father, blackmailer, ghoul. . . Delp, the eminently respectable professor-surgeon who takes a glass of Madeira with my lord or a hand at whist with my lady, and then sends his confederates round to rob their graves before the fluids have had a chance to settle" (250). Delp has carefully crafted a sparkling exterior image as a paragon of civilization that is completely opposite from his true personality, allowing him to conduct his nefarious deeds without any hint of suspicion. Since Boyle's picaresque protagonists have access to all levels of society, and participate in numerous activities at all social levels, he is able to satirize hypocrisy and how appearances can be deceptive masks that disguise a character's

true personality, no matter what their social standing may be. In the case of Delp, Boyle shows how cultivation and social graces can be used to hide fiendish intentions.

Ned's involuntary attachment of three and a half years to Delp is also a revival of the servant and master relationship in traditional picaresque novels, as Ned must do whatever it takes to appease Delp and his constant need for more corpses. Ned knows the risk of getting caught and the severity of the punishment, but since he has no chance to escape, he must overcome his reluctance by adapting to Delp's plans. The only benefit Ned receives is rather ironic: continued life by surreptitiously exhuming the dead. By working for Delp, Ned operates out of fear and overcomes his superstitions because he is under duress. It is a much different type of criminal act than he is accustomed to since it is not a ruse with willing, but innocent participants. The outright theft of human corpses is a disturbing affront to society, yet Ned has no other options if he wishes to live, so he becomes the best graverobber he can be by learning the finer points of his vulturous craft. He is very proficient in using his sneaky abilities and wits to obtain this rare and forbidden commodity that is in high demand by unethical surgeons. As a picaresque protagonist, Ned has been through and seen the worst life has to offer and still survived. He can acclimate himself to conditions that would make lesser characters blanch, fall apart or perish. Ned has no reservations about enacting any type of sleazy scheme, such as attending a funeral and posing as a relative, as long as there is a reasonable chance of success with a minimal chance of being caught. He does not do it for enjoyment but for self-protection, until his ambition and proficiency catch up with him.

Ned's ability to protect himself and take advantage of opportunity in almost any given situation is especially evident when he becomes a member of Mungo's second expedition party, thus taking part in another master-servant relationship in the picaresque tradition. Ned ended up in jail for being falsely accused and convicted of poaching game on a squire's estate, which results in a twenty year sentence of shoveling mud at the hulks, an endless and unwinnable battle against nature. His fate continues to get worse when he is conscripted to Goree on the west coast of Africa, which is the main point of entry for accessing the Niger River from land. Death and disease are everywhere and Ned is almost completely debilitated when he spots Mungo moving toward him.

Recognizing a chance to escape certain death in Goree by going into the service of a new master, Ned is able to con his way into Park's expedition by feigning an appearance of hard-work and dedication while shoveling graves in the relentless heat and humidity.

As Mungo approaches Boyles and Ned, the men go into their act: "Instantly Ned is on his feet, shovel in hand, flinging dirt like a prospector on to the motherlode. . . . Ned neither slows down nor glances up. His voice is as taut and urgent as a strung bow: 'Pick up the shovel, you idiot. Dig. Dig for your life.' Bewildered, Boyles takes up his shovel and begins pitching earth into the open hole" (308). Ned's act provides an illusory appearance that is a sharp contrast to the other prisoners begging Mungo for a spot on his expedition. Rather than smoothly talking his way into the party, Ned demonstrates his worth with swift, physical action that creates a quick, positive impression. He is a purely opportunistic character who knows how to appeal to others to believe in him, especially when the stakes are his life. Ned's knowledge as a picaresque protagonist, combined with the necessities of his life, leads him to find an inventive solution to find a way out of his current dilemma. Still, he has a tough time adapting to his new situation as a member of Mungo's expedition. "Like a street cat he's always managed to land on his feet--whether as a fisherman, entrepreneur, resurrected Christ, grave robber or convict--but this African nonsense has him stumped. The filth and savagery of it--sometimes he wishes he was back in London dodging Osprey, Banks and the hangman" (359). Part of the humor and irony of *Water Music* is how the conditions of London's streets are quite similar to those of remote Africa. Mungo's acceptance of Ned into the exploration party is a pivotal moment for both characters, as it points toward their destinies, while further defining the natures of each character in the changes they undergo as a result of their African experiences.

Of course, Ned cannot foresee the consequences of searching for the Niger River, particularly when he is reunited with his old nemesis Smirke. As if the unpredictability of the climate, dangerous animals, disease, and other discomforts were not enough, Ned must continually watch out in fear for his vindictive tormentor. Smirke has a long-standing grudge from back in their London days and blames Ned for being in Africa. At any moment, Smirke may appear to abuse and

harm Ned without any provocation, and all he can do is tolerate it. He is not strong enough to win a fight or even retaliate. In such a predatory setting it is clear that only one of them can continue living. Since Ned lacks the necessary brawn for victory, he uses his craftiness to outwit Smirke by selling him to a band of cannibals. Ned feels the predatory thrill of success and absolutely no regret for disposing of Smirke in an uncivilized fashion:

He feels evil, powerful, exhilarated. A partner to demons and devils and things of the night. He steps forward and looks Smirke square in the eye. The big man lies there like a big whiskered baby, his mouth squawking against the gag, neck craning, arms drawn tight to the body swaddled in linen. . . . And the eyes: beating wildly from face to face, stark and terrorized, until they settle on Ned with a look of wrath and hatred and utter hopelessness. Ned responds with a wink, snapping a hand to the side of his head and waving a pair of fingers like an old maid seeing a crony off at the docks. (362-63)

Boyle's descriptions of Smirke's unending abuses and Ned's disposal of him makes it difficult for a reader not to feel a portion of Ned's victory with a smile or a laugh. It is a very human response to a trying dilemma, and very few people would not act the way he did if faced with the same situation. Ned's life is finished if he does nothing about Smirke, but revenge is another reason for selling him. Ned is deeply and justifiably motivated by Smirke's past history of theft and mistreatment: he stole Ned's caviar cash, crushed Ned's relationship with Fanny, and lied about Lord Twit's death to send Ned to the gallows. There is never any doubt that Smirke has earned his cruel punishment, particularly as there was nothing else Ned could do to protect himself in their utterly lawless setting.

Rise's sale of Smirke to cannibals is not meant to be easy to accept, as it runs directly counter to our civilized notions of the sanctity of the human body, no matter how offensive the inhabitant of it may be. In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, John Clark mentions the place cannibalism has in contemporary fiction by stating it is: "a topic that normally can be expected to generate in its audience horror and revulsion. For that reason, cannibalism is understandably favored by our

satirists” (131). The practice of cannibalism is ordinarily supposed to provoke disgusted response in the reader, yet Boyle’s treatment of this instance of cannibalism causes the reader to condone it with an opposite response by siding with Ned in vanquishing his vicious tormentor. There is a feeling of satisfaction that Smirke received his just due, even if it was a cruel outcome, which has a direct connection to Boyle’s use of schadenfreude. Finding amusement and pleasure at Smirke’s predicament is typically considered to be a highly inappropriate reaction. A human being has been sold for food, yet Boyle is able to find a comical exception to the social taboo forbidding the sale and consumption of humans by creating laughter where most would find revulsion.

This scenario is one that some readers may find unsettling. But getting rid of Smirke is essential for Ned’s continued survival and the way in which he does it contributes to the grotesque elements in *Water Music*. When writing about the effects of the grotesque, Thompson mentions: “But there is also present, at least in many instances, a sadistic pleasure in the horrifying, the cruel, the disgusting” (57). Not only does Ned get ultimate revenge upon his worst enemy, he makes a profit too. His actions are inhumane, yet completely justified when one considers the setting and situation. They are located in the heart of the African jungle and locked in a Darwinian struggle of pure predation where the strongest don’t necessarily survive but the most cunning do, which led Ned to do whatever he needed to protect himself. His conscience is clear and his final reaction to Smirke indicates that Ned has no second thoughts or sleepless nights over his behavior. The final sentence of the above quote has the effect of comically mitigating the horror of what preceded it. By portraying Ned’s mirthful behavior in contrast to Smirke’s pure terror of realizing the consequences of the just completed deal, Boyle creates a response in the reader that is on the exact opposite end of the emotional spectrum of acceptable reactions. One is not supposed to find amusement and humor in such a situation, but Boyle does just that. With all of Smirke’s relentless and ruthless bullying, he received his just due for underestimating Ned’s ability to strike back out of desperation.

At the juncture toward the novel’s end, Mungo’s power in the narrative gradually diminishes

through the combined effects of many illnesses, fatigue, the arduous rigors of traveling overland, uncountable accidents, deaths, disasters and other mishaps he must account for as the expedition's leader. While he was able to take care of himself on his solo expedition, the demands of managing the needs of a large party are another matter entirely. Acquiring food, water and other supplies can be difficult because small towns cannot suddenly provide for fifty men on a moment's notice, especially during times of shortage. Mungo naively believes that because his men are armed with guns, that will serve as a sufficient deterrent to keep the natives from stealing their goods and creating other problems. Johnson tried to advise him otherwise about the effects of a large party of white men traveling through kingdoms: "'You think a handful of men is goin' to intimidate Mansong or Ali? . . . You think they goin' to sit still for a whole platoon of white men stormin' across their borders and insultin' the populace? . . . Mansong could raise three thousand men for every one you got'" (342). Besides contending with thieves and greedy kings who demand tributes of material goods to be allowed to pass through their kingdoms, Mungo must also deal with the rainy season and its effects; swollen and dangerous rivers to cross, flooding and halted progress, which creates intense boredom and stress through inactivity. The morale of Mungo's expedition is pitiful and he struggles to keep his men moving forward through all of these difficulties.

All of these factors have understandably changed Mungo's character, and his role as a picaresque protagonist is altered as well. The burden of responsibility has forced him to change, and a variety of negative influences make it for the worst. The rest of his actions in the novel are not comic, but serious, as he is in a constant struggle to stay alive. The circumstances and battles he is involved in show the darkest truths about exploration when the group is forced to fight and kill hostile natives in order to survive. The fact that Mungo dies also indicates an alteration in his picaresque status because picaresque characters almost always live on to see another day. When Mungo's brother-in-law Zander dies from disease, Mungo is forced to confront his most trying crisis and questions the hopelessness of his position in a nearly complete breakdown:

Why was he beating his way up the Niger? he asked himself. Why was he risking life, taking life? What kind of man was he, Mungo Park, to drag a narrow--

shouldered little parlor-sitter like Zander out into the teeth of the wilderness? To desert a wife and four children? To lead thirty-six men to their deaths and blow a cringing old negro to Kingdom Come as if he were nothing more than an insect or a toad? What had he come to? The answer was something he didn't want to face. Not now. Not ever. At dawn he pushed himself up and uncorked a keg of rum. He was drunk for three days. Blind drunk. (377)

With Zander's death Mungo is finally coming to the realization of what all of his actions on this expedition have meant as well as his powerlessness to change them. It is significant that he mostly considers the effects his mission has had upon himself and not others. Mungo lacks the ability to see or admit his own mistakes and learn from them. His three-day rum binge is an indication of his need to escape the severity of his situation and his inability to contend with it. He is understandably succumbing to the intense pressure of his circumstances, which is what previous explorers faced but did not live to tell their tales. The questions he asks of himself have answers he cannot face because they point to his own errors and overestimation. He must look to his greatly diminished self for a resolution, which he has never had to do before. His only way out is to go forward and even that does not look like a hopeful prospect. This sense of imminent doom contributes to his delusions and miscalculations toward completing his objective.

Since Johnson recognizes the futility of continuing down the Niger River, he tries to persuade Mungo into turning around. Knowing Mungo has lost almost all of his common sense with his irrational expectations, Johnson resigns as the lead guide. The truth of Johnson's words penetrates Mungo's consciousness, yet he fails to heed them and the feelings they conjure up:

Self-doubt was something new to Mungo, something that had crept up on him like a growth, a malignancy, during the course of this second expedition. Self-doubt and guilt. Every word out of Johnson's mouth struck him with all the force of his own convictions, every word jabbed at him like a needle. But he was stubborn. He threw his head back. "I leave at dawn." (384)

This trait of self-doubt is an uncharacteristic one for Mungo to reveal or even show, as it would

diminish his authority, so he must always act as if he were right at all times. The narration here reveals that Mungo is struggling with conflicting feelings, so he buries the ones that interfere with his forward progress, no matter how sensible they are. As Mungo had never experienced self-doubt before, it was something he was not prepared to handle, yet it is a very real aspect of exploration that is not often discussed. It is painfully obvious that Mungo overestimated his abilities. He did not learn as much as he should have from his first expedition. He assumed that he knew all he needed to know before heading off into the unknown. He failed to recognize the sheer impracticality of his venture and the nearly impossible logistics of moving that many men and animals over rugged terrain. Through his overconfidence and negligence, he did not account for unexpected difficulties, seasonal variations and the always unpredictable human element. He naively assumed that reasoning and perseverance could overcome any problem or obstacle, which can be attributed to his belief in the superior intelligence and civilization of British society. He was unable to see beyond his customary way of thinking to find new approaches or listen to other ideas. The manner in which he concludes his friendship with Johnson clearly demonstrates this notion.

Throughout their time together, Johnson has been an exceptionally loyal, helpful friend and guide to Mungo, who cannot comprehend the larger meaning of the resignation and interprets it as a personal affront. There are many factors that cause Mungo's imperialistic response at this moment--severe illness is the largest--but they do not mitigate his reaction. He tries persuasion, bribery and finally, out of fatigue and frustration, he callously insults Johnson while dismissing him as if he were nothing. Mungo can only consider the damage to his reputation for turning back. He cannot accept being thought of as a failure and a coward for not completing his intended objective. Nobody must stand in his way and anybody is an expendable commodity if sacrificing that person allows Mungo to get closer to the terminus of the Niger River. He cannot see the efficacy of cutting his already drastic losses by turning back. His dilemma is one which places the limitations of an individual against the demands and expectations of a culture driven by conquest. He is afraid his poor preparations, lack of knowledge and foolish perseverance in the face of insurmountable obstacles will come to light to destroy his reputation as a triumphant explorer.

Accomplishing his goal would allow him to wipe the slate clean and either ignore the cost in human lives or justify them as a necessary but unfortunate consequence of exploration. Boyle uses these topics as a way to examine the dark side of exploration to show it in its true light instead of simply revering a person based on the accomplishment only. How a goal was achieved is just as important to realize when assessing the significance of that goal.

These same circumstances that undo Mungo bring forth the best in Ned, who takes on a vital role in the expedition during Mungo's times of incapacity. The fact that Ned is able to endure and thrive in this situation shows how is much more of a picaresque character than Mungo, who is succumbing to the pressure and the environment. Ned does not act out of loyalty to Mungo or belief in his mission, but out of a desire to preserve his own life. With a void in leadership the expedition is sure to end and Ned, always expedient in his thinking, knows the group must effectively function as a unit for their mutual protection, ensuring his continued survival. His value to the expedition is shown when it is under attack by Dassoud's army of Moors. Mungo's mind is not functioning properly during the assault, as he contemplates his own doomed circumstances. His inability to lead the expedition nearly gets everybody in it killed: "He can only think of failure, ignominy and death. But then Ned Rise's voice sweeps up out of the din, muscular and hortatory-- 'Pull boys! Pull!'--and the tableau begins to dissolve. Dassoud drops back and the *Joliba* is suddenly rushing with the current. . . Transfixed, Mungo kneels there like a supplicant, unable to move or think" (390). Without Ned to take the lead, death is inevitable because there is nobody appointed as second in command. It is obvious that Mungo is incapable of making critical decisions, which seriously jeopardizes the expedition's safety.

Near the end of *Water Music*, Boyle's purpose for the double picaresque protagonist element is revealed to show the intertwined fortunes of Ned and Mungo. Ned adapts and survives, just like a true picaresque protagonist, while Mungo remains static and perishes, due to his refusal to accept defeat and failure as well as learn from it. Since Ned has experienced many setbacks and misfortunes in his life, he uses this experience to show his value under pressure. He has earned Mungo's trust, which is shown by the increased responsibilities on the makeshift boat. Mungo's

decline offers Ned the opportunity to ascend. Of course, Ned knew that a bit of well-timed flattery aimed at Mungo's ego couldn't hurt, especially since he was so susceptible to it. The novel explains Ned's motives: "Worming his way into the explorer's confidence was barely a challenge. The man was easy, a self-centered fool. If Ned hadn't got a grip on the reins long ago they'd all be dead by now" (421). By gaining Mungo's trust, Ned is running another one of his confidence schemes, but now, the stakes are his life. Even though he has a liking for the explorer, Ned is compelled to manipulate him for his own ends and the good of the expedition. Still, Ned is unable to prevent the physical and mental deterioration of the crew members as they proceed down the river to unknowingly meet their deaths, all of them except for Ned.

In the picaresque novel, protagonists usually do not die; they live on into their next episode, suggesting a continuation of their adventures and comic misfortunes, and Ned is no exception. Somehow he was the only one fortunate enough to barely live through Dassoud's ambush and the precipitous drop from the waterfall. Ned survived this plummet solely through good fortune but his instinct for self-preservation was what allowed him to pacify the people he encounters down river with his flute playing. Because Ned has a more universal understanding of human nature, when compared to Mungo and other expedition members, he is able to read the behavior of these people to discern that they meant him no harm. He charms them with his demeanor and his ability to play their music with them, as he cannot speak their language. Ned's continued existence ends the novel on an optimistic note of promise for his future.

In *Water Music* Boyle searches for the meanings behind written history and the desires that influence and motivate human behavior. His novel suggests that if one looks closely and carefully enough at an event or person there are many truths to be discerned that run deeper than the surface appearance of facts and written history. This indeterminacy and concealment are fictive starting points for his novels and he continues his examination of these ideas in *World's End* and *The Road to Wellville*. With *Budding Prospects*, Boyle chooses a more traditional and less experimental way to write a picaresque novel that looks behind the lives of characters who believe they have a quick way to achieve the American Dream.

Chapter Three

Wasted Dreams and Schemes: *Budding Prospects* as Social Satire

Budding Prospects is a dark satire about capitalism and corrupt aspirations to fulfill the American Dream. Unlike *Water Music*, *Budding Prospects* does not contain any of Boyle's usual concerns with history or deflate any historical figures, but it does feature characters who desire to achieve prosperity through unconventional means. As a picaresque novel, its structure closely adheres to this tradition while merging its elements with contemporary social themes to point to the fresh directions this genre may take. By merging the American Dream with criminal enterprise, Boyle gives the picaresque novel a new possibility by showing how difficult it is to attain this ideal and the lengths people will go to in order to find it. In Eva Hoffman's review of this novel, she observes: "If the larger pattern of this picaresque parable are situated within the perennial geography of American mythology and folklore, its particulars are rooted--or mired--in a very contemporary soil" (10). By using the elements of the picaresque novel to satirize present-day social issues, Boyle establishes this genre's current relevance for examining divisive and provocative topics that define who we are as an American society.

In *Budding Prospects*, the overall meaning appears to be that significant lessons in life can be learned in the most unexpected places, even during mishaps, times of loss or failure. Bad experiences can yield valuable insight into the human condition. Felix Nasmyth is an aimless picaresque protagonist who narrates his own entertaining tale of woe. The novel clearly depicts his status as an outsider in his struggle to illegally earn money in an attempt to fulfill his dreams. Through his various misadventures, Felix learns that surface appearances are often deceptive and people have ulterior motives that remain concealed until it is too late to change course. In the novel, Boyle shows how contemporary picaresque narrators can still offer insights about how society functions in confusing and contradictory ways, revealing the instability of modern existence. When I asked Boyle about what inspired him to write *Budding Prospects* he replied: "After *Water Music*, I decided to write a contemporary picaresque, based very closely on a true story, to which I was

(very) privy” (Boyle “A Quick Question”). In an interview, he responded to a similar question by replying: “*Budding Prospects* was the fictional account of a Northern Californian pot plantation that had been started by two friends of mine” (qtd. in Brisick 71). By using the picaresque novel’s features as a means to fictionalize actual events, Boyle shows how this type of novel is still very much alive in a contemporary setting. Picaresque novels are useful for examining the unpredictable realities of modern American life, which is frequently torn between the expectations of ideals and the inability to fulfill them. Materialism and unrestrained capitalism can drive people to behave in unusual and inappropriate ways to satisfy their constant drive to obtain more, which is one version of the American Dream. Boyle humorously explores how greed, schemes, and the lure of easy money motivate many people in life, while depicting how these desires influence people into making poor decisions and taking tremendous risks that have serious consequences. In this arena of illegal activities and large amounts of cash, loyalty and trust are alien concepts. There are always predators and parasites looking to obtain a share of the profits, whether it is justified or not, or destroy the operation and its participants.

The examination of *Budding Prospects* will begin with a brief look at the critical reception of the novel after it was published before discussing the novel’s context. Because this novel deals with the controversial social issue of growing and using marijuana in an unapologetic manner that is antithetical to the federal government’s condemnatory stance, it is useful to provide some introductory information on this subject. This background material will help to indicate the novel’s scope and its social relevance while providing context to explain the larger significance of the marijuana farm. This information will also define Felix as a picaresque narrator and a character who is a social outsider, while leading into an analysis of his role in the novel. The discussion will then shift to examine the minor roles of Gesh and Phil before closely analyzing how Vogelsang functions in the novel. He is an ancillary character who has a significant presence in the novel through his manipulation and exploitation of the other characters. Once the context of these characters has been established, I will then analyze selected episodes dealing with the farm, traveling into the town of Willits, and the various interactions of Felix with the characters of

officer Jerpbak and Petra to demonstrate the picaresque qualities of *Budding Prospects*. These episodes are crucial in defining Felix as a picaresque character and understanding why this novel is a continuation of the picaresque tradition.

Boyle begins the novel with two interesting quotes that suggest American aspirations and ideals that helped form this country. The first is from Benjamin Franklin's *The Way to Wealth*: "Plough deep, while Sluggards sleep; and you shall have Corn to sell and to keep" (iii). This quote speaks of the rewards of hard work and dedication to one's craft. It tells how the way to earning a fortune requires careful planning, discipline and perseverance, all of which are directly connected to Felix's enterprise of growing marijuana. If he and his friends are to succeed they must take their project seriously and not mistakenly believe that the plants will grow by themselves. The second quote is from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: " Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked out into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich" (iii). It comes from one of Willie Loman's dream sequences when his brother Ben recalls how he made his fortune. It shows the need for daring and courage in the face of obstacles and the desire to take on what most people fear to do if one is to take advantage of unrestrained capitalist enterprise and the opportunities it presents.

While Ben Loman's claim is true on its surface, the boastful, easygoing way it is delivered conceals the underlying obstacles and difficulties he overcame, the chances he took and the luck that fell his way. Although Miller's play never specifies Ben's methods for obtaining wealth, it implies that effort and desire are not enough. Unlike Franklin's quote, which asserts the ideal of hard work, Miller's quote suggests the real nature of gaining a fortune. Both of these quotes firmly place *Budding Prospects* in the American literary tradition to show how the desire for money and success motivates people to do or risk almost anything to achieve it. While *Death of a Salesman* examines the decaying nature of the American dream in the 1950s, *Budding Prospects* depicts the condition of this dream in the 1980s to show that it still exists, but that it is predictably only enjoyed by a fortunate few. While *The Way to Wealth* and *Death of a Salesman* deal with ethical ways of

finding success, *Budding Prospects* vividly shows the risks and consequences of using unethical means as a way to earn money, which is an aspect of the American Dream that is often overlooked. Hoffman's review of the novel mentions the relevance of the opening quotations: "Between these two bits of quintessential Americana, the satirical, distinctly antipastoral and quite often hilarious action of *Budding Prospects* unfolds" (A10). She also mentions how these quotes define the range of the novel's allegorical terrain, particularly the quote from Miller, which she describes as the: "braggadocio refrain of rugged individualism" (A10). Felix and his friends enter into their project with the same sort of enthusiasm, only to discover that earning a fortune is not so simple.

Not all critics found this novel so amusing. The British reviewer John Clute found this novel to be lacking in substance and did not see it as satiric or even funny: "As a bit of sarcasm, therefore, the title of T. Coraghessan Boyle's second novel is something of a cheap shot. . . . Beneath the chilly high-jinks of its telling, *Budding Prospects* is a palinode, and an astonishingly bitter one. It is also, at heart, without humor" ("Bitter Harvests" 1020). Clute seems to have missed much of this novel's irony and the satire directed at American culture and the frequent failure of its ideals. Felix's narrative is not intended to be taken as an outright, or even subtle, renunciation of his past. As a picaresque novel, *Budding Prospects* depicts a much different way of living contemporary life that most people are not accustomed to viewing. In doing so, this novel openly defies codified social standards and ideals to show characters living alternative lifestyles that openly reject mainstream values. Growing marijuana and using it are still contentious and controversial social issues in the United States that have not yet been resolved. Felix's narration revels in the fact that he consciously broke the law and got away with it, but that does not mean he did not pay a price for his transgression.

In a later review of *World's End*, Clute wrote that *Budding Prospects*: "bore messages of determinism and spiritual penury that sorted ill with the outgoing, rambunctious inflation of the tales they told" ("Van Warts and All" 927). Apparently Clute missed Boyle's satirical aims, as they were reflected in the exuberance of his language and the situations he placed his characters in.

Clute does not take into account that *Budding Prospects* is a picaresque novel. As a narrator, Felix gains a small measure of reliability because he does not fully regret or reject his past, while acknowledging that he had a lot of fun, despite the many mishaps. Felix's narrative is trying to communicate an experience that changed him for the better. The novel is narrated as if Felix and the reader were sitting around having a few drinks to recall old times and swap stories. It seems that Clute was bothered by the informality and lack of proper penance on Felix's behalf. But one of Boyle's points is that the characters of *Budding Prospects* dismiss all ideals because they have ultimately found them to be disappointing and lacking. Through their marijuana farm they also learn that the desire for money is just another empty ideal that can never be satisfied.

Boyle's writing style allows him to take on subjects that are typically considered distasteful because they run counter to the mainstream American way of life. He elevates these low subjects into meaningful examinations of contemporary life to show the chaos that runs beneath the surface of our seemingly static existence. According to Hoffman, one of the ways he does this is through his use of language: "The life of *Budding Prospects* exists in its language--coruscated with electricity leaping elegantly from colloquial to literary, from rough to lyrical in distinctively American, jagged rhythms" (10). Boyle's ability to deftly shift techniques and word choices to match his subject matter, ranging from deliberately crude and vulgar to cultured and educated, lets him truthfully show the mixed personalities and influences of his characters. Boyle shows how his misguided characters are much more than the simplistic stereotypes favored by mainstream America, which castigates marijuana users as a bunch of derelicts and subversives.

In an interview with Boyle, Bruce Weber observes: "The cynical look at American culture that his work frequently provides draws heavily on his former alienated perspective" (71). When Boyle graduated with his bachelor's degree, he ended up teaching high school for a couple of years and began shooting heroin. He has been quite open about his past but he does not condemn or condone what he did, yet his experiences with this drug and the lifestyle he led taught him a great deal about human behavior on the fringes of life. It appears that he used this knowledge from his experiences to inform his writing in *Budding Prospects*. The irony of Felix's account is that he

learned many valuable lessons from his misadventures and used this hard-earned knowledge to become a better individual who has a much clearer understanding of life and what he wants out of it. At the novel's end, he discovers an unexpected reward from his efforts on the farm. His dedication to make the farm work, despite the many hardships and obstacles, has a direct correlation to his relationship with Petra. Felix is in love and he is willing to give up his spot on the farm so that he can be with her. This romance appears promising, which is quite a contrast to all of the mishaps that have led up to it. The implied promise of this relationship with Petra also suggests that Felix is not as socially isolated as he thinks.

Felix and his associates are characters who exist on the social margins in Northern California and their attitudes toward living are in many ways antithetical to mainstream society, yet these characters ironically have the same desire for prosperity and happiness, but they take a much different and far less socially acceptable approach toward meeting their aspirations. Regarding the social themes of *Budding Prospects*, Hoffman observes:

Mr. Boyle's chosen milieu is that seedy, downwardly mobile demi-monde inhabited by gracelessly aging flower children who have never grown more aimless, strapped for money and dependent on drugs. It is a subculture that has always lent itself well to native anthropological comedy, and Mr. Boyle has a wonderful eye--and ear--for its social ironies and its rarefied incongruities.

(A10)

These characters see no benefit in trying to fit in with respectable, mainstream society because they find it to be confining, empty, and meaningless. They may not know what they want out of life, but they certainly know what they do not want.

Numerous people in American history have realized their American Dreams through corrupt and illegal ways, yet they still maintain a high social standing and their prosperity is never questioned. During the prohibition era, many people secured their fortunes through smuggling and bootlegging alcohol in the United States. Joseph Kennedy built his wealth by circumventing prohibition laws on a large scale and used his money to create a political dynasty that got his son,

John F. Kennedy, elected United States Senator and then President while allowing his other sons, Robert and Edward Kennedy to be elected as United States Senators and be serious contenders for the office of President. This comparison is not meant to imply that Felix has the same stature and sophistication as the Kennedys--he clearly does not--but it does show that they have similar aspirations toward beating the system to make money by providing the public a popular intoxicant that is illegal, despite the government's strenuous efforts to halt its distribution.

Following laws and ideals is the socially accepted route to achieving the American Dream, but it is no guarantee of success. Many people in the United States have taken advantage of the system and broken laws, only to get away with it while obtaining status and respect for their wealth. That is one of the unfortunate offshoots of capitalism and there are always predators on the lookout for easy but illegal money. These ideas are quite a contrast to the novel's subtitle, which says it is a pastoral. By ironically subverting the traditional meaning of a pastoral novel, Boyle shows how the foray into marijuana farming is anything but a bucolic, idyllic escape into a country landscape filled with shepherds, far away from the pressures and hassles of city life. Guillén observes the differences between the pastoral and the picaresque when he writes: "The pastoral and the picaresque have represented two diametrically opposed attitudes toward the ills of the city; the pastoral attempt to flee the city and replace it with nature and sentimental love; and the [picaresque] decision to live and survive in it, but not to fight it or 'join' it, on the part of the 'half-outsider'" (97). Though Felix is an outsider, he is not seeking to flee the city, but he does have a number of naive expectations of what his project in the country will be like. He and his friends only think of their dreams being realized and they do not consider the intensive physical labor or the danger that is involved.

Rather than find peace and relaxation, Felix and his friends must endure continually escalating stress, boredom, hard work and diminished expectations. Nature is not a friendly, ideal presence that readily lends itself to calm repose and easy contemplation, it is an enemy that slowly chips away at their potential harvest and they must struggle against its ways at all times. This circumstance shows how they are not in harmony with their environment. They must also contend

with nosy and intrusive locals who are justifiably suspicious and intent on discovering what is going on. Instead of seeing their dream slowly grow before their eyes, they helplessly watch it decay. They end up finding the American nightmare as the novel progresses, but Felix is able to salvage valuable wisdom from his wayward experiences.

It is important to remember the socially restrictive climate *Budding Prospects* was written in during the early 1980s. Ronald Reagan's so-called war on drugs used extensive propaganda campaigns to categorize any form of drug use as evil while misinforming the public by distorting medical facts and declaring all drugs as equally bad and equally destructive in their effects. When I asked Boyle if this novel was a conscious reaction against Reagan's "war on drugs," he responded: "I was more interested in comedy--and making a statement about capitalistic schemes--than in responding to Reagan. But of course the world of the book, as it reflects the world of life, stands as a sort of matter-of-fact refutation of that man's worldview" (Boyle "A Quick Question"). Reagan's "war on drugs" helped to perpetrate many negative stereotypes about drug use. Expensive "zero-tolerance" campaigns were conducted to jail drug users and dealers, and to eradicate marijuana cultivation, with little regard for constitutional rights, yet little progress was made in curbing the growth, manufacture, or consumption of illegal substances.

By using comedy and the versatile features of the picaresque novel to examine this unresolvable social conflict, Boyle defuses some of the tension his subject creates. His novel raises a serious issue about the limitations of an individual's personal freedom and the government's right to interfere with it. *Budding Prospects* challenges these long-held assumptions about marijuana users and growers by honestly depicting them as they are, with their flaws on display. By demythologizing marijuana growers and users, Boyle shows that they are simply human and have the same problems and desires as anybody else. They are neither villains nor heroes, but they wish to achieve the American Dream with the few opportunities they have available to them, even if such activities are illegal and, for the most part, socially unacceptable. By writing a picaresque novel to express these themes, Boyle shows what happens when the government implements its ideals through a war against its citizens for what amounts to a minor and consensual crime. The American ideals of

law, as set forth in the Constitution, are frequently ignored or distorted to warrant unethical and illegal activities by law enforcement, which often invokes the Machiavellian tenet of the ends justifying the means as a way of defending its unconstitutional mistreatment of citizens. When this abuse is combined with negative stereotypes, few Americans question the validity of such law enforcement tactics because those who are arrested are not, in general, a part of mainstream society, so they are thought to deserve their harsh punishment.

Felix's enterprise on the farm represents an ongoing social conflict that remains unresolved. Growing and using marijuana openly contradicts legal and social codes of behavior. There is still a large, unsettled debate over its long-term effects and the consequences over its use. What is known, but infrequently admitted in the highly polarized debates over marijuana use, is that this drug is less harmful than tobacco and alcohol. Marijuana is not physically addictive, nor does it have a lethal dosage (unlike tobacco and alcohol). Felix knows growing marijuana is illegal, but he truly does not believe he is doing anything wrong. If the legal questions are removed from his farming project, all he is really doing is growing plants and harvesting them. His actions harm nobody and they have no lasting effect upon the environment. There are many more legally acceptable behaviors that are much more destructive to humans or the environment, yet they are allowed to persist. Just like a traditional farmer, Felix must contend with the elements and work diligently to produce the best possible crop he can, as well as suffering the consequences of failure.

Felix's first-person narration adheres to the features of picaresque tradition, while taking its subject matter in a new direction. His narration is a deliberately subjective and satirical view of his misadventures while growing marijuana outside of a rural northern California town. His recitation is straightforward and has added credibility because he is not afraid to criticize himself or laugh at his errors in his retrospective account. During the course of the novel he explains one of his reasons for telling about his misadventures: "If the best stories--or the funniest, at any rate--derive from the suffering recollected in tranquillity then this was hilarious. In telling it, I'd defused it, neutralized the misery through retrospection, made light of the woe." (265). As a subjective account, there are still moments where his perception of events reflects a flawed or distorted understanding of them,

which shows Felix is not a completely reliable narrator. As a narrator, he seems to be a descendant of Hunter Thompson's picaresque narrator Raoul Duke from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Both characters have the subjective perspectives of outsiders who examine America's social contradictions and hypocrisies. Both Raoul and Felix openly revel in antisocial behavior and debauchery while consuming mass quantities of substances, legal and illegal, in their search for the American Dream, even though each character has a different interpretation of it. One of the reasons Felix tells his tale is to justify his past actions to show where they led him and what he gained from them, but he is not above putting some spin on his story to make himself look better while making others look worse.

Trying to discern what was left out of Felix's account is not really an issue as it was in *Water Music* with Mungo Park's journals. Felix does not appear to be interested in fabricating a fictive version of reality, in concealing the truth about his activities, or in trying to create a reputation. (His encounters with officer Jerpbak are an exception to Felix's apparent reliability that will be discussed later.) Boyle carefully structures Felix's narration to lure the reader into believing in the promise of the farm, just as the other characters did. Boyle captures the mentality of such characters in these situations, as they are always thinking that just around the next bend there will be a fortune awaiting them. Felix knows how his story will end, but his narration creates suspense through the use of deliberately deceptive foreshadowing that hints of fortunes still to come, which leads the reader to think the farm still has viability, even in the face of numerous setbacks. Because many readers will be lured into the farm's promise and potential, they will experience the same gradual revelation and the sting of crushed expectations as every episode slowly chips away at the farm's earning potential. Even though a reader might not agree with what takes place on the farm, it is hard to deny that Felix has an amusing personality with resilient features that allow him to endure and overcome many challenges. Even if Felix, Phil, and Gesh walked away with a fortune, it would not be as if they had gotten something for nothing. Felix's narration depicts how their transition from lazy slackers to diligent workers was not an easy one. They put in a tremendous effort on the farm and it is difficult not to at least sympathize with their aspirations to beat the

system. Despite their initial lack of motivation, they gradually become characters who genuinely aspire to get away with an activity that society and its laws condemn, all the while making a profit.

Rather than regret, glamorize or demonize his activities, Felix seems to just tell them like they occurred without striving to attach any moral messages to them, which points directly to a major cultural conflict. In portraying this type of circumstance, picaresque novels are at their most effective, as they are able to show numerous viewpoints about divisive social issues. Felix's stance runs counter to the conservative mainstream social norms of the early 1980s, but it is right in tune with the values of the oppositional counterculture, which regards growing and using marijuana as perfectly acceptable activities, despite their illegal status. These traits establish Felix as an outsider who does not fit in with many people. Felix and his friends have a distinct countercultural identity that is post-1960s, but they are not a part of any organized movement and they do not have the political baggage that is usually associated with such groups.

Felix, Phil and Gesh exhibit characteristics of coarseness, disaffectedness, listlessness, lunacy and rootlessness but they also have vitality when their interests are concerned, which helps to connect the novel to the picaresque tradition. They exhibit a wide range of interests, from the crude to the cultured and sophisticated, which makes them hard to categorize as purely degenerate characters. Hoffman said about this subject: "His characters are *soigné* derelicts, underground depressives of a highly educated kind, whose sensibilities are equally attuned to New Wave music, Stravinsky, metaphysical philosophy and the exquisite nuances of failure, pot, and Cabernet Sauvignon--though their circumstances rarely allow them to indulge in the latter" (A10). Though these characters have cultured interests, they reject the snobbish posturing and exclusionary tendencies that generally go along with them. They do not feel bound to adhere to any idealistic system of beliefs, such as the American vision of upper middle-class prosperity, because they know that acceptance is impossible and letdown and futility are inevitable. These characters are content to live their lives on their own terms, whenever possible.

These characters represent the post-1960s generation in American society that does not adhere

to the values of the past or think very highly of it. This generation has little belief in anything, while despising authority as corrupt and abusive of its power. This jaded view of American life is aptly summed up when Felix assesses a conversation he had with Gesh and Phil:

The whole hippie ethic - beads, beards, brotherhood, the community of man - it had all been bullshit, a subterfuge to keep us from realizing there were no jobs, the economy was in trouble and the resources of the world were going up in smoke. And we'd bought it, lived it, invented it. For all those years. His laugh was bitter. We were older now, he said, and wiser. We knew what counted: money. Money, and nothing else. (29)

This stance shows that once their ideals have let them down, all they have to fall back on is looking out for themselves and cynicism, as they are powerless to alter the ways of the world or buy into them. They see that their best opportunity to find financial stability is to try to beat the system and simply walk away. This clash of values exposes a number of social contradictions and hypocritical practices in American life concerning the use of illegal drugs and the ways the government handles this situation. These three characters have already attempted to realize their dreams by adopting an idealistic set of values, only to later feel let down by the whole experience. The promised yield of the farm is what they now believe in to realize their dreams. Even when it becomes evident that all of their efforts are proving futile they still must find a way to persevere because they are desperate and in need of money. Felix explains: "They needed this thing as badly as I did--if it failed, after all the hope and sweat and toil we'd invested in it, then the society itself was bankrupt, the pioneers a fraud, true grit, enterprise and daring as vestigial as adenoids or appendixes" (192). On the farm, Felix, Phil and Gesh have worked harder than they ever have for anything else in their lives, yet they are still unable to realize their once promising expectations, which eventually leaves them dejected and frustrated with their endeavor.

Boyle constructed Felix as a character who has a number of flaws and his aimlessness in life seems to be the most significant. This characteristic helps to define him as an outcast and a picaresque protagonist. Felix has not found any specific direction to take because he habitually

gives up when the struggle becomes difficult. He does not like to overcome obstacles and often chooses the path of least resistance when forced to make a decision or put forth more effort. The novel's opening paragraph reinforces Felix's self-assessment as a habitual quitter:

I've always been a quitter. I quit the Boy Scouts, the glee club, the marching band.
Gave up my paper route, turned my back on the church, stuffed the basketball team.
I dropped out of college, sidestepped the army with a 4-F on the grounds of mental instability, went back to school, made a go of it, entered a Ph. D. program in nineteenth-century British literature, sat in the front row, took notes assiduously, bought a pair of horn-rims, and quit on the eve of my comprehensive exams. I got married, separated, divorced. (3)

Felix certainly doesn't lack opportunities in life but he has never found something to satisfy his interests. He doesn't really seem to have a clue as to what he wants out of life and this negative character trait is an important defining feature that gradually changes as the novel progresses. At age thirty-one, he is a middle-class character who does not fit in with society's standards of what someone in his position should be doing, which is trying to achieve stability and success through a steady job and accepting all of the restraints that come with it.

Felix is content to drift along, live meagerly on his savings and work only when necessary. He is still in the process of learning who he is and finding himself. In her dissertation on the picaresque novel, Willa Valencia mentions how American novelists have enhanced this genre and its protagonists: "Whereas traditional rogues seldom take themselves seriously or undergo crises of identity, most of the protagonists of the American neo-picaresque novel are self-conscious and introspective. Not content to merely outwit their superiors or to achieve financial success, they are trying to find themselves" (146). In this vein, throughout the course of *Budding Prospects*, Felix has the chance to reconsider various facets of his life which were formative, which allows him to discover what he really wants. When the project starts turning bad his first inclination is to give it all up by driving away. When he sees himself falling back into his usual pattern of behavior he turns back to rejoin Phil and Gesh on the farm. The struggle to make the farm produce is also Felix's

fight for something substantive in his life. By learning from his obvious failures and other mishaps, Felix emerges as a wiser character with a better understanding of the corrupt side of human nature and what it takes to succeed in life.

As characters, Gesh and Phil play a secondary role to Felix's narration of his misadventures on the farm. These characters are not especially developed but their purpose is to reflect other aspects of and responses to the many dilemmas encountered on the farm. Hoffman makes a similar point: "But for all the mixture of their pathetic, endearing and eccentric qualities, the novel's characters aren't differentiated or developed enough. We learn about them through a few quirks" (A10). Gesh and Phil's interaction and companionship with Felix helps to define him as a picaresque character, as one of these three characters is always causing trouble or evading it. Even though Phil and Gesh have some picaresque features, most notably their drive for subsistence and their delinquent behavior, they do not have enough of the requisite characteristics to merit that designation, yet their continual mishaps enhance the comic dimensions of the novel. Much like Felix, these characters are social outsiders who are not at all concerned with what other people think of them. Their sense of social alienation helps to keep them together, as they still remain loyal to each other when everything else is collapsing around them. When this notion is combined with their status as deviant characters who enjoy defying society's codes of polite behavior and sobriety, it becomes evident that another one of their purposes is to act as comic foils that mitigate the misery of their depicted experiences. Their behavior is not meant to be viewed as admirable, let alone ideal, but it honestly portrays them as they are, flaws and all. They revel in irresponsible, obnoxious behavior that many people find disturbing. They regularly clash with any form of authority and almost every time they leave the farm they inevitably have an incident that lands one of them in jail for a short stay. They offer varied perspectives of what happened on the farm and they have different reasons for participating in it. Gesh and Phil have their own versions of the American Dream and what it takes to make themselves happy.

For Gesh, his dream is to live life happily by obliterating his consciousness with a variety of illegal substances, which often interfere with his ability to make sound judgments. The fact that he

can still function is amazing. He is a character who reacts immediately to any situation without concern for the consequences. He is the one who openly challenges and provokes Vogelsang about the farm to cut through all of his bluster by exposing it as lies. He reacts viscerally to any situation and sometimes thinks about the results later. Felix says about Gesh:

He liked to think of himself in heroic terms--biggest, toughest, smartest, strongest, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, eat the most Quaaludes and still stand up and wash the dishes. Raised in Echo Park and educated in abandoned clapboard houses and the alleys out back of Sunset Boulevard, he'd been through it all--gang fights, juvenile hall, doping, moping, expulsion from his high school honor society, and two years of the worst the UCLA classics department could dish out--and he never let you forget it. (65)

As this passage reveals, Gesh has had an education and opportunities, but he has never found them to be worthwhile. Even though he has an inflated sense of himself, he prefers to live a disorganized life without the trappings of material goods. He lives solely for the moment, yet he is prone to gloomy moods and unpredictable outbursts. He has almost nothing in his life and making a fortune would allow him to waste his life away without having to work at a regular job.

Compared to Gesh, Phil has more opportunities in life, as he has some artistic aspirations. He made a brief, unsuccessful foray as a sculptor and he has bounced about working menial jobs in restaurants. His dream is to own his own restaurant and by working on the farm he believes he can realize his aspirations. He is the only character who contemplates putting his money to productive use. He is not averse to consuming large quantities of illegal substances, but unlike Gesh, doing so does not seem to be the entire focus of his life. When the morale of the camp has collapsed and the worst seems as if it is just around the corner, Phil channels his restless energy and despondency into creating art rather than sitting around sulking and this reaction is an important character trait. He welds together a monstrous sculpture from the decaying metal and assorted detritus that litters the property as a tribute to their wretched experiences of the farm. He considers giving his

sculpture the aptly ironic title of either “*Agrarian Rhapsody*” or “*Burned*” (286). Felix describes his impression of the sculpture:

The thing was monstrous, anarchic, a mockery of proportion and grace of line. It looked like a heap of crushed and rusted French horns and tubas, it looked like a dismantled tank in the Sinai, it looked like the Watts Towers compressed by an Olympian fist Twenty feet high, wide around as my bedroom floor, it was monumental, toothy, jagged and unsteady, a maze of gears, bolts, hammered planes and swooping arcs. (286)

Capturing their misadventures and turning them into art and entertainment is the best these characters can do to salvage something from the farm because they realize they are not going to get much money. Felix took the same artistic path as Phil by deciding to narrate the novel as a commemoration of their negative experiences. In both cases, their artistic creations serve as lasting reminders of their exploitation at the hands of Vogelsang, so that they may never forget what they learned from this awful experience.

As an astute predator who is skilled at manipulating people, Vogelsang uses their gullibility and desires against them to lure them into the project. Picaresque novels often contain a significant character who takes advantage of the picaresque protagonist as well as other characters and Vogelsang fills this role. As the project’s financial backer, property owner, and planner, he tells them only about the ideal financial and horticultural expectations he believes the farm will yield, without qualifying his projections with any of the numerous possibilities of what could go wrong. By talking about the maximum harvest as if it is a given, he sells Felix, Gesh and Phil an ideal dream and casually allows their giddy expectations to cloud any pessimistic, or even realistic, considerations that might cause them to question the project’s success. The thought of splitting \$500,000 three ways has an insidious way of affecting the better judgment of these characters. As the project’s physical laborers, their role is the most dangerous and demanding as well as the least rewarding.

Vogelsang's polished technique of inspiring confidence works to persuade them into accepting his offer. Felix's enthusiastic description tells how readily they swallowed the bait, especially himself:

For six months I'd been idle, living off what I'd made from my last remodeling job (the housing market had closed up like a fist) and the pittance they gave me at the community college for teaching a summer course in freshman English, sinking lower into the pit of inactivity, self-denigration and loneliness. Now, sitting there in the glow of anticipation, the moment rich and immediate, Phil and his friend at my side like supporters at a pep rally, I felt purged of all that. Sunlight suffused the room like a dream of kings, Bruce Springsteen was singing about the Promised Land, we were drinking gimlets from a pitcher. (30)

These sentences reveal the contrast in feelings experienced by Felix, as they shift from despair to elation. A great opportunity has emerged and he wants to make the best of it. Of course, Vogelsang helps their exuberance along by concealing crucial details about his true motives and how expendable he considers the project's participants. Vogelsang deceives Felix, Gesh and Phil with their dreams of prosperity and uses this idea to inspire confidence in them. Felix is clearly impressed with Vogelsang's many varied abilities and he has always proven reliable in the past. Felix observes: "He was amazing. Entrepreneur, culturado, expert mechanic, carpenter and electrician, collector non-pariel--and a gourmet chef to boot" (26). Vogelsang is a successful man who can do anything with aplomb. He is a living realization of the American Dream and by asking the three guys to participate in his project, he makes it seem as if he is a generous person who is willing to share his good fortune with them.

By getting them drunk and feeding them with a seemingly endless supply of liquor and food, Vogelsang smoothly lowers their defenses and any second thoughts they might have. The effects of liquor are fairly obvious, but the effects of stunningly good food are a bit more subtle in their influence. Vogelsang knowingly uses the intense, sensual pleasures of fine Italian cuisine, with many courses, to seduce the men into accepting the project. The quality of the meal is so superb that

it takes their minds off of all other considerations except the pure pleasure of the immediate moment. It provides Vogelsang just the distraction he needs. It is as if the meal is supposed to be an indication of the good life that will come to them if they go along with the project. He gets them to fully believe in the farm by cultivating an illusion of trust and reliability. On the surface it all sounds like a great plan and Vogelsang appears quite compliant to throw his money around to obtain all of the necessary resources, including a botanist. He retains the services of Boyd Dowst, who has a master's degree in botanical science from Yale, to assist the project with his knowledge of growing premium marijuana. Although Vogelsang doesn't let on, he is truly concerned about his bottom line. Because he is such a sharp operator, the novel implicitly suggests he had already anticipated his loss in wining and dining them as fertilizer for their imaginations and a sedative for their common sense. By shrewdly understanding the motivations of Felix, Phil and Gesh, Vogelsang is able to exploit their need for money and their dreams of wealth and independence to take full advantage of them for his own financial benefit in ways they can never suspect.

When Vogelsang pitches the opportunity of working on the marijuana farm and Felix accepts, it is a modern updating of the servant-master relationship from Spanish picaresque novels. Boyle updates this theme to show the comic effects of an employer exploiting an employee in an illegal enterprise. Like Boyle's early novels, it is also a continued development of the predator and prey theme as well. Felix freely chooses to work on the farm, but his choice is influenced by his need for money and his desire to live an independent life free from work. The fact that he is not governed by cupidity is important, as it indicates a sense of proportion to his endeavor, even though he does get carried away with his expectations. Vogelsang is a slick operator who deftly uses Felix's desires as a means of deceiving him into the project. Because Vogelsang's schemes have succeeded many times before, Felix does not doubt the project's feasibility or anticipate the difficulty of executing it. Since Felix, Gesh and Phil have never grown anything on a large scale before, they cannot comprehend the arduous work involved. They naively assume their nine months of growing will be like an extended vacation of sorts.

Vogelsang sells the project to the group with the understanding they will perform most of the labor. Initially they accept this end of their deal until their discontent with the numerous problems on the farm becomes a crisis that threatens to derail the project. They correctly deduce that Vogelsang and Dowst are enjoying the benefits of the farm, and the future profits, without having to make many sacrifices, which only creates more animosity and resentment. Gesh finally confronts Vogelsang about this disparity as the seedlings are beginning to sprout and this timing gives him a little more leverage to be taken seriously because Vogelsang cannot handle the project by himself.

Felix recalls:

Gesh's voice nagged on, expressing deep and insupportable disaffection with everything, from lack of direction and equipment to the leaky roof and the holes in his boots and underwear. I could see lines being drawn, the sides forming up: slaves and overseers, coolies and satraps, workers and bosses. . . . So could Vogelsang. He was nervous, hyperkinetic, scratching round the room like a dog looking for a place to squat. (88-9)

These characters have legitimate complaints and Vogelsang is quite aware of it, as his behavior demonstrates. If the project is to succeed, they must have unity and not the division described in the quote. His workers are close to rebelling and quitting, yet he knows exactly how to handle the situation to manipulate their disgruntled feelings. Vogelsang may be deceitful and overconfident, but he is no fool. He knows how to spot the weaknesses in these characters and turn them to his advantage. He gives them money, supplies and support by pitching in with the labor for a week. By getting his hands dirty for a week, Vogelsang lost some time and money, but he restored their confidence in the farm and in him at a critical juncture during the planting season. Vogelsang has an uncanny ability to charm adversaries whenever he needs it most to help almost any negative situation turn out in his favor.

These characters should have learned right away the disparity between the ideals of Vogelsang's promises and their empty reality when they first arrive at the lodge, which is really just a crumbling cabin. Before they left San Francisco this is what they were told: "The place is perfectly

adequate,' Vogelsang said. 'With a little work it could be really cozy'" (31-32). By deceptively twisting his words to stretch their meaning and hide the truth, Vogelsang led them to believe they would be living in a small, isolated stretch of paradise and implied, much like a used-car salesman, that the cabin would have many of the modest amenities of home. They are quite shocked when they see the cabin's dilapidated condition. Felix narrates:

I'd experienced hiatuses between expectation and actuality before--who hasn't?
But this was staggering. Hunting lodge? The place was an extended shack, the yard strewn with refuse, the doorway gaping like an open mouth, like the hungry maw of the demon-god of abandoned houses demanding propitiation. Someone-- Vogelsang, no doubt - had nailed tarpaper up on the outer walls in place of shingles, and there was a ridiculous white cloud of sheet Styrofoam lashed across the roof (in the hope of forestalling leaks, as I was later to learn). (41)

This description only includes the external condition, but the inside was in even worse shape. It is unfit for human habitation and it requires much work and materials just to make it barely tolerable. It is only the beginning of their illusions being rapidly deflated.

Once the project is underway, the serious risks and potential consequences begin to loom heavily. Since *Budding Prospects* is a picaresque novel, these circumstances are viewed humorously rather than seriously, especially since the characters are the cause of their own problems. With over a thousand eighteen-inch plants in the ground, they would be facing a battery of serious charges and a lengthy stay in jail. The government does not take such enterprises lightly and it likes to make an example of offenders to dissuade future growers. Felix, Phil and Gesh must always exercise caution, yet paranoia is always present. This point is realized when they observe Vogelsang's fearful behavior when he is on the property after the seedlings have been transplanted into the ground.

Since his arrival two nights earlier--he'd come, reluctantly, to oversee the completion of the irrigation system--Vogelsang had been as jumpy as an air-raid warden. Nervous about everything from poison oak to pot poachers to detection and arrest by the DEA,

FBI, IRS and the Willits Sheriff's Department, he was practically clonic, every facial muscle twitching, fingers drumming the tabletop, legs beating like pistons. (130)

Vogelsang's response is quite the opposite of his usual calm, self-assured demeanor. It shows his understanding of how any intervention by the government that catches him on the property means he will forfeit everything he has worked so hard to acquire by going to prison for a long time.

Felix, Gesh and Phil have become acclimated to their circumstances and are not as easily spooked, at least until something actually happens and then the tension suddenly rises. One of the ways they cope with the extremes of paranoia and boredom is to consume large quantities of alcohol, smoke marijuana, and eat Quaaludes. It is the only means of escape they have to break up the monotony of their daily existence on the farm. Early in the novel, Felix describes Gesh's appearance and morning wakeup ritual: "Gesh was wearing a torn flannel shirt that featured cowboys with lariats, his hair was in aboriginal disarray and his eyes looked as if they'd been freshly transplanted. He mixed himself another Bloody Mary, threw back two Quaaludes and gave us a sick grin" (36). Such a heavy consumption of intoxicants is considered acceptable in their circle of friends but heavily frowned upon by most of society. Some might argue that their drug use is indicative of addiction. By showing this behavior openly and honestly, Boyle shows how they use these substances recreationally, but he also tempers their pleasure by showing their arrests, mishaps, unnecessary risks and poor judgments that are the results of their nearly steady state of intoxication.

Because Felix and his friends were seduced by the ideal of the farm, they could not fully anticipate any of the troubles that would arise, particularly the obvious ones they should have known about. The reality of their situation is much different from their expectations, which aligns *Budding Prospects* with the picaresque tradition. Picaresque characters are always subject to unexpected twists of fate, and often these events comically portray bad fate. On the farm, Felix must endure what seems to be an arbitrary punishment from nature. Neither Vogelsang nor Dowst informed them about how the effects of nature would interfere with their enterprise. Growing premium marijuana is an art and a science that takes much skill and dedication to succeed. That by

itself is plenty of work, but when one must contend with the vagaries of nature, many complications arise. Nature appears to be a hostile, malignant enemy actively seeking to destroy their plants--and subsequently their dreams--but in actuality it is indifferent and unpredictable. Trying to keep nature at bay is a constant battle. In such a relentlessly arid climate, with the exception of the rainy season, all of the vegetation is bone dry, and growing marijuana, which requires intensive watering, is antithetical to such an environment. As a result, it attracts the attention of animals that are looking to forage and subsist.

The best example of destructive foraging is when the bear begins its depredation of the farm. The bear is only acting out its natural inclinations by foraging for food, but its activities are very destructive to the farm. Felix has mixed feelings towards the bear as he recognizes its symbolic importance: "I was confronting nature at the root rather than lying back and reading about it. And at root, nature was dirty, anarchic, undisciplined, an enemy to progress and the American dream" (141). These words also ironically describe the function of Felix and his friends and how most of society, particularly authority, perceives their activities. Just like the bear, they have no need to follow society's rules to fulfill their needs and desires, so they act according to their will. The bear is interfering with their ability to earn a fortune and this realization forces them to perceive nature from a new perspective and act in ways they previously would have considered abhorrent. The marijuana plants are tasty, water-filled meal that offer the additional benefit of a pleasant buzz when eaten and the bear can not resist this good fortune. Besides destroying the plants, it becomes an additional menace by chewing through the irrigation pipes, crashing through protective fences and crushing healthy plants that are in its way.

As a top predator in the food chain, this bear is a powerful, dangerous, and unpredictable creature capable of killing a human if it is provoked or surprised. Its active presence forces the characters to carry guns at all times for protection in case of an emergency, as well as an effective means of dealing with humans seeking to poach the plants for their own gain. These points reinforce the idea of how no one is safe, even when they are confined to private property. Something must be done to stop this predation of their plants and the only feasible solution they can come up

with is to kill the bear to protect their crop. Felix's position is paradoxical because part of him reveres what the bear represents in the natural world but part of him despises how the bear affects his monetary aspirations, which reveals the inherent conflict between the progress of society and the preservation of nature.

Felix must sift through his own torn feelings when he happens upon the slumbering bear after it has consumed about forty succulent plants and is sleeping off an intense buzz. He describes his thoughts: "The bear was raiding our crops, destroying everything we'd worked and planned for, threatening the very success of the project itself. I raised the gun. *Kill!* a voice shrieked in my ear. *Kill!*" (143). By thinking only of himself and how his future will be affected, Felix shows how anything that interferes with the success of the project is expendable, including his own sense of right and wrong. He fired the gun repeatedly and missed his target each time. Felix fails to complete what he set out to do, but by killing the bear he would have destroyed a part of himself, as the bear and its behavior is not really all that different from him. As a former student of nineteenth-century British literature, it appears as if he has forgotten the admonition contained in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," concerning the killing of an albatross.

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
(Lines 610 - 613)

Besides the bear, other forces of nature slowly destroy their plants, gradually diminishing their total until they have only 840 left. It is at this time that Dowst informs them of an important fact of growing high quality marijuana that they somehow overlooked. Felix explains: "Any fool knew that in order to get sinsemilla pot you had to identify and eliminate the male plants so that the energy of the unfertilized females would go toward the production of the huge, resinous, THC-packed colas that made seedless pot the most potent, desirable and highly priced smoke on the market" (189). This oversight is one more example of how these characters do not know what they are doing. Of the healthy plants they have left, approximately half of them will have to be exterminated to prevent them from fertilizing the females. Because they are growing sinsemilla,

which yields seedless buds, male plants are of little use, except for reproductive purposes. Male marijuana plants do not produce as much THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the chemical compound that causes the high in the user. Consequently, male plants are worth much less than female plants when it comes time to sell the finished product. All of their projections were worthless and now they are going to have to struggle just to make any money at all. Any hopes they had of strolling away with a tax-free fortune are rapidly eliminated.

Even though Felix and his friends moved to the country from San Francisco, and return for occasional sojourns, traveling is not a primary emphasis in the novel as in many picaresque fictions, but there are a few incidents that occur which define their status as outsiders in conflict with society and authority. The trips that Felix, Phil, and Gesh take into Willits qualify as minor episodes of traveling. Their excursions into town bring them into contact with the local population that is understandably suspicious of outsiders. These incidents show how Felix and his friends do not fit in with this small community. Willits is located in what is known in northern California as the Emerald Triangle, a region found between the towns and national forests of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity. This area is notorious for growing premium outdoor marijuana that is unmatched anywhere else in the world for its potency and quality. When these straggly guys appear in Willits, the locals immediately know why they are there. Many of these locals are resentful because, if the guys are successful, they will have a considerable amount of tax-free money that surpasses what most locals legally earn in a year. Not all of the population is resentful though, because marijuana farming is also practiced by year-round residents, which helps to drive the local economy through jobs and the trickle down effect of money being spent. It is a curious relationship that often goes unacknowledged, as does the corruption of local politicians and policemen who benefit from bribes to stay away from certain farms.

Because Felix, Phil and Gesh are easily identified as outsiders, their travel into Willits is fraught with peril and danger. There is a dire need to keep a low profile and avoid the exposure of their project. The encounters Felix has with officer Jerpbak of the California Highway Patrol help to define this representative of authority as a villain who clearly abuses his power. In terms of the

picaresque novel, Jerpbak is an abusive character who torments Felix, the picaresque protagonist. The first episode with Jerpbak sets the tone for their antagonistic relationship and it makes Felix a target for Jerpbak's wrath. Felix first drew Jerpbak's attention by making an illegal U-turn and nearly hitting his CHP patrol car that was moving at high speed with its lights flashing and its siren blaring. Jerpbak was handling an emergency and continued on, but he later recognized Felix in the police station when Phil had to be bailed out for public intoxication.

Felix refuses to acknowledge his culpability for the near accident. His defiant attitude causes Jerpbak to overreact and abuse his authority by cuffing, frisking and throwing Felix against a wall, for no legally valid reason. Felix says: "I had managed to make an enemy of the most desperate and lawless sort--a cop--simply because I'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time" (19). This initial confrontation helps to establish Jerpbak as a power-hungry and remorseless predator in continual search of prey to harass, abuse and intimidate, even though he claims to be upholding the law. Even though Felix does not appear to be committing any crimes in Jerpbak's presence, as an outsider with a scruffy appearance, Felix is deemed to be an undesirable presence and automatically presumed to be guilty of something yet to be discovered, which is contrary to the principles of the American legal system.

Jerpbak continues to exhibit villainous traits when he has a confrontation with Petra, a woman from Willits who makes and sells her own pottery. When her car has a flat tire and is stuck alongside of the road, Felix stops to assist her, mostly because she is attractive and he would like a chance of having a date with her, not out of the generosity of his heart. Then Jerpbak arrives on the scene to give Petra a difficult time. She and Jerpbak have a history of conflicts and he has repeatedly pulled her over to search her vehicle and issue tickets for petty violations. Since she doesn't have her license with her this time, she gets arrested and when Felix tries to help her he gets arrested too. Again, Felix tries to spin his story by downplaying his role with his subjective recitation to make it look as if what he did was fully justified. Felix knew he was interfering with an arrest, even if it was an unjustified one, just as he knew the consequences of tangling with an officer like Jerpbak.

Since Felix's account of Jerpbak's actions is all the reader has to interpret, his interpretation of events must be examined to discern any exaggerations or distortions. In his encounters with Jerpbak, Felix's emotions betray any sense of objectivity and his insults reveal a particularly strong animus, which prohibits the reader from gaining a full understanding of what may have really happened. All of these factors work to conceal what may be the truth about these encounters, but this type of behavior is not unexpected from a picaresque protagonist who is trying to portray his life in a way that makes him look good, particularly when describing the encounters with a known enemy. Petra tells Felix the reason Jerpbak is bothering her so much. Felix offers this version of Jerpbak's behavior:

Jerpbak had sexually harassed her. I was outraged and disgusted. He was no ascetic, no true believer--he was venal, an extortionist, an amatorial strong-arm man. He was a sinner like the rest of us. It seemed that he'd been transferred to the eastern Mendocino region. He'd stopped Petra had first run afoul of him shortly after her for a routine check, stopped her because he was bored, because she was a pretty girl and he was a lean, tough, sinewy, head-cracking, dooper-busting, macho highway patrol man. (174)

Felix's narration here is highly subjective and part of his reason for getting so angry is self-interest. Much like Jerpbak, Felix would like to go out with Petra. If she had not been so attractive, it is unlikely he would have responded in this way or shown so much concern for her, a trait he rarely exhibits in this novel. Even though Felix's account is not the most reliable here, it still seems that Jerpbak is a hypocrite who hides behind his badge to break the law and take advantage of others. Every time Petra refuses to go out with Jerpbak, he uses it as a pretext to write more tickets and increase the pressure on her. Boyle uses these circumstances as a way to depict the corrupt nature of authority and the abuse of power that occurs on occasion.

These conflicts with Jerpbak represent Felix's larger picaresque struggles within society, as he believes both hinder him from finding success in life and achieving the American Dream by living his life on his own terms and nobody else's. During the 1995 symposium on Boyle's writing, Vince

Knapp mentioned in his lecture how Boyle's characters represent the dilemma of an individual confronting the pressures of society:

Boyle's evident belief that the individual must do for himself, or herself, is reflected in his repeated literary attacks on authority and his constant mockery of idealistic causes. Underlying his attitude here is his apparent conviction that established authority and thoughtless idealism can both stymie and blind the individual and thereby limit individual freedom of action. (6)

In Boyle's novels, he shows that even though authority may be in control, it does not have a monopoly on prescribing what is right for individuals and that its ideals often fall short of actualities. Boyle frequently turns to the picaresque as a means of exposing flaws within authority and society. Since a picaresque protagonist is not bound to uphold social ideals, he becomes a useful vehicle to criticize social practices and hypocrisies that hinder an individual's freedom. Felix has a healthy distrust of any system for ordering life but his own life is frequently in disarray. He doesn't have any answers or solutions, except relying on himself, but he knows that the acceptance of any ideal is bound to have shortcomings and contradictions that cannot be adequately accounted for, hence his devoted skepticism. Even though law enforcement is supposed to act in ideal ways by strictly upholding laws and the Constitution, the police are still human and imperfect. There are rogue police officers who do not follow the laws they have sworn to uphold, which seriously erodes public confidence in this profession.

As a renegade cop, Jerpak is dangerous because he regularly oversteps his authority to satisfy his own aggressive ends of making people conform to legal codes as well as unspoken social ones, such as dress and appearance, whether such enforcement serves the law or not. Jerpak's inappropriate behavior is indicative of the relentless social pressure imposed upon individuals to conform to rigid standards to form a homogenous society that does not tolerate anything outside of its norms. There are no easy resolutions for such cultural conflicts and those in positions of authority are content to accept these abuses until the violations become egregious enough that action must be taken. Such abuses of authority eventually yield a serious mistake.

When Jerpbak is suspended for putting two teenage hitchhikers in the hospital for refusing to freely surrender their civil rights and consent to a search, Felix's claims of abuse are verified. There is a sense of justice being served when Jerpbak is suspended from the force. It is Boyle's way of indicating how actions have repercussions that eventually penalize someone who behaves in an irresponsible manner.

In a picaresque novel, trouble is always arriving in unexpected ways to interfere with a protagonist's plans, which helps to make the episodes more colorful and true to life. If Felix, Gesh and Phil thought they had their hands full with the predatory tactics of Jerpbak, at least they could take solace in the fact that his actions were consistent and predictable, even if they were unnecessarily aggressive. With the police and Jerpbak, the characters know what they must face, but when Jones intrudes upon the farm they have no idea what to expect. Jones operates outside of the law and is concerned only with himself. He knows the characters on the farm are vulnerable and the only way they can protect themselves, short of murder, is to pay him off. They are helpless in this situation and he seeks to take advantage of it for his own financial benefit. As it turned out, Jones was part of the farm in the previous year, but he had been busted. To save the project and avoid unnecessary scrutiny by the authorities, Vogelsang kicked Jones out of it. Now he has returned to recover some of his losses by blackmailing everyone associated with the farm in order to get revenge with Vogelsang, which leaves the other characters as innocent pawns caught in a trap because they had nothing to do with the previous year's events except their association with Vogelsang. Jones threatened to turn them all in to the police if they refuse to comply. Either way he will get some money. His threat is all too real and the characters do not even know if he will be satisfied with his initial demands. His willingness to exploit the legal system for his own benefit makes him dangerous and unpredictable, which allows him to control the situation.

Jones uses this leverage to act as a parasite to siphon away their potential profits. It is difficult to fully condemn or despise Jones because he does have a legitimate gripe against Vogelsang, but threatening Felix, Phil and Gesh with a severe penalty for something they are not responsible for is rather unjust. It is Vogelsang's problem but he deflects his responsibility for it by declaring the cash

will be removed from the farm's final profits. Jones's actions, reprehensible as they are, expose Vogelsang as a liar who has frequently deceived these characters while seeming to act in their best interests. Boyle shows how the possibility of getting easy money almost always brings out the worst in humans and Jones does not seem to be the least bit troubled about putting Felix, Phil and Gesh in jail in order to satisfy his vendetta against Vogelsang. Given the complex nature of the circumstances, Jones's demand for \$10,000 is not unreasonable. His opportunistic and expedient behavior reflects one of the many difficulties in engaging in illegal enterprise, because there is no turning to the law for protection.

The other unpredictable threat that the farm must regularly confront is the neighbor Lloyd Sapers. He is very suspicious of the farm's activities but he does not have any concrete evidence to verify his hunches. Since he is so curious, he frequently devises reasons to venture onto Vogelsang's land, especially the emergency fire road that traverses the property, as Lloyd is allowed full legal access to it. Since Felix, Phil and Gesh know what he is after, they must be polite, yet evasive in their interactions with him. Because Lloyd is often frustrated by their obvious lack of candor and their lack of respect for him, he deftly hurls pointed and hilarious verbal barbs in their direction to provoke a desired response that is intended to blow their cover. His character serves as a comic foil for the farm's participants. When Lloyd first intruded onto the property to introduce himself in a neighborly fashion, he appeared to be a lonely but nosy, older man, yet the characters immediately realized that if he came around whenever he wished he would be a serious liability to the farm's much needed secrecy. They realize that their troubles with Lloyd are only beginning when he informs them that he knows the real reason they are on the farm. Felix explains:

It seemed that Vogelsang, thinking of everything, had told Sapers that he had some friends who were writers--really first-rate, mind you--but that they had a severe and debilitating problem with alcohol. He was going to let them live at the camp for six or nine months so they could dry out, get some writing done and batten on sunshine and good clean country living. It was about a lame a story as I'd ever heard. (54-5)

Since this excuse for being on the land seems so improbable, Gesh resorts to stronger action in an attempt to ensure that Lloyd never returns. For no clearly rational reason, at least to Lloyd, Gesh goes into his violent psychopath routine when he smashes Lloyd's coffee cup against the wall and then threatens to do the same to him. As Lloyd is not accustomed to such a lack of hospitality from neighbors, he flees the premises in a total panic. From that point on he becomes a nuisance to the their aspirations because he knows enough to be dangerous, despite the lack of proof. He knows the guys are up to something suspicious, as his backhanded compliments reveal, but he needs to confirm his suspicions. Lloyd serves as a comic foil to torment the guys. They regard him as an backward redneck and he uses this label to his advantage to needle and annoy them by pointing out the obvious in humorous ways to make them squirm uncomfortably in his presence. They might not like him, but they have to respect him or endure the consequences.

Lloyd might be a nuisance to the farm, but the guys can usually keep him at a distance. His mentally impaired son, named Marlon, is truly a menace who is curious, destructive, utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable. He represents the chaos that can destroy the farm and its participants at any moment. Every time he appears on the property, another picaresque episode in misadventure ensues. At nineteen years old, he is six-feet tall, weighs 320 pounds and has spent a large portion of his life committed to the violent ward at a state mental hospital. Since he does not recognize property boundaries, he freely roams Vogelsang's land, going wherever his whims take him. Ordinarily, this circumstance would not be a cause for problems, but the chance of him discovering the marijuana plants and saying something to his father is too great a risk to tolerate. At first Felix tried to be nice to Marlon and warn him to leave the premises, but when that proved ineffective the yelling commenced, which only increased his anger and resentment. Felix and his friends really have no solution for keeping Marlon away, until he provides one by going on a violent rampage and wrecking Vogelsang's storage shed after being caught eavesdropping on them.

Marlon turned his attention to the storage shed. Huge, savage, amok, Marlon reared back and hit the side of the building with the force of an artillery shell, and I heard

something give, the brittle snap of stud or beam. Then he began pounding the weathered panels with his fists and forearms until he managed to punch a hole in the wall. . . . He was awesome, brutal, mindless, King Kong hammering the dinosaurs into submission. (238)

Despite being present, Vogelsang and the rest are powerless to stop or subdue Marlon, who unexpectedly vents his fury at them through destruction. Marlon is just one of the unmanageable forces the guys must overcome to make their farm work. He can appear anywhere on Vogelsang's land without warning, which increases their chances of exposure. To Marlon, the characters on the farm are mean and spiteful, as he does not understand why they do not want him on the property. Even though they have no control over Marlon, his behavior seems to be one more malignant act of fate conspiring against the success of their project. He is a jarring reminder of what the authorities could do to their farm, as they are in such a vulnerable position. This episode with Marlon is a prime example of the chaos that engulfs their lives on the farm.

As *Budding Prospects* progresses, the ideal that Felix, Phil and Gesh devoutly believed in has been reduced to disappointment. Toward the end of their growing season, all they are working for is pride and a chance to get a little money out of their efforts, as there is no chance to earn a fortune anymore. It would have been much easier to abandon the project altogether but the characters feel it is in their best interest to salvage what they can. When the fire occurs in the shed it is a true test of their fortitude, as it defines who they are, even with their numerous flaws. The fire began when Phil and Felix went to the shed to refill their lantern. Because they were both drunk, they were careless in taking the necessary precautions of waiting for the lamp to cool before adding the highly flammable fuel to it. As there has been no rain for five months, the land is extremely dry and their reckless behavior sets the shed on fire and seriously threatens to set the surrounding area ablaze. This episode demonstrates how Felix, as a picaresque protagonist, is at fault for some of the problems that hinder his aspirations. He cannot blame everything on bad luck. Acting irresponsibly has its consequences, but Felix directly confronts this problem to avoid a more serious punishment, while learning about who he is.

Combating this fire is the biggest challenge Felix has ever faced and he emerges from his experience a better character who knows himself. He is forced into action to save Phil and the farm, as there is nowhere to escape or run away. His narration reflects his sense of desperation and urgency: "I felt nothing--neither the heat on my face nor the burns on my hands and arms--nothing but the imperative of the moment; we had to quench the fire, kill it before it killed us and took the house, the woods and the mountain with it" (243). Such diligence and selflessness is unlike Felix, but the fire brings out previously submerged aspects of his character. It is as if the exterior debris of his personality has been stripped away to expose his hidden core and leave him purified. For Felix to discover himself, he needed a moment of crisis. If the fire was allowed to burn out of control, the destruction would have been massive, yet Felix willingly risks his life in a valiant attempt to save everything. As carefree and reckless as these characters have been throughout the novel, they are responsible at a crucial juncture. It was not just their lives and dreams that would have been affected if the fire had burned out of control. Many innocent people would have paid the price for their negligence and their response to this crisis shows them accepting accountability for their actions. Stupidity got them into such a situation, but bravery and composure got them out of it.

Felix's battle with the fire also leads to a reconciliation with Petra. Traditionally, picaresque characters do not have successful relationships with women. The failure of these relationships stems from the fact that the protagonist is often living under chaotic circumstances and is frequently on the run. Felix manages to overcome these obstacles to form a romantic bond with Petra, in part because he is honest with her. He is a character who learns from his mistakes and Petra helps him to discover himself and what he wants out of life. This type of romantic success is not a typical feature in a Boyle novel. After Felix's initial meeting with Petra, he saw her a couple of times but his behavior made her understandably suspicious. Whenever she would ask him basic questions while trying to make conversation, Felix would respond with elusive or evasive answers to deflect attention away from what he was really doing in Willits. Even though Felix likes Petra, he can not compromise the security of the farm and risk the consequences of detection. After their disastrous first date, the barbecue at Shirelle's Bum Steer, Petra does not think too highly of Felix,

especially after he sent her some long, deranged letter professing his attraction to her. Still, she sees something in him that others do not. She grants him another chance when he unexpectedly appears at her doorstep at five in the morning, looking his worst after fighting the fire:

She was studying my sorry hair, soiled face, scorched clothes and mummy-wrapped hands, recalling no doubt that the last time she'd laid eyes on me my behavior had been eccentric to the point of offense, and that our only communication since had been my mad, interminable, demanding, love-struck letters, the tone of which made *Notes from the Underground* seem the tranquil recollections of a lucid mind. (262)

At this point, Felix feels he no longer has anything to hide and nothing to lose by revealing his secrets to Petra. He finds her to be sincere and interested in him as a person. When he confesses everything to Petra, he is cleansed of his impurities to emerge new, whole and at peace with himself. He can only recognize his errors in retrospect, which accounts for his subjective narration of events to show what he was thinking at the time they occurred.

Felix implicitly trusts Petra and he gains her trust with his admissions, which takes a lot of courage. By admitting to the farm he leaves himself in a vulnerable position. As far as he knows, he might be rejected or she might accidentally tell somebody and word could get to the authorities. It turned out that he was worrying too much because she was growing a few plants herself and her friends had their own large farms. All this time when Felix thought he was completely alienated from society, there were many others just like him pursuing the same dreams, but on a larger and more organized scale. Felix is completely smitten by Petra and it is no delusion or illusion on his behalf. Most picaresque characters experience love as a liability that offers nothing but trouble, yet Felix's romance with Petra is quite the opposite. She tells Felix her plans for her future and new possibilities in life begin to occur to him. Felix remembers Petra saying:

“It's just that when you look at it, no matter how much our generation has tried to postpone the issue of adulthood and all the responsibilities that go with it, you've got to grow up sometime and realize that having a family is just a part of life, maybe the biggest part.” She shoved her hair back, took a sip of wine and went on to talk

about the life force, mayflies, the great chain of being and the nesting habits of birds.

She was philosophical and she was nude. Somehow, everything she said made perfect sense. (290)

By listening to Petra, Felix is realizing that he has new options in his life, ones that are much different from the uncommitted and chaotic course he has followed. He seems to recognize that he cannot continue his present lifestyle forever and that some changes are positive. She gets Felix to believe in himself by accepting him for who he is. His hard work and dedication to the farm had its rewards, just not the ones he expected. Rather than cultivating a fortune, he has discovered love and suddenly all of his recent difficulties are irrelevant. It is also the first positive development that has happened in Felix's life for quite some time and being in Petra's presence is a relief from the drudgery of the farm.

Perhaps the most picaresque episode in *Budding Prospects* occurs when Felix is left on the farm alone for a long weekend. Rather than endure the solitary monotony, he decides to go on his first date with Petra. What should have been a stress-free time turned into a chaotic misadventure that was wrong from the start. To thank him for standing up to Jerpbak, Petra invited Felix to meet her and her friends at Shirelle's Bum Steer for a town barbecue celebrating National Heifer Week. Felix knew he was not supposed to leave the farm, but he succumbed to the temptations of town to alleviate his boredom. At this event, Felix is truly an outsider flirting with danger because many of the locals are suspicious of his presence. Despite his best efforts, his awkward, uncomfortable behavior does nothing but confirm their hunches. He is understandably nervous and self-conscious in this setting, as he is risking the farm and his freedom if he makes any mistakes. He wants to impress Petra but his mind is distracted by other, more pressing matters.

Felix's narration comically exaggerates the description to make it seem as if he has just entered hell: "I stood there a moment in the hellish sun, the smell of burning meat in my nostrils, and felt as naked and exposed as a sinner at the gates of Dis. Twice before I had trod this very ground, and twice before I'd found myself in deep trouble. The place was a sink of enmity, a nest of yahooism, as fraught with danger as the Willits police station" (201). Felix knows better than to go to Shirelle's

but his desire to impress Petra is stronger than his common sense. His search for some kind of relationship with Petra is more of a liability than an asset at this point. It becomes quite evident that Felix is out of place when he fumbles in his conversations with Petra's friends. He is hindered by his inability to give honest answers about what he is doing in Willits because he cannot afford to be exposed. Her friends seem to be people he would get along with, but not being able to find anything to talk about only increases his sense of alienation in this environment where he does not belong. Because we only see Felix from his own narrative perspective, he does not overtly implicate himself for the problems he is having at this juncture, as he tries to attribute his conversational ineptitude on the dullness of others.

When Felix is with Petra at Shirelle's everything is fine, but once she is away from Felix, he is on his own and a confrontation with the locals seems inevitable. He encounters Lloyd Sapers, his neighborly nemesis, who heightens Felix's sense of fear by asking how the gardening is going. Sapers' gardening question overtly suggests vegetables but it covertly implies marijuana, much to Felix's alarm and dismay. Finding an easy target in Felix, Sapers takes advantage of the setting to embarrass him by making jokes about the farm. Rather than retaliate, Felix must act amused since defending himself or firing insults back in return would only escalate matters in Sapers' favor. In true picaresque fashion, Felix negotiates his way around the party, unsuccessfully attempting to avoid many traps and pitfalls. Instead he finds that the danger is increasing, which only fuels his misgivings. He expected a relaxing date with Petra, not an inescapable nightmare where he is mercilessly tossed about by the malignant forces of fate. Every attempt to avoid trouble inevitably leads him further into it. When he is waylaid by Savoy, a precocious teenager whose mother owns the bar, and placed into the company of Mrs. Jerpbak and her daughter-in-law, his real trouble begins. Felix knows this situation may cause serious trouble but he cannot find an inconspicuous way to flee Jerpbak's mother and wife, who happen to be discussing the rewards for turning in marijuana farmers. It would be in Felix's best interests to maintain composure, but he is overwhelmed with guilt, fear, and self-consciousness. The possibility of immediate exposure by arousing suspicions is all too real. The combination of excessive drinking on an empty stomach

and pure paranoia conspire against Felix and he subsequently vomits on Mrs. Jerpbak. His only chance for survival is to escape the premises immediately and hope nobody follows him, which is why he rudely ditches Petra with a feeble explanation. Such rude, unexplained behavior greatly diminishes Felix's chances with Petra, which is indicative of the difficulties of a picaresque protagonist having a stable relationship with a woman, especially if he is forced to flee on a moment's notice.

Somehow, Felix is able to convince Petra that he is a decent guy after the fire. The problem he must face is one of exposure. Because he is frequently traveling into Willits to be with her, there is always a chance of attracting the unnecessary attention of the police who will question his activities, no matter how innocent they may be. If he has any more legal problems or encounters with Jerpbak, the entire farm is in jeopardy. It is already close to disintegrating with all of the problems and fighting, but their bond of friendship and opposition to Vogelsang keeps the characters together. When Vogelsang and Dowst confront Felix about his new romance, he does not try to evade his responsibility. He fully accepts it and offers to leave. Felix explains what it was like at the camp during one of its worst moments of internal conflict: "Accusations flew, tempers flared. We cursed one another, raged and receded, plotted wildly, imagined untold horrors and parceled out blame. The biggest parcel was mine. I was blameworthy in everyone's eyes, my own included. I was incontinent, unreliable, about as trustworthy as a shaggy-legged satyr at a Girl Scout jamboree" (225). This admission represents the beginning of a critical change in Felix. He is willing to walk away from the entire project and forfeit his share of it so he can be with Petra. He recognizes that his attraction to her is much stronger than his desire for money. The way he jokes about the matter shows how, to some degree, he is governed by lust, but his interest in Petra is more than simply sex. The fact that he is able to have a good relationship with her is an unusual, but not unheard of, feature in a picaresque novel.

Felix's improved outlook on life helps him to come to terms with the eroded promises of the farm and the deflation of his dream of wealth. Despite the characters' best efforts and newly found ideals of hard work and dedication through adversity, their dreams are inevitably crushed by forces of

reality far beyond their control. When it came time to harvest their plants, the dry weather suddenly gave way to an early rainy season and their already diminished crop was damaged even further. Somehow this turn of events does not dampen their enthusiasm when it is time to sample their harvest to determine its potency and market value. Felix describes the moment in religious terms in one of his few positive moments in this novel: “No one said a word, the moment as drenched in ritual as a high mass at the Vatican. We watched as he rolled the joint with sacerdotal solemnity, sealed it with a sidelong lick and held it up before our eyes as if he were blessing the host” (305). All of Felix’s efforts and the misadventures he has endured have led up to this moment. By refusing to quit when circumstances were at their worst, he can now bask in the thrill of his accomplishment and take pride in his work, because he will not see much of a financial reward for his efforts.

In the end, Felix does not get very much money, and what he does get is certainly not worth the sacrifices and work he put into the farm. He learns some valuable lessons though, ones that he can put to use for the rest of his days. When reviewing the novel, Michael Gorra stated: “The dope farm teaches him the merits of hard work as an end in itself--and it makes him realize that he wants something else from life than the money he craved at the start of the novel” (18). Through the experiences of the farm, Felix undergoes a considerable change in his perspective about life. Money cannot satisfy what he is looking for, but Petra can and money is not a priority in her life. Felix realizes that money is only transitory, yet the hope of genuine love is not. The future of Felix and Petra’s relationship is not stated at the novel’s end, but their interaction suggests they are on a positive course. Working on the farm taught Felix to confront his biggest fear, failure. He was always content to walk away from all of his previous endeavors whenever they became difficult. He was incapable of meeting a challenge if it was too difficult and he did not want to be held accountable for his lack of results. Hoffman wrote about the ending: “Paradoxically, the illegal scam in which they are engaged becomes a lesson in responsibility: it’s the one thing which they--even at the peril of their lives--will not run away from” (A10). The farm is the first time Felix has ever followed through on a commitment. He persists even when he knows it will be what he expected. In

doing so, he learns to accept failure and discovers that much can be gained from such losses, just not what one would expect.

Not all readers were convinced that Felix had learned or imparted significant lessons. The British reviewer John Clute, who did not like the novel, complained: “But if *Budding Prospects* is meant to represent a purgative experience for him [Felix], and if his telling the tale is meant to be read as an homage to and renunciation of his youth and America’s innocence, then something has gone sour”(1020). Clute seems to have missed the fact that Felix never renounced his participation on the farm, neither subtly nor overtly. His sole reason for telling his tale is to let people learn what they can from his experiences so they don’t repeat the same mistakes, particularly with illegal activities, because everybody cannot be trusted. Somebody else will always have the upper hand and use it when it is least expected.

Boyle uses the picaresque to demonstrate the significance of the American Dream and how it influences the characters in his novels. His novels imply that a few will achieve this dream in their lifetimes, while others will fruitlessly struggle and never obtain it. Even though these dreams may not be found, or are only partially realized, there are still beneficial lessons to be learned in the struggle, which may be of more value than the fulfillment of desires. The failure of the American Dream is far more common than its discovery, which is what Boyle writes about in *World’s End*, to show how successive generations try to find their American Dreams in a land filled with opportunity and possibility.

Chapter Four

Walter's Search For the Truth: *World's End* and the Picaresque

While Boyle wrote *Budding Prospects* to comically examine contemporary social issues through a picaresque framework, with *World's End*, he returns to merging a picaresque protagonist with history as a way to explore its complex meanings and continuing relevance in today's society. In *World's End*, Boyle raises pertinent social questions about the accuracy of our history as it has been documented and passed down through time, as well as raising awareness about the many possible interpretations an event or historical figure may have. His examination of history shows how it is subjective and inconclusive and not the purely objective and truthfully accurate documentation many people assume it to be. The perspective from which persons or events are represented is a key issue. This ambitious novel has a number of major, non-picaresque narratives fictively dealing with the Dutch colonial period and the Peekskill riots of the 1960s. These narratives directly or indirectly relate to the aimless picaresque protagonist Walter Van Brunt, as they trace his ancestral lineage to show how the events from the past continue to have contemporary relevance. These narratives also bring up the issues of biological and historical determinism to show how characters are tied to their fates, no matter how hard they try to escape them. Boyle depicts history as having many cyclical characteristics that affect the events of the present in tangible and unpredictable ways.

The narratives of *World's End* span three time periods: the early Dutch colonial period of the seventeenth century, the late 1940s, and the late 1960s. This wide range of coverage gives the novel multiple dimensions that continually reflect the past returning to influence the present. In this novel, the past and all of its turmoil are very much alive, as it reappears in cyclical patterns, memories, ghosts, historical markers, intensive research and repeated behaviors. Boyle carefully demonstrates how the chaos of the present is connected to events from the past, even if we, or the characters in his novel, are not aware of these origins. In many respects, each of the novel's narratives reflects different aspects of the American Dream to show the various obstacles that

hinder its realization as well as the breakdown of ideals, which are readily and expediently compromised.

Walter's quest, which is the novel's main narrative, is a picaresque journey to discover himself by learning the complicated truth about his heritage, despite the injuries and the self-destructive tendencies that hinder him. The role of history, its fragmented nature and who interprets it are significant factors in *World's End*, as Walter must uncover the concealed truth about his ancestral past and his missing father to find how they are all irrevocably intertwined in comprehending the present. In *World's End* the truth is slippery and elusive, as appearances are deceiving and ideals are exposed as corrupt and fraudulent. Even the most well intentioned of people are not what they seem to be.

Boyle uses *World's End* to fictively trace the roots of the problems in Peterskill back to their Dutch colonial beginnings to demonstrate how they have slowly developed through the passage of time. Regarding the appropriation of history in historical fiction, David Cowart observes:

A sense of urgency--sometimes even an air of desperation--pervades the historical novel since mid-century, for its author probes the past to account for a present that grows increasingly chaotic. To gauge the significance of this development, one must consider the claims of both art and history to insight into the past. In doing so, one finds the past often less accessible to history than to historical fiction. (10)

In order to adequately represent the intricate complications of past events, it may be easier to do so through the form of the novel rather than a strict historical account. In a novel, a writer can accentuate and heighten critical episodes, while downplaying or even omitting lesser occurrences that interfere with the telling of a story and the presentation of the hidden truth of an event. A historian, on the other hand, is obligated to cover all of the major and minor facts or face charges of negligent scholarship. Unlike novelists, historians are not free to deviate from the established facts to offer alternative versions of the truth that may reside beyond the facts. Boyle clearly shows how the perception of facts can interfere with a person's understanding of the truth of an occurrence.

In his interview in *Rolling Stone*, Boyle stated one of his purposes for writing this novel, while referring to Washington Irving as a significant influence: "He wrote stories that are part of our mythos and our consciousness. I wanted to be a purveyor of myths about the area myself. I wanted to invent myths and use his myths and play off them. And talk about history as myth too, and weave it all together" (qtd. in DeCurtis 55). Boyle's aim is to show how the past and present are interconnected to demonstrate why people should be aware of their history as well as how it was written. At the same time, he was also looking to capture a reader's interest in another way. He said: "I consider *World's End* a comic book. You might say that's by definition and tone, because it's not joyful" (qtd. in E. Adams 54). These points are important to remember because many of the episodes in the novel are not intended to be pleasant, yet they still have entertaining and informative qualities, even if they are not fully comic.

When observed as a whole, *World's End* is not a fully picaresque novel, but the main narrative concerning Walter has enough picaresque elements to warrant an examination from a picaresque perspective. Boyle uses the picaresque in shaping Walter's character to effectively explore the difficulties of historical documentation and representation, the troubling questions these subjects raise and what all of these topics imply about American society. By using the picaresque, Boyle is able to balance the troubling issues he unearths with humor to prevent his writing from becoming overtly didactic and ponderous, because he is clearly trying to instill an important message in his readers. I will include discussions of relevant aspects from the other narratives as they pertain to Walter and his dilemmas, but the other narratives will not be the main focus in my analysis of *World's End*. Due to the sheer mass of pertinent details in this long novel, it is essential to confine my discussion of it to specific ideas or characters as they relate to Walter and define him as a character. I will begin by discussing Walter as a picaresque protagonist to indicate what his basic features are before examining his personality traits and the instability that governs his life. Part of the confusion in his life stems from his accidents, which alter his thinking to make it more cynical and pessimistic. I will take a close look at the meaning behind these accidents and how they affect

Walter's personality and interactions with others before discussing the deterministic aspects of *World's End*.

From there, I shall analyze specific episodes in the novel which feature Walter, particularly his fractured relationship with Truman, which mostly consists of Walter's memories and the recollections of other characters. One episode that warrants careful attention is the 1949 Peterskill riot because it is a defining moment in the lives of many of the novel's characters. It is essential to give some relevant context about this event to be able to explore its meanings thoroughly. The search for the truth about this occurrence is what leads Walter to go to Barrow, Alaska, to find his long lost father, which is also one of the pivotal episodes in the novel. Truman offers his account of the 1949 riot by tracing its roots back to the 1693 uprising in Van Wartville, while showing Walter how he is affected by this past history. This discussion will lead into a brief examination of the different versions of the American Dream that are shown in the novel to shed insight into the book that Truman wrote. All of this discussion will set the foundation for an examination of Walter's behavior at the novel's end. Walter has a number of simmering conflicts with his close friends, their ideals and their participation on the ship the *Arcadia*. Through Depeyster Van Wart's negative influence and the disconcerting knowledge imparted by Truman, Walter acts to betray his friends, much like his ancestors have done for generations. He is unable or unwilling to break the patterns of history and he succumbs to his fate, which ultimately leads to his death.

As a picaresque protagonist, Walter is Boyle's most confused and alienated major character. Walter does not narrate his own tale, yet how he is defined (and in many ways remains troubled and indeterminate) is one of the main focuses of *World's End*. If Boyle had chosen to use first-person narration, he would not have been able to incorporate so many ancillary characters and historical details that make significant contributions to this novel and allow for a better understanding of Walter's plight as a character. Boyle does not hold back in his representation of Walter as a reprobate, particularly when it comes to reflecting his subjective view of life and his character flaws. Many of his personality traits are inherited and beyond his control. He is not meant to be either an admirable character or a villain. In an interview, Boyle said of Walter:

“Walter is not always a likable character--he's got some elements of the antihero--but I think the reader sympathizes with him, wants him to straighten out his life, find his way“ (qtd. in Brisick 71-72). Walter's most noticeable virtue is his interrogating temperament. He is always questioning the world around him so that he can perceive the difficult and complex truths that lay buried beneath the surface of existence. He is not content to accept the received facts and other information he learns or hears at face value. His discontentment has its roots in his tumultuous upbringing.

Like many picaresque protagonists before him, Walter is the product of a family history he is wholly unaware of, which contributes to his lack of direction and social dislocation. Although his parentage is quite certain, he was adopted and raised by Lola and Hesh Solovay, who took Walter in when his mother died after being abandoned by his father. This situation is only the beginning of a life that lacks stability and direction. With his father absent and his mother deceased, Walter is completely disconnected from his family's lengthy past. He has an incomplete understanding of who he really is and no idea about the direction he wants to take in his life, but he does desire to know himself, despite his listlessness and depression. He just doesn't know where to look for answers. He has a few close friends who accept him for who he is, but his discontentment, unpredictable moodiness, and frequent brooding tends to keep most people at a distance. He is adept at seeing through the facades of other characters, yet he cannot apply this insight to himself. Mostly, he is an outsider who is not especially concerned with social acceptance, in part because he is always associated with his father, even though he barely knew him. For a short while Walter even has a wife, named Jessica, but he is unable to maintain a marital relationship due to his irresponsibility, selfishness, and utter lack of commitment. The novel does not feature too much travel in the strict sense usually associated with picaresque novels, because much of *World's End* is set in the region surrounding Peterskill, but Walter does have to figuratively travel into the past to learn the complicated truths about his recent family history as well as his ancestral family history. He also takes a journey to Barrow, Alaska, to search for his lost father, who played a pivotal role in the Peterskill riots. Walter must discover what actually happened in his family's past if he is to learn who he really is, rather than accepting the

biased and incomplete stories he has repeatedly heard all of his life. Boyle is convincing when portraying Walter's dejected and alienated viewpoint because he really does not care about anything, including himself, which leads him into all sorts of reckless behavior. He does not have any ambition to do something with his life. He is content to hang around all day drinking rather than doing anything more stimulating or productive. These negative qualities lead Walter into all sorts of episodic misadventures that are both comic and serious.

Much of the traveling done by Walter is figurative, since he is searching for a sense of direction and purpose in his life. This notion of exploring his inner-self is demonstrated early in the novel when he goes skinny-dipping with Mardi Van Wart in the Hudson River near some old, wrecked ships. Walter's mind is still quite fuzzy from all of the substances he consumed at the bar, but Mardi easily persuades him to plunge into the cold water when she sheds her skimpy clothes and jumps in. She leads him out to one of the ships and seductively entices him to climb up the rusted chain and board it: "Listen, birthday boy,' she whispered. . . 'I could be real nice to you if you'd do something for me'" (12-13). Walter needs Mardi's encouragement to overcome his fear and reluctance. Though the meaning of the ship's title, the *U.S.S. Anima*, is a bit obvious, the ship itself is a metaphorical object that has a number of allusions to Walter. This defunct ship can be seen to represent the interior personality and history that Walter must explore to find out who he really is, as his true self has been obscured through years of confusion and misdirection.

Intending to impress Mardi with his bravado he starts climbing up the slippery chain. His awkward, unbalanced venture up the chain reflects the risks and dangers that are involved with such an intense, exploration of his self. The chain is rather difficult to access in the dark, he is unsure of what he will discover on the ship, and the revelations he may find can be destructive. The description of the ship's interior is a vivid assessment of Walter's soul as cold, dark, and decaying:

He was inside now, in an undefined space of utter, impossible, unalloyed darkness. Bare feet gripped bare steel, his fingers played along the walls. There was the smell of metal in decay, of oil sludge and dead paint. He worked his way forward, inch by inch, until shadows began to emerge from the obscurity and he found himself on the

main deck. . . There was nothing here but shadows. And the thousand creaks and groans of the inanimate in faint, rhythmic motion. (14)

Walter must proceed slowly through this morass or risk injury. Once Walter is onboard the ship he is besieged by the ghosts of his paternal grandmother and his father, followed by some other unknown figures. To Walter they appear to be quite real, as they communicate cryptic messages to him about the direction he should take in life. Because there is a large void in Walter's knowledge about his family's past, he cannot comprehend what it means when he is warned to not be like his father. Walter has many questions to ask, but before he can, the ghosts disappear as quickly as they came, leaving him alone once again. Just after this incident, Walter has his first accident. Because he could not make sense of the ghost's warnings, he could not heed them or protect himself from his inevitable bad fate. This episode serves as an example of how Walter is trapped in a deterministic universe from which he cannot escape.

In each instance when Walter loses one of his feet, his attention is suddenly distracted while riding his motorcycle. These accidents are a combination of his drunkenness and the momentary attacks of history where ghost-like figures from the past realistically appear to divert his attention. There is another link in common as well. Before each accident, he had been with Mardi Van Wart. They have a casual interest in each other, yet neither is aware of their mutually tangled family histories. Walter's loss of his feet is the most grotesque occurrence in his narrative, though there are a number of amusing and unsettling grotesque features in the rest of the novel. In Bernard McElroy's *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, he makes an interesting point that is directly related to Walter's injuries: "At its most effective. . . the modern grotesque serves not only to satirize and to heighten, but to expose. The rationalizations and compensations of everyday life are stripped away to bare the substratum of terror which underlies the seemingly mundane" (20).

For Walter, the small historical marker is seemingly benign and meaningless because he cannot identify his connection to it: "Fact is, he'd never read the inscription on the thing. . . For all he knew, it could have commemorated one of Lafayette's bowel movements or the discovery of the onion; it was nothing to him" (17). In this instance, Boyle uses a tone that is deliberately blasé and ironic to

depict Walter's lack of recognition while underscoring the sign's significance. This sign marks the 1693 uprising at Van Wart manor and the subsequent hanging of Cadwallader Crane and Jeremy Mohonk. What the sign does not state is that Wouter Van Brunt was directly responsible for all of those events. This sign, that appears meaningless to Walter, can provide many of the answers he has been searching for in his life, as it represents the darkest episode in his ancestral history, which unknowingly affects almost every aspect of his life. The most obvious meaning of Walter's accidents, as Boyle has stated repeatedly, is: "If you don't know your history, you don't have your feet on the ground. You're not connected" (qtd. in DeCurtis 55). The fact that Walter loses both of his feet as an inadvertent result, serves to reinforce the notion of Walter's disconnectedness, an affliction that is becoming more prevalent in contemporary American culture. *World's End* is a warning about the consequences that can ensue if an individual or a culture blithely ignores the events of the past.

The severity of Walter's injuries shows the physical manifestations of this neglect of history, but there is a psychological correlation as well, which is trickier to define and possibly more damaging than the physical injuries. Walter expresses his lack of understanding through brooding and dejection:

He was staring at the foot in Huysterkark's lap. . . a sense of hopelessness and irremediable doom working its way through his veins like some sort of infection, feeling judged and condemned and at the same time revolting against the unfairness of it all. Old Joe had the Huns to excoriate, Ahab the whale. Walter had a shadow, and the image of his father (43-44).

This quote aptly sums up Walter's current feelings. He cannot make sense of his bad fate, which has left him severely scarred, mentally and physically. He can not discover any answers or reasons as to why he was afflicted in such a brutal manner. He did not ask for this struggle or actively seek it out, but he must deal with it nonetheless until he discovers the truth that can unlock the mysterious secrets of the past and the ghosts that haunt his existence.

In many respects, Walter has much in common with outcast characters who live their lives on the road, even though most of his movement takes place around his native region. In his book *The Literary Rebel*, Kingsley Widmer explained the value of listening to the perspectives of characters who live their lives on the road and on the fringes of society. The following quote offers some insight into Walter's character and why he is out of place with most of society:

This does not just derive from the aesthetic aptness of the outsider to mirror life on the highways and low-ways of society, but comes also from the glorification of the outcast as hero, the kaleidoscopic picaresque moods, the rich amorality of pariahdom, the radical perspective on the established order, the almost mystic negative freedom and terror of the wanderer--indeed, a whole complex of related ways of showing man not at home in the universe. (Widmer 77)

Walter appears to revel in his status as a disaffected outsider, but in many instances this is simply a mask to conceal his inner feelings, which sometimes suggest a contrary stance. Since Walter is beholden to nobody and has no real responsibility, he is free to think and do whatever he chooses, especially if it runs counter to what society perceives to be its norm. The collective weight of the negative experiences in his life has led him to believe he is a nihilistic hero of sorts, which only increases his distance from others, particularly those who care about him. These circumstances give Walter the opportunity to form a different view of society and its inhabitants. Using his perspective as an outsider, Walter can freely question his world and what is wrong with it to point out hypocrisies, incongruities, and other failings that others often cannot perceive because they are so close to them.

This ability of Walter's does not qualify him as admirable or even heroic, but it does show that he has a cynically accurate insight into how the world functions, which is a trait evident in many picaresque protagonists. He still has many flaws as a character. Through Walter, Boyle is able to depict how disaffection and nihilism are inadequate responses or solutions for a lack of faith in the various American social ideals. These ideals, such as capitalism, communism, living like a hippie, and being patriotic to one's country, are often in direct conflict, as each one represents a different

interpretation of what this country's direction should be, how individuals should strive to fulfill the American Dream, and the limitations of individual freedom. The struggle between these ideals are an inherent part of living in a democracy that allows for unlimited free expression. Boyle does not offer any answers to these often irreconcilable dilemmas, except to imply through Walter deterministic flaws, that people need to be aware of their history and the many possible interpretations of it to know how it affects their lives on a regular basis. One of the reasons Walter is an outsider throughout the novel is because he cannot completely identify with any of the ideologies he comes in contact with, and as a result, he criticizes them rather than espousing them.

As a picaresque character, Walter is best defined by his alienation from himself, his family, his wife and friends, and most of society, as well as his devotion to being viewed as a nihilist. He has little hope or ambition and he lets his life be governed by his sense of dejection and disappointment. Whenever something goes wrong in his life, and he is usually the root of his many problems, he shrugs off his responsibility by thinking to himself (through the narrator): "Nothing mattered. He was Walter Truman Van Brunt, nihilist hero. . . hard as stone" (251). Walter also likes to consider himself as a "creature of his own destiny, soulless, hard, free from convention and the twin burdens of love and duty" (8). These poses are a convenient way for him to avoid confronting his true feelings and his responsibilities to his wife and adoptive parents. In spurning them for no reason in particular, he is hurting himself more than he hurts them. Though he may consider himself to be too tough to be affected mentally, which is a truly self-deceptive trait, he is frequently betrayed by the frailty of his body and its inability to withstand the abuses and traumas he inflicts upon it.

Boyle is able to include existential themes in the novel through Walter and these ideas are closely related to the picaresque tradition. At the 1995 SUNY Potsdam Symposium, Vincent Knapp's presentation, "T. Coraghessan Boyle and Modern Existentialism," discussed how Boyle included existential ideas in his writing:

He is an author who evidently subscribes to the basic existential belief that the individual has to do battle with and make sense out of an increasingly absurd world.

In that struggle, institutions must back off and strike an [sic] progressively laissez-faire position and idealistic causes must stop claiming acolytes, because the individual must have the freest possible reign to make his or her own hard-fought decisions. And the overall scene is getting worse because there are no more heroes for the individual to use as models. (10-11)

Walter is in a difficult position in the novel, his life is utterly chaotic and it makes no sense to him. Though he claims otherwise, he appears to be searching for some type of meaning for his existence, and he is unable to find any answers. He is surrounded by people who stake their claims in life to a variety of inflexible ideological positions, yet none of these positions have any appeal to Walter. He sees through ideologies as flawed, empty and devoid of substance, in part because they manipulate people to only consider advancing the cause, no matter what, above all other considerations. Because institutions and ideals are unable to assist Walter, he must search within himself and his family history for some sort of solution or insight into the dilemma of his alienation from the world.

In David Galloway's *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, he makes an observation that offers some insight into Walter's status as an outsider in his society:

With increasing frequency and persistence many contemporary writers would seem to suggest that alienation is not the result of the confrontation of a unique human spirit with a particular set of essentially external conditions, but that it is the fate of any and all men who think and feel with any intensity about their relationship to the world which surrounds them. Therefore man does not *become* alienated (the word itself ceases to have any connotations of process): alienation is his birthright, the modern, psychologically colored equivalent of original sin. (18)

As a result of his alienation, Walter is inadvertently wrestling with forces of history he does not comprehend. If his biological parents were still around, they may have been able to offer him some explanation. As *World's End* clearly shows, Walter's ancestors have always existed on the fringes of their society and they have always had conflicts with those in power, only to later succumb in

humiliating fashion. Even when he does learn about his family's past and the patterns of behavior it will impose upon him, he is still unable to change his inevitable fate and so he continues on his path of alienation. He cannot escape his family's traits and this is where Boyle's examination of determinism comes into the novel.

Picaresque characters and novels are traditionally presented from a deterministic perspective. Doing so represents how little control picaresque protagonists have over their lives. In many ways, Walter is a character whose life is guided by forces beyond his control, as he is unable to steer his destiny to any significant degree, especially since accidents and other misfortunes play such a large role in influencing the direction of his life. I asked Boyle a question about determinism and freewill in his first two novels and in response he suggested: "You should include *World's End* as well, because this is a book about determinism, fate in the genes, as the scientists mapping the human genome are discovering" ("Searching for Illumination"). In *World's End*, Boyle shows how genetics and the cyclical patterns of history exert an inescapable influence upon our lives, often in ways we do not comprehend. Walter must contend with these deterministic patterns throughout the entire novel. The novel suggests that even if we are able to recognize, and possibly understand, these patterns we still are unable to break completely free from them or ignore them, as they will eventually affect us in some way.

In his review of *World's End*, John Clute found Boyle's mixture of determinism and history to be a refreshing addition to his fictional repertoire: "By tying the fate of his hippie-like protagonist to a dark reading of the real shape of American history, Boyle has freed himself from the chill spite of his earlier work, the sense that he tended to create characters on whom he could wreak revenge for behaving in ways he could not explain" (927). Through Walter's questioning of history and his search for the truth, Boyle convincingly punctures the illusions and myths that are passed down as factual to show how history and fate are often subject to forces beyond our control. As much as Americans like to believe in freewill and the ability of an individual to control his or her own destiny, Boyle indicates that accidents and fortune, both good and bad, play as much of a role in the unfolding of historical events as does an individual's will.

One of the important features of *World's End* that reinforces Boyle's deterministic themes is the novel's structure. During the 1995 Symposium on Boyle's fiction at SUNY Potsdam, James Lang made this point in his presentation "The Construction of History in T. C. Boyle's *World's End*":

Boyle uses three distinct narrative techniques to impress this sense of determinism upon his characters--and the reader--in *World's End*: the first technique involves the cyclical and parallel patterns in the fortunes of the seventeenth and twentieth century characters; the second is the standard literary device of foreshadowing; the third is the manner in which he alters the chapter sequences. (3)

The chapters continuously shift between the past and present to compare and contrast the events of both time periods, which strongly denotes the parallels between them to reflect the continuing influence of history, particularly its repetitions. Each narrative in the novel directly or indirectly relates to Walter, as each one traces his ancestral lineage to show the relevance of the past's events to the present. One example is how, during the seventeenth century, Jeremias Van Brunt loses his lower leg and foot after being bitten by a large snapping turtle. It is evidence of the repeated bad fortune that periodically haunts the Van Brunt family.

By zigzagging back and forth from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century, Boyle is able to effectively make significant connections in the narrative between the past and present while offering the reader helpful background information that explains the actions of the Van Brunt family through time. In using these techniques, Boyle is able to align his novel with the larger patterns of the picaresque novel as well. Claudio Guillén states how: "The use of recurrent motifs, circular patterns and incremental processes is particularly frequent in the picaresque" (84-85). The devices mentioned by Guillén are most evident in *World's End* where Boyle employs them as a way of showing how his characters' lives are controlled by the forces of fate. This circumstance leaves precious little room for freewill in their lives, a fact which is supported by the larger patterns of history that Boyle gradually depicts as the novel unfolds. Boyle's careful attention to structure allows him to reveal important information to the reader at the same time Walter learns about it,

which multiplies the ramifications as new information or perspectives are discovered, while elusively or teasingly suggesting what may happen next.

In his symposium presentation, James Lang pointed out how Boyle intentionally used foreshadowing to show how his characters in *World's End* led deterministic lives: "The excitement of pursuing the narrative shifts from an interest in learning the outcome of events to learning precisely how that outcome came about. Boyle's afterthoughts, the seemingly casual nature of his foreshadowings, are in fact reminders that we are proceeding into a future whose outcome has long since been determined" (5-6). Boyle's use of foreshadowing creates interest, not just in the event itself, but the context of the event, as its many possible meanings and interpretations echo throughout the novel and in the lives of his characters. In an interview, when Boyle was asked about the difficulties of the structure in *World's End*, he responded: "My first two novels came from fixed stories. In *World's End* I wanted to immerse myself in the subject and have a story work organically out of my reading of the history of the valley" (qtd. in Brisick 72). In order to do that and be effective, he had to weave in a lot of material to show how events from three centuries ago still have significance in contemporary times and how individuals are affected.

In his review of *World's End*, Benjamin DeMott found Boyle's technique of portraying the effects of history to be one of the most engaging aspects of the novel:

It's not primarily the sense of character though, that lies at the root of this book's distinction; it's the ceaseless reaching for broader contexts, more comprehensive views--the push for a vision of interrelationships. As *World's End* interweaves, fugally, the lives of long-gone peasants, slaves, landholders and displaced Indians with those of last season's activists, wantons, *rentiers* and factory hands, we're conscious of recurrences and echoes. Past and present, sharply separated by chapter structure, are fused in motifs and unstressed parallels. (53)

By using a picaresque narrative as one of the means to show the hidden patterns and forces of history across a large span of time, Boyle effectively demonstrates a strong current of modern

existence that few people are aware of, even though it is quite relevant to how they live their lives. This notion is especially poignant with Walter, who is unable to escape or break the patterns of history that were set down long before he was born. Since he is unaware of his family's lengthy past, he cannot know or understand the meaning of his ancestry and how it consciously or unconsciously influences his behavior; thus he must deal with the consequences of his ignorance until he can become enlightened. Even enlightenment is tough to come by though, and it is no guarantee of change. The truth, much like history in this novel, is complicated, slippery, and elusive. What characters believe to be true and factual is dependent upon their perspective, and Boyle readily shows how political beliefs color and distort what his characters perceive. Appearances are deceiving and frequently conceal ulterior motives, while the ideals held by various characters are exposed as corrupt, fraudulent and manipulative. In *World's End*, Boyle strongly asserts the need for individuals to view people and events from multiple viewpoints to avoid falling into traps set by the surface appearance of facts that may hinder a fuller understanding of the truth, which often contains many layers of meaning that are not readily apparent.

As a character, Walter exists in the present, yet he is continually being drawn back into the past, particularly his own past, through jarring memories and the frequent appearance of ghosts from previous eras. When the novel begins it is Walter's birthday, but it is not a joyous occasion. He is quite depressed and filled with a good deal of self-pity. In many ways, he needs to escape from himself so that he can forget the continual pressure of the past that always imposes itself upon him. That would be the main reason why he is celebrating so excessively. He wants to numb his mind by consuming copious quantities of alcohol, marijuana, pills, and a few lines of cocaine to forget that another year of his life has passed. Rather than shut Walter's mind down, the effects of these substances trigger memories of his eleventh birthday and the last time he saw his father. Much to the dismay of Lola and Hesh, Truman Van Brunt appeared unannounced at their house to see Walter. The narrator describes Truman's arrival:

Out of nowhere. Like an apparition. Huge, his head cropped to a reddish stubble,

pants torn and greasy, jacket too small, he'd looked like a cross between the Wandering Jew and the Ghost of Christmas past, he'd looked like an ecstatic who's lost the ecstasy, a man with no future, a bum. So insubstantial Walter would have missed him if it weren't for the shouting. (9)

Truman's arrival has a disruptive effect. He is Walter's biological father, yet he is a withered shadow of his former self. It is as if his experiences during and after the riots have drained him of all of his hope and energy, leaving him with nothing but disillusionment. His appearance can be seen as the consequences of his selfishness and his neglect of his wife and son. As much as Hesh despises Truman for his betrayal during the riots, there is no interference with this unexpected visit, for Walter's sake alone. Between the day when Truman abandoned Walter and his wife, and Walter's trip to Barrow, Alaska, this is all he knows firsthand about his father. The rest of Walter's knowledge of Truman comes from the recollections of others, and none of it is positive.

Walter's lack of a relationship with his biological father points back to the earliest picaresque novels. Truman could be present if he chose to do so, but his absence has contributed to Walter's aimlessness in life. At an early age he lost many close relatives, including his grandfather, whom he witnessed having a stroke and falling into a bait pen. These circumstances account for the instability in Walter's life as well as the callousness of his reactions toward others, which serve as a means of self-protection from the painful events of life. He has experienced more of these unfortunate occurrences than most do at his age. Walter's alienation from others is, to some degree, self-imposed but it also stems from his tumultuous upbringing. Keeping his distance from other characters, even ones who are friendly to him, seems to be his way of avoiding being overwhelmed by the tragedies of human existence. Walter's sense of alienation also appears to be an effective justification for his nihilistic beliefs, because anybody or anything he has believed in throughout his life has been a letdown and a disappointment, including himself. It is much easier to dismiss everything and everybody as meaningless and keep them at a safe distance rather than risk the sting of inevitable disappointment. These unconventional character traits of Walter's become more understandable as the novel progresses, even though they are not admirable, because they allow

him to have a much different perspective about life and history. This perspective allows him to closely observe circumstances to search for inconsistencies, larger patterns, and hidden meanings rather than accepting facts and stories at face value, particularly where his father is concerned.

The absence of a father and an unstable childhood are recurring themes in picaresque novels that recall situations from the earliest Spanish picaresque novels, which continued the archetype of missing or unknown fathers by putting their own signature upon this theme. Picaresque protagonists often do not have responsible parental guidance during their formative years. There is an early American contribution to this element of the picaresque tradition with Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, whose protagonist seeks to find a new life away from his abusive, alcoholic father. Huck discovers a surrogate father in Jim, who teaches him about survival in life while traveling down the Mississippi River. *World's End* is a continuation of this prevalent theme of absent fathers and surrogate parents. What gives this development more resonance is how Boyle connects Walter's search for his father with one of the significant themes of *World's End*, which is the cultural search to learn the origins of the United States and how the nation was developed.

Truman is the biggest source of confusion and instability in Walter's life. All the firsthand information Walter knows about his father comes from fleeting childhood memories. These memories recall situations that were far from perfect, yet Walter, in his loneliness and desire for true parental affection, almost comes close to idealizing these past events concerning his father by believing them to be something more than they actually were, simply because they are all he has. He wants to look past the tarnished reputation to see if there is anything else worth knowing. Walter never resorts to sentiment though, as he realizes his father is a difficult and troubled person, much like himself. Walter has heard so many conflicting accounts about his father, that he is never really sure what to believe about him. Each story presents a vastly different view of Truman, depending on the perspective and biases of the teller. Even though each account is subjective and flawed, they still contain aspects of the truth about the events of the Peterskill riots and Truman's actions, but not the full and ugly truth in all of its frustrating complexity. Only Truman can provide that answer, and he has been running from it all of his life.

One of the most interesting facets of *World's End*, and Boyle's fiction in general, is his fictionalization of historical events to suit his artistic purposes. When any event occurs, there are always multiple interpretations that will vary, depending on the experiences and ideologies of the participants, as well as their proximity to the action. In this novel, one of the pivotal events that inspired Boyle was the 1949 Peekskill riot. This riot was supposed to be a peaceful concert with the noted singer and activist Paul Robeson as the featured performer. The more conservative community members were adamantly opposed to such a flagrant display of left wing, Communist politics in their midst. Unable to stop the concert through legal means, the right wing proponents stirred up animosity and helped to provoke the riot, which gained national attention and resulted in the infamous bumpersticker that declared "Wake Up America, Peekskill Did!" to encourage more violent protest against Communist ideals.

In the late 1940s, the conflict over the direction of the United States and the American Dream is dramatized in the Peterskill riot, which is loosely based on the actual Peekskill riot. This riot reflects the polar opposite of governing ideals and individual freedom within the United States. It is the Communists, with their vision of socialist utopia, versus the extremist right wing patriots, who want to vigorously defend their version of American ideals by hypocritically defying the ideal principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution by not allowing free speech and peaceable demonstration on private property. Because each narrative is set in a different historical time period, Boyle is able to portray the various interpretations of the American Dream through assorted characters. He also shows the many obstacles that hinder the realization of this dream, as well as the breakdown of ideals, which are readily and expediently compromised. Boyle's fictive treatment of this ugly incident does not take sides so that he can portray it as fairly and fully as possible to recognize its complexity and reveal why people acted as they did on both sides of the struggle. Boyle explained his purpose as follows:

"The 1949 riot has always fascinated me. . . It's been a blot on the morality of the valley, yet as I portray it in the book, the politics are somewhat ambiguous, just as they are in real life. When I started to write the book I was gung ho to expose the

redneck point of view, but when I talked to people in the area, I realized that it wasn't as simple as that. There was a provocation: it served the Communist cause better to have blacks and women beaten and bloodied than it did to have a peaceful concert.

On the other hand, the local people were blindly intolerant." (qtd. in Brisick 72)

By aiming for a balanced portrayal instead of a slanted one, Boyle is seeking to demonstrate how events can easily be misinterpreted and misunderstood if all one relies upon is the surface facts and appearances. These superficial views often overlook the underlying or concealed motives that are tangled and thorny in their unflattering implications. These views fail to account for duplicitous and expedient behavior that can be readily disguised as being virtuous, while castigating an opponent as villainous, which is why, according to Boyle, the actual Peekskill riots were instigated. Through his treatment of the Peterskill riot in *World's End*, Boyle demonstrates what happens when people cannot look beyond the fervency of their convictions. By handling these circumstances fictively and exploring them through Walter's questioning as a picaresque protagonist, Boyle is showing the inherent dangers of espousing idealistic ideologies, or any set of beliefs, particularly when members are more concerned with militantly advancing their cause at all costs, no matter what the human or social price may be.

David Cowart makes an interesting observation about Barth's treatment of history in *The Sot-Weed Factor*; the same ideas apply to Boyle's treatment of history in *World's End* as well:

Barth reimagines the American political myth in the interests of truth (a thing not necessarily congruent with "fact") and national self-knowledge. Treating certain episodes of American history ironically, he converts them into a revisionist fable.

But Barth's revisionism goes beyond the mere debunking of jingoist pieties.

Thematically and generically, his novel constitutes a mediation on a number of historical questions, along with their philosophical, anthropological, and literary corollaries. (55-56)

In *World's End*, Boyle chooses to examine the political myths derived from turbulent moments

of New York's history that mirror national dilemmas. These incidents reflect formative moments in the ongoing debate over the political direction of the United States as well as recalling how the country was settled. By choosing the Peekskill riot of 1949, Boyle depicts the intense rivalries that developed by opposing political philosophies. By exposing the flaws and hypocrisies of each movement, he shows how political causes can often become vehicles to serve the self-interests of its leaders, rather than the constituencies they pretend to represent.

The role of history and who interprets it is a significant factor in the novel and this idea is best shown through Truman's role in the Peterskill riots, as there many contradictory views about his behavior and no easy resolutions to these highly polarized perspectives. With so many divergent viewpoints, Walter has no clear grasp of the truth, which contributes to his disordered personality as a picaresque character. It is essential for Walter to get a clear understanding of the facts about the riot if he is to have any hope of putting his life back together. By using a picaresque protagonist to obtain all of this varied and confusing information, Boyle shows the chaotic and unpredictable nature of sifting through history in search of facts and answers. For the most part, each account of Truman is an ideologically biased perspective that fails to show the true complexity of what really happened on the day of the riot. Though these firsthand accounts are incomplete and have their biases, it is difficult to fault the tellers of these tales because each person only knew about a limited aspect of that day's events. It is not as if critical information is being deliberately omitted, but the ideological prejudices, from both the left and the right, overlook and oversimplify crucial details that might offer a more complete understanding of an inherently complicated situation.

Unlike the picaresque protagonists from other novels, who go out into the world in search of adventure and new experiences through their travels, Walter undertakes a different type of journey. He goes through imaginative adventures of personal history as the characters of *World's End* recount various events from different perspectives. The chaos he experiences is more internal as a result of trying to discern the truth about the riot, but as the loss of his feet indicates, there are external consequences as well. The Peterskill riot was the single most formative event in Walter's life, even though he was not a participant in it, because it permanently destroyed his family. With

Truman unavailable to tell his version of the event, an essential perspective on the riots is missing and Walter has a hard time piecing together and interpreting the various stories he has heard about his father. Who wouldn't be confused and aimless in such a predicament? The various points of view about Truman are essential in understanding him and his actions. There is nobody in Walter's family to give him an objective, or even partly subjective viewpoint. The closest he gets to a family viewpoint comes from the ghost of his grandmother, who advises Walter not to blame Truman for loving his country more than his wife. This sympathetic advice implicitly recognizes the complexity of the circumstances without condemning Truman, yet it does not do much to acknowledge his culpability for his role in the riot and abandoning his wife and child.

The story Walter knows best comes from his adoptive parents Lola and Hesh, who think of Truman as a despicable traitor, both to them personally and their mutual commitment to the Communist cause. Feeling nothing but betrayal, Hesh will not see beyond his ideological perspectives. Lola is at least sympathetic toward the Truman she once knew, but she is at a loss to explain the drastic, unexpected change in his character. She recalls the events of the riot in a manner of quiet disbelief, which shows she is still searching for answers and meaning in a situation that clearly puzzles her. She recognizes that there are parts to this story that are still unknown, but the facts she does know clearly point toward Truman in a negative light. As much as Walter wants to believe otherwise, he cannot help finding Lola's story persuasive and this reaction only increases his confusion, as the following quote demonstrates.

His father was scum. A man who'd sold out his friends and deserted his wife and son. Why fight it. That's what Walter was thinking when he looked up from the table and saw his father standing there by the stove, framed between Lola's head and the rigid declamatory index finger of her right hand. . . *Don't you believe it,* Truman growled.

Lola didn't see him, didn't hear him. "Animals, Walter. They were animals. Filth. Nazis."

Two sides, Walter, his father said. *Two sides to every story.* (97)

Despite Lola's incomplete perspective of Truman's behavior during the riot, she makes a convincing case to support the validity of her views. She is also helped by the fact that, even though she is a Communist, she is not an ideologue. It would be much easier for Walter to accept Lola's story at face value and not think about it any further, but Truman's ghost-like appearance intervenes. Truman's timely reminder helps Walter to overcome his reluctance in discerning the murky complexity of the riot. It spurs Walter's need to know what really happened instead of simply accepting reasonable accounts at face value.

Depeyster Van Wart's perspective of the riot gives a polar opposite view of Truman, as represented by the Solovays. Depeyster was the man in charge of organizing the patriots, a group of right-wing zealots from Peterskill that only believe in their restrictive definition of freedom. His only objective is to discredit and disparage the Communists and anyone sympathetic to their cause. He believes it is his duty to set Walter straight with the correct account of the riot to counter his brainwashed upbringing by the Solovays. Depeyster thinks to himself: "The kid had heard one side of the story all his life--the wrong side, the twisted, lying and perverted side. . . . His parents--foster parents: Jews, Communists, the worst--had fed him hate and lies and their vicious propaganda all his life till he was ready to choke on it. He was clay. Clay to be molded" (157). Part of the grim irony in this quote is how Depeyster is unable to see through his own distorted views and propaganda about what it means to be loyal to one's country. He arrogantly and devoutly believes that his restrictive notions of patriotism are beyond questioning and that they take precedence over all other perspectives.

Through Depeyster's prodding, Walter realizes how Hesh and Lola have their own ideological agendas and an unqualified belief in them. Walter begins to see the flaws in these ideals and how they create false illusions with utopian dreams of perfecting society. In picaresque novels, the protagonist typically discovers the flaws of society by undergoing many misadventures. Walter begins to discover social flaws through a series of episodes that reveal to him the indeterminacy of historical facts and how characters will manipulate these facts to fit their own agendas. Since there is a strong resemblance to Truman in Walter, Depeyster spots a predatory opportunity for

exploiting him for devious ends, and thus is charming and careful with his responses. He uses his charisma in an attempt to win Walter over to his way of thinking. The information Depeyster provides only muddies the water instead of clarifying it: "I admit your father was wrong to go off and desert his family like that--and I admit he had his crazy streak too--but what he did was in the name of freedom and justice. He sacrificed himself, Walter--he was a martyr. Be proud" (158). Walter is really unsure of how to interpret this contrary view and its teller because they are not what he had expected. All of his life, he had been conditioned to think of Depeyster as a vile demon, but in person he does not seem to be reprehensible. Walter finds this discrepancy troubling and it sets him to questioning the appearances of everything around him in the hope of discovering any sort of truth about Truman.

Two minor characters in *World's End* also provide insightful views about what Truman was really like. The first one comes from Piet, the dwarf who accompanied Truman as he slipped away from the riot. After losing his second foot, Walter encountered Piet at the hospital. Piet says of Truman: "He was a real card, your old man," before running through a series of amusing stories Walter had never heard before (269). Piet's recollections show the playful side of Truman's personality before he became consumed with history and the effects it had upon himself and his ancestors. Perhaps the most poignant assessment of Truman comes when Jeremy Mohonk says to Walter, "Yeah, I knew him. He was a real piece of shit" (177). Jeremy is sympathetic toward the Communist's objectives but he is no brainwashed ideologue, which makes him a credible witness to Truman's behavior. With all of these conflicting accounts about Truman swirling about, Walter needs to find out for himself who his father really is and the truth about his role in the riot. It is Truman's perspective that can clear up the confusion to make sense of why these varied characters have so many differing opinions about him. Truman's view of the truth is complex and disturbing, as it raises more questions than it answers.

Once the riot was over, Truman could not stay in Peterskill. There were simply too many bad memories and hard feelings combined with a strong sense of guilt and regret. Truman needed to escape the area and himself in order to put his life into some sort of perspective without having to

worry about others knowing his past. He literally runs away to the end of the earth, to Barrow, Alaska to place himself in permanent exile and do penance for his actions. At 330 miles above the Arctic Circle, Barrow is the northernmost city in the United States and it is almost as far away from civilization as one can get, as there are no roads. The only access from the outside world is by small airplanes. In this remote part of the earth, half of the year is spent in bitterly freezing cold and complete darkness, while the other half is spent in coolness and complete light. It is as if Truman needs these vast seasonal extremes to make sense of his own fragmented personality. The stark barrenness of the snow covered, deeply frozen tundra and the sharp, jagged ice that surrounds Barrow also accord with Truman's current personality, which has been eroded through the steady consumption of gin. Even though he is physically alive, he is mostly just passing his days in isolation until he dies. All that remains of Truman's personality is dark, bitterly cold, and unresponsive to human emotions, including Walter's.

Walter's trip to Barrow is an extension of his picaresque journey through history in his narrative. Once he is in Barrow, he immediately recognizes how alienated and out of place he is in this remote culture comprised almost exclusively of Inuits. Even though the town is still in the United States, it seems to be another country altogether and Walter's minor misadventures there reflect his discomfort with this setting. Walter does not have any optimistic expectations about meeting his father, but he desires some sort of reconciliation and understanding. His hopes are quickly dashed when a waitress in a bar informs Walter what she "knows" about Truman. The narrator describes Walter's thoughts:

He never had a son. Four thousand miles to hear that little bulletin from the lips of a stranger, a hag in a baggy sweater and two tons of makeup. God, that hurt. Even if he was hard, soulless and free. . . . He felt like some poor abused orphan out of a Dickens story--what was he going to say? What was he going to call him, even--Dad? Father? Pater? He was weary, dejected, chilled to the marrow. (391- 92)

Walter might like to think of himself as a nihilistic antihero, yet he is bothered by the fact that his father regards him as meaningless and nonexistent. Once again, Walter is experiencing the

disappointment and sting of rejection he has felt all of his life from his father. It is as if Walter is being abandoned yet again, even though he has found his father. Walter's sense of alienation increases as these circumstances leave him exposed, vulnerable and unprepared to encounter his father. Any illusions Walter had of affection, hospitality, or even kinship are quickly expelled by Truman's gruff demeanor. Truman's behavior indicates that he has truly forgotten about his son and that he really does not care about his existence. It is a pointed indication of how distant Truman is from the rest of humanity.

Instead of finding fatherly companionship, Walter's alienation from the world only increases as Truman tells the lengthy tale about the Van Brunt family history and his part in the 1949 riot. At this point in the novel, Walter's narrative becomes more tragic than picaresque, as the knowledge he gains increases his rejection of the world. What is interesting about Truman's account of the riot is that he does not appear to be putting any favorable gloss on his side of the story. He knows that the truth about his behavior is ugly and traitorous, yet he does not seem to want to hide anything or distort facts to make himself look better. It is the harsh, unsparing manner in which Truman recites his tale, without trying to exculpate himself, that makes his account seem reliable. His side of the story does not differ from the particulars of the other accounts, which gives him added credibility. His point of view and the revelation of his motives are what fills in the missing pieces that the other characters in the novel cannot know or understand.

By initially admitting his wrongdoing, Truman is able to plunge beneath the surface facts of the riot to get at the rotten core of concealed truths. The first element of truth that Truman exposes is how he grew disillusioned with the Communist party and its naive, single-minded idealism. Truman joined the Communists through the influence of his wife, and for a while he went along with the party's idealism. He says:

"I wanted to believe that happy horseshit about the oppressed worker and the greed of the capitalists and all the rest of it--hey, my father was a fisherman, you know. But who was right, huh? Khrushchev comes along and denounces Stalin and everybody in the Colony shits blood. You got to put things into perspective, Walter

... There's a lot of factors here, things you know nothing about. Don't be so quick to judge." (399)

What turned Truman against the Communists and their ideals was their inability to answer for their obvious ideological failures. For years the American Communists revered Stalin as if he were a saint, but when Khrushchev came to power and overwhelming evidence exposed Stalin as a manipulative and power-hungry dictator, the American Communists were at a loss to explain the emptiness of their previous devotion to this treacherous, murdering leader. All they could offer were hollow, intellectually inadequate responses to this most unexpected turn of historical events. The American Communists were worshipping a false ideal that unknowingly concealed the heinous behavior of Stalin's government. The true believers in the party tried to put a positive interpretation on these revelations to try to keep the faith, while Truman reacted with disgust and saw through the facade. For Truman, his beliefs are all or nothing and he thoroughly distrusts the Communist party. After his complete disillusionment, he does not wish to have a deeper understanding of Communist ideology, including the faction that disagrees with Stalinism. Truman wants Walter to grasp the full picture, with all of its complications, before coming to any sort of condemnatory judgment.

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, discusses incorporating postmodern views of history into literature and the various effects derived from this combination, which has a direct connection to Truman's recitation of his role in the 1949 riot and the events that led up to it. Hutcheon writes:

In the postmodern writing of history--and fiction (*Midnight's Children*, *The White Hotel*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*)--there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with the didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation. What fades away with this kind of contesting is any sure ground upon which to base representation and narration, in either historiography or fiction. In most postmodern work, however, that ground is

first inscribed and subsequently subverted. (92)

Walter's picaresque adventures are an attempt to put this "ground" together--an admirable but impossible task. Truman's account of the riot clearly delineates incontrovertible facets of the truth, yet with all of his thoroughness in attention to details and accuracy, it is not a complete account of what happened. He never makes any attempt to hide his point of view. The multiplicity of views represented in *World's End* lets Boyle display the many angles from which an event may be perceived without having to settle on a definitive version as the only possible representation of it. This understanding is part of the complexity of understanding history and its subjectivity in the postmodern era. Part of Truman's penance is to never forget his guilt for what he did, which helps to explain his twenty-year obsession with writing about this episode. He is unable to make peace with himself to forget what happened. He wants the hard-earned lessons he has learned to be available for future generations so that they may benefit and not make the same errors, if that is indeed possible. The novel suggests the grimly cynical opposite effect. With Truman living in exile and isolation, combined with Walter's death, it seems that there will be no future family members to realize this possible redemption. This painful knowledge will not be passed on so that others may learn from it.

The next element of truth Truman offers to Walter is how the leaders of the American Communists were not acting in the best interests of their devoted followers, but only in the best interests of the party and themselves. These leaders were after power and control in an organization that was supposedly about promoting true equality and comradeship, yet few people inside the group questioned this discrepancy between professed ideals and actual practices. Truman did question what he saw and his disillusionment grew as he renewed his acquaintance with Depeyster, a militant anti-Communist and Republican devoted toward maintaining the old political order. This relationship with Depeyster is the beginning of Truman's 180 degree change of political thinking. Rather than sever his ties with the Communists, he decides to undermine them

by resuming his former military role as a spy by providing Depeyster and his cronies secret information.

Truman claims he acted as a spy out of loyalty to the United States, because he believed the Communists were out to undermine the democratic principles this country was founded upon. Once Truman realized he was being used by Depeyster, it was too late to undo anything. Truman acted out of principle to serve his country, while Depeyster acted out of expediency to serve his own interests. In *World's End*, Boyle shows how unmitigated belief in any ideology, combined with the desire to implement it upon an entire population, is a guaranteed recipe for trouble. The novel reflects Boyle's wariness of any absolutist principle. He portrays through Truman the dilemmas faced by an individual caught in the middle of such fanatical and inflexible beliefs. Truman was exploited by the Communists and the patriots. Even though he thought he had been diligently serving their respective causes, he was nothing more than an expendable pawn, to be disposed of whenever it suited their purposes. That is why Truman is so frustrated and disillusioned. By believing his actions were right, he sacrificed everything, only to receive no respect or recognition in return. Still, he claims he would do it all over in the same manner. He wants to protect his country above all other considerations, including personal obligations. Apparently the lessons he learned from his betrayal mean more to him than those he betrayed, including his wife and son. He certainly had the chance to reconcile his relationship with them if he were really interested in doing so, but he is not capable of considering how his actions have affected others.

The Communist leaders, Sasha Freeman and Morton Blum, had inadvertently used both Truman and Depeyster in a way neither suspected possible. In the interest of promoting the virtues of the Communist party and eliciting public sympathy for this cause, these two leaders deliberately put innocent party members into an indefensible position to face an angry mob of patriots for the purpose of publicity. Much like Stalin, Blum and Freeman believe that their desired ends justify their deceitful practices. Truman thought his role was to instigate a minor brawl to teach the Communists a lesson. He never dreamed of a full blown riot:

But it all backfired, of course. If Sasha Freeman had been there he would have let

the animals in himself. Gladly. It was his idea all along to stir thing [sic] up till they were good and hot, work in a little slaughter of the innocents with some broken bones and bloody noses thrown in for good measure and get a bunch of pictures of women in blood-stained skirts into the newspapers. And if some poor coon got lynched, so much the better. A peaceful sing-along? What the hell good was that?

(406)

These are the ulterior motives of the Communist leadership that have been concealed for so long. Freeman and Blum felt it was in their best interests to sacrifice some party members as martyrs, by letting them take a beating, all in order to gain public sympathy to strengthen the party. By deliberately working up the animosity of their right wing ideological opponents, who are equally fervent zealots in their own right, the Communists felt they could turn the publicity in their favor by portraying themselves as innocent bystanders holding a peaceable demonstration on private property. It is a prime example of ideological expediency and the implementation of Machiavellian principles in a most nefarious fashion. The right wing patriots have their fair share of guilt in this matter as well because their actions and interpretation of the American Dream is antithetical to the ideals the United States was founded upon, despite their claims of defending these principles.

One of the major themes of *World's End* is the condition of the contemporary American Dream as it is contrasted with the colonial American Dream. Boyle is able to show the many positive and negative facets of this dream through Walter's picaresque perspective as he learns about his family history. Walter's picaresque misadventures and other experiences have taught him not to accept anything based on its surface appearance, which leads him to intensively question whatever he learns. Through his questioning he learns of the dashed dreams of his ancestors. The struggle over the best way to achieve this dream as well as how to govern a democratic society reaches its culmination in the riot, but it has its genesis in the narrative dealing with the Dutch colonial period. In a review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani observed: "He attempts not only to examine the American Dream, as he's done in earlier works, but also the complicated issues of freedom, class

and race involved in the founding of our nation” (C27). The fact that there are no easy resolutions to these critical issues, which are related to the past, present and future direction of this country, is reflected by the violence of the riot.

Different interpretations of what this country's ideals are and how they should be fulfilled will always exist. In the early colonial period of the novel, the Dutch patroons are living their American Dream, as they firmly control the land and its people. These ruling colonists are represented by the Van Warts. Life could not get any better for them. In their European homeland such an opportunity to rule over such a vast amount of land was unavailable to them. Their only concern is to increase their wealth, land and power, even if it is at the expense of their indentured servants, who are considered expendable. The indentured servants, as represented by the Van Brunts and the various Native Americans in the novel are in similar circumstances with their versions of the American Dream. They would like to modestly prosper, but for them, reality is much tougher. Both are looking to subsist and survive in a rough environment. They face similar problems of food shortages, harsh winters, illness and constant death. Simply staying alive is considered a blessing (or a curse, depending on how one looks at the circumstances Boyle depicts). In the time of Walter's narrative, the nature of the American Dream has changed.

In the present time of the novel, the late 1960s, Walter is in search of some answers for the confusion and rejection in his life, but he is not sure where to look. In response, he believes himself to be a nihilist, or at least takes to acting like one, rather than being an idealist. He knows the world is a chaotic mess but he is not interested in solutions or even responsible actions. This stance runs counter to the ideals of his closest friends who happen to be hippies. To Walter, their ideals are empty and naive at the core. Depeyster Van Wart feels the same way about hippies, except he regards them more as subversive to his American values, in part because he deeply resents the fact that his daughter Mardi hangs around with them. Depeyster is an extrapolation of the Van Wart desire for control, power, and wealth, all of which leave him fairly isolated in the world. Though his situation is prosperous by most standards, it is nowhere near what his ancestors once had, which can be seen as a gradual decay of an older version of the American Dream to indicate how it

is out of place in today's society. The fact that he has no male heir to inherit his name, in part because his wife finds him sexually undesirable, shows the sterility of his vision by strictly adhering to exclusionary and outdated principles. When his wife does have a child, the biological father is Jeremy Mohonk, which indicates an interesting merger and renewed possibilities for finding the American Dream.

By representing so many variations of the American Dream, Boyle vividly depicts the importance of knowing one's history and all of the intricacy behind it. In an interview, Boyle stated why he believed knowing history was so important: "Well obviously it's cyclic, and you have to be aware of that so you can see your place in history. I guess I'm interested in it just because it relates me to the rest of the human race. It makes you less isolated if you're aware of history" (qtd. in E. Adams 57). If there is any redeeming lesson Walter receives from Truman, it is this: know your history. Truman instructs Walter to thoroughly question history, its sources, and its many interpretations to examine events from many perspectives, even if the end result is an indeterminate conclusion about what really happened. Indeterminacy is certainly preferable to believing a lie or distortion to be an irrefutable fact.

Walter is unable to understand the source of his many problems until he learns from Truman about their ancestors' tangled past, which represents a grave, tragic failure of the American Dream through misfortune and betrayal. The answers reside in Truman's book, "*Colonial Shame: Betrayal and Death in Van Wartville, the First Revolt*" (409). He has spent the last twenty years rewriting and expanding his senior history thesis. This book explains the role Wouter Van Brunt had in selling out his friend Cadwallader Crane and his half-cousin Jeremy Mohonk to send them to their deaths for the uprising at Stephanous Rombout Van Wart's Manor. Wouter instigated the incident by setting Van Wart's barn on fire. Wouter was acting out of many years of humiliation, revenge, drunkenness, mixed together with the painful memories of his own father who had been a traitor to his family. Van Wart had been abusive and unfair with his indentured servants, but Wouter clearly overstepped a justified response with his vengeful actions. Truman's tome explains the inherent connection between the Van Wartville uprising of 1693 and the Peterskill riot of 1949, both of which

occurred on nearly the same ground and have many similarities. It is no coincidence that he completed his senior thesis a few weeks before the riot.

By extensively probing through the detailed particulars of each incident, Truman is able to show how deeper secrets and unexpected complications lay concealed beneath the surface facts. The discovery of these dark truths lurking in Truman's ancestry transformed him. These revelations caused him to extensively question his perceptions of life and history, which in turn changed him so much that his wife Christina no longer recognized him. He completely alienated himself from his wife and child before his final rejection of them with his betrayal at the riot. It is only through Truman's lengthy, detailed explanation that Walter can realize how it is all connected to himself. Once Truman concludes reciting this history lesson, he throws its meaning and importance at Walter with a pointed question.

“You know what ‘Wouter’ translates to in English?” Truman asked with a leer. . . .

“Walter, that's what,” the old man snarled as if it were a curse. “I named my son after one of the biggest scumbags that ever lived--my ancestor Walter, your ancestor--and I didn't even know it till I was a grown man in college”. . . . He was on his feet now. “

Pacing. Fate!” he shouted suddenly. “Doom! History! Don't you see?” (423)

All of this new information comes crashing down upon Walter and he does not know how to make sense of it. Nothing in his life has prepared him for it. With Truman able to tell everything about his family's past, he shows the far reach of history and its unintentional, subconscious consequences. After walking out on his father, Walter is ashamed and disgusted, conflicted and confused, mostly because he knows that Truman, crazy as he may be, is right. Walter is now aware of how he has the curse of his family upon him. Walter has a choice about what he can do with this knowledge. He can either succumb to it in his own way, as his ancestors before him did, or he can use this information in an attempt to break the pattern of history.

After his return from Barrow, Walter is more depressed and disillusioned than ever. He received some pretty troubling answers from Truman that only created deeper questions that festered in an unresolved fashion. Walter's disillusionment with all ideals begins to affect his relationships with

his close friends. After Walter and Jessica were married, she left him due to his lack of attention and caring. She ends up with Tom Crane, an environmental idealist and devout hippie who happens to be Walter's best friend. Both Jessica and Tom have begun working on a small ship called the *Arcadia*, with the intention to spread environmental awareness about the extensive, illegal polluting of the Hudson River, as well as having a good time. The novel states Tom's thoughts about the *Arcadia*: "A floating shack christened in and dedicated to all the great hippie ideals--to long hair and vegetarianism, astrology, the snail darter, Peace Now, satori, folk music and goat turd mulching. And, surreptitiously, to pot, hash and acid too" (426). Based on Pete Seeger and *The Clearwater*, the *Arcadia* represents a new awareness of the world and its environment, and as such, also embodies a new version of the possibilities of the American Dream. Walter grows resentful of the *Arcadia's* mission, in part because he is jealous that Jessica has found a contentment and happiness he could never provide for her, despite their still being married. Even though he is still friends with Tom, Walter misinterprets his friend's activism and idealism as naive and misguided. He cannot conceive of any value in their actions to increase awareness of environmental problems. Tom is not out to create a utopia, he just wants to raise awareness and restore a once vibrant but now exploited ecosystem into a viable habitat again.

The novel explains Walter's thoughts on this relationship and *Arcadia's* mission: "Tom Crane and Jessica. The two of them, out on the river, clasped together in their sanctimonious bunk, waving their I'm-Cleaner-Than-You banners on the deck and chanting for peace and love and hope, crowing for the spider monkeys and the harp seals, for Angel Falls and the ozone layer and all the rest of the soft-brained shit of the world" (348-49). These thoughts occur to Walter before meeting his father, which indicates how this disgust with environmental idealism has been simmering for some time. Once Walter returns home his thoughts become grimmer. He resumes his curious friendship with Depeyster, which only fuels Walter's distrust of the *Arcadia* and his friends. During a meeting with Depeyster and his cronies, Walter is unable or unwilling to recognize the immediate parallels between his current situation and his father's back

in 1949. Depeyster views the activities of the *Arcadia* as an affront to his values and insists action must be taken to stop this menace before it gets out of hand.

Even though Walter has the necessary information to break the ancestral pattern of behavior, it seems that he is under the spell of forces beyond his control. When reviewing the novel, John Clute observed the pattern of behavior by the Van Brunts throughout their history: "This indenture of the Van Brunts becomes a servitude so deeply ingrained as to seem almost genetic. One Van Brunt after another comes grotesquely to grief against the cold realities of a world based on ownership" (927). Walter's thoughts and actions are no longer his, as he cannot escape his inclinations. Ancestral afflictions begin to affect his behavior. Walter's sudden unquenchable hunger after dining at Depeyster's house recalls the plight of Harmanus Van Brunt in the seventeenth century, which destroyed his family and set in motion the events that led up to the 1693 revolt. Walter follows his sudden impulse to go to the *Acadia's* party, but he is unsure why. His conflict with the *Arcadia* reflects his disillusionment with any form of idealism, yet these conflicts, whether they are real or imagined, seem to be aimed more at seeking revenge on Tom and Jessica. Because Walter cannot or will not confront them individually, the most obvious target for striking back at them is the ship, because he really has no legitimate complaint with them. In his confusion and muddled thinking, he directs his anger at the *Arcadia* and its ideals, rather than the individuals he has the problem with. This betrayal is closely tied to his family's pattern of behavior when confronted by circumstances that place personal loyalty and friendship against ideological principles.

When he is there he feels alienated and distant from all of the people who are thoroughly enjoying themselves. Apparently, the influence of the Van Warts is taking a subconscious hold upon another Van Brunt. Only a little while earlier Walter thought to himself about the role Depeyster plays in his life: "Dipe Van Wart, his employer, his mentor, his best and only friend" (440). Walter is unable to see through Depeyster's ulterior motives, vindictive personality or even remember how he set Truman up. Walter is strangely unable to see through the flaws of Depeyster's misplaced idealism and the harsh totalitarianism it represents. Though Depeyster never asks

Walter to do anything to the ship, he takes it upon himself to act destructively and betray his friends by undoing the mooring lines to let the *Arcadia* drift down the Hudson. It is as if Walter is subconsciously doing Depeyster's bidding. Walter appears to be desperate for some form of approval and recognition, and possibly even a father figure. He believes that if he can do something to undermine the purpose of the *Arcadia*, he can prove his worth to Depeyster.

Walter's action of setting the *Arcadia* adrift during a heavy snowstorm acts as a catalyst that sets in motion a number of critical events that reinforce the notion that he is inescapably tied to his fate, as are the other characters in the novel. The most significant event is Walter's death. After loosening the mooring ropes, he cannot get sufficient traction while running on the slippery snow with his artificial feet. The awkwardness of his gait and the exertion exhaust him until he finally collapses into the snow, unable to get up. In the blinding intensity of the snowstorm, he has literally and figuratively lost his way, as he cannot get back to the safety of his car. It appears as if nature is reaping its own form of revenge for Walter's attempted destruction of the *Arcadia*. After his experience in Alaska, he foolishly underestimates the power of nature's fury in his own region. He kept naively thinking that he knew he could handle the power of the snowstorm because he had read a lot of Jack London, yet Walter's death from freezing is nothing like the calm acceptance and tranquillity represented in London's overtly deterministic story "To Build a Fire."

Just before Walter's life expires, he comes to a realization. He understands the helplessness of his position in the snow and that he is about to die, but he also knows that he is also the pawn of fate. His life and death have been cruelly governed by forces beyond his control or comprehension. It is only just before his death that he gains a clear understanding of what his life has meant, particularly the last few hours.

It was while he was crawling, his hands and knees gone dead as his feet, that he first heard the first tentative whimper. He paused. His mind was fuzzy and he was tired. He'd forgotten where he was, what he'd done, where he was going, why he'd come. And there it was again. The whimper rose to a sob, a cry, a plaint

of protest and lament. And finally, shattering and disconsolate, beyond hope or redemption, it rose to a wail. (447)

This recognition and response by Walter indicates that he has claimed his ancestral inheritance and understands the consequences of doing so. Since there are no other male Van Brunts who descended from Harmanus Van Brunt, it appears that the family curse has finally been lifted. Truman is still living, but with his extreme isolation it is unlikely he will have another heir to inherit the family name and the curse that goes with it.

By sabotaging the *Arcadia*, Walter does make an impression upon Depeyster, but only a fleeting one and not the lasting one that was intended. Depeyster has other objectives in mind, which indicates how expendable Walter really was. Depeyster demonstrates the expediency of his principles when he is offered a deal he cannot refuse. With the *Arcadia* badly damaged and in need of expensive repairs, Tom Crane offers to sell, at an incredibly low price, the fifty acres of land Depeyster so desperately covets. He is aware that his money will fund a cause he utterly despises, but it will allow him to regain a parcel of land once held by his ancestors, which is his greater priority. It is a compromise he is more than willing to make. The novel explains Depeyster's thoughts: "The Crane property. Desecrated by Communists and fellow travelers, lost to the Van Warts nearly his whole life--the fifty wild undeveloped and untrammelled wooded acres that were his link to the glorious past and the very cornerstone and foundation to the triumphant future" (450). Of course, Depeyster's notion of a glorious future is ironically undercut by the fact that his wife, Joanna, is pregnant with a son whose father is Jeremy Mohonk, the last surviving member of the Kitchawank tribe who also has Van Brunt blood in him. This development suggests that there is some hope for the future, which is the opposite implication of Walter's demise.

Depeyster's interest in this parcel of land is an example of his greed and his unbridled desire to control the land as his ancestors once did. This type of ambition is dangerous and the consequences of implementing it are far reaching, as Boyle clearly demonstrates throughout *World's End*. He is overtly encouraging his readers to thoroughly question what they see and hear so that they may probe deeply to discover new, hidden facets of the truth that lay buried in the historical

record. Such intensive searching is necessary because what the historical record says and what actually occurred can be completely different, depending on the perspective in which an event or person is viewed. In the next novel that I shall examine, *The Road to Wellville*, Boyle is moving in a different literary direction away from the picaresque, yet he includes a significant picaresque character, Charlie Ossining, to demythologize the historical figure John Harvey Kellogg, by comically showing the inherent danger of championing idealistic ideologies about health and eating to the exclusion of all other practices.

Chapter Five

Charlie Ossining's Picaresque Quest For Success in *The Road to Wellville*

With *World's End*, Boyle uses the picaresque as a means to explore the various interpretations of history and the American Dream, while exposing how many people in this country's history have callously arrived at this dream through the exploitation of others. He also reveals the flaws of mindlessly espousing idealistic ideologies from all sides of the political spectrum. Boyle continues his examination of the American Dream and the struggle to attain it in a much different setting and social climate with *The Road to Wellville*, which takes place in 1907. In this novel's main narrative, Boyle again uses history creatively for his own artistic ends by satirically depicting the bizarre beliefs and practices of health fanatic Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the inventor of the cornflake. Boyle also debunks the idealistic notions of social perfection through the strict regimen of vegetarianism and sexual abstinence espoused by Kellogg. Once Kellogg begins to succeed financially with a health food empire and a Sanitarium, it is not long before imitators, both genuine and dishonest, seek to cut into his profitable businesses to find their own route to riches. These imitators believe they have found a way to make their fortunes and Charlie Ossining is one of them.

Although *Wellville* is not a fully picaresque novel, the narrative featuring Charlie contains many picaresque elements. Charlie wants to live prosperously and he will do anything to succeed, legally or otherwise. His misguided enterprises demonstrate tainted aspirations to find the American Dream by enacting various scams in an attempt to quickly gain a fortune. Charlie is not only a con-man, but also a dupe who is seduced by his own desires of success by an even shiftier scam artist. The portrayal of Charlie's behavior and demise, as well as Kellogg's fanatical health consciousness and tyrannical control in forwarding his ideological agenda, offers a strong satirical commentary about the contradictory nature of American society and how many still believe in the Machiavellian principle of the ends justifying the means, especially when it comes to money and beliefs. Boyle's pillorying of these behaviors is a characteristic example of the picaresque genre being updated to

serve contemporary fictive needs while exposing the many flaws of our own society in a revealing, humorous manner.

As a novel, *Wellville* is a pointed satire that takes aim at past health trends and through many obvious parallels, the contemporary American obsessions with health, fitness, longevity, and vegetarianism. While these principles are certainly fine ideals to aspire to, some people have a tendency to carry these practices to extreme ends while indoctrinating others to take up the cause. As a satirist, Boyle exposes how these ideals, when taken to extreme measures, are often not all they are claimed to be. In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, John Clark makes a general statement about contemporary satirists that also applies to Boyle:

[The satirist's] cynical vision proposes that in our defective society heroism is tainted or bogus and in our deteriorating era the pious aims, exalted motives, and self-congratulatory claims of artists are at best pompous and misguided, at worst entirely spurious. . . . The satiric author will not permit us to continue to float securely upon a cloud of virtuous platitudes and grandiloquent delusions. (51)

With *Wellville*, Boyle shows how many characters have, despite their claim of virtuous ideals, concealed ulterior motives and character quirks that often run counter to what is expressed on the surface. There are also characters, such as Charlie and Bender, who will falsely proclaim to hold certain ideals in order to reassure customers and stockholders, when the only intention is to make a quick profit.

At this time, there has been no critical commentary written about *Wellville*. Almost all of the book reviews discuss Boyle's fictive treatment of Kellogg and how Boyle revels in the graphic details of Kellogg's obsessions with the functions of the human body. Molly O'Neill's review of the novel observes how it reflects the darker sides of appetite and desire: "In his book, the characters act out a play of passions between control and indulgence, commerce and science, recognition and obscurity, as well as between the preordained and the potentially perfectible" (C1). Many of the characters in *Wellville* are caught in a struggle to control the course and length of their lives by

regulating their appetites through a strictly regimented diet. The ones who go to the Sanitarium must consciously choose inflexible vegetarian asceticism over the uninhibited consumption of rich foods, richer sauces and large quantities of meat, which were all the dietary norm of the day for those who could afford it. The novel's characters reflect the difficulties of being placed between these two polar extremes of eating and the inclination to give into temptation rather than abstaining. Through Kellogg's guidance, his patients are on a crusade of sorts by attempting to perfect their flawed bodies. Kellogg asserts that these deficiencies can be corrected only by a proper vegetarian diet and other treatments he prescribes. Though Kellogg's methods at his sanitarium comprise the majority of the novel, there are other facets to it as well.

In an overview of Boyle's fiction, Sanford Pinsker stated about this novel:

The Road to Wellville has its comic way with an easier target: the health-food sanitarium run by cereal king John Harvey Kellogg. The high jinks that went on in Battle Creek, Michigan, during the early 1900s became an extended analogy for present-day food fads. Flimflammers are, of course, an abiding subject in American humor, and *The Road to Wellville* is a worthy enough contribution to that tradition.

(130)

Boyle intended for *Wellville* to be an examination of how food fads have a way of spinning out of control, but he also wanted to show how opportunistic people seek to take advantage of these fads for their own financial gain and not in the interest of reforming the dietary practices of Americans. This self-serving and unabashed opportunism has a direct connection to the picaresque tradition.

As a picaresque character, Charlie has a much more limited role than the picaresque protagonists that were discussed in previous chapters. Though he is not the primary focus of *Wellville*, he does play a major role. His character demonstrates the functions that greed, opportunism, and schemes have in motivating characters in a capitalistic system, particularly when it comes to cheaply imitating or stealing the original ideas of others for profit. These behaviors imply that there are alternate routes to achieve the American Dream besides honest

means. With these ideas in mind, I am deliberately restricting my analysis of *Wellville* to the character of Charlie and his many misadventures, showing Boyle's use of picaresque themes and situations. I will be including relevant context from other parts of the novel and discussing other characters as they apply to Charlie and his circumstances, but I shall not be examining every aspect and character of this large novel. I will begin by analyzing Charlie as a picaresque character to define what his features are and the circumstances he finds himself in. I will also closely examine selected episodes to demonstrate why his narrative and his behavior are picaresque.

Next, I will briefly explain Charlie's interactions with Goodloe Bender, his picaresque mentor and tormentor, whom Charlie regards mostly with frustration mixed with admiration. From there, I shall discuss the function of John Harvey Kellogg to understand his substantial role in this novel, especially as his character pertains to Charlie's narrative. It is critical to understand Kellogg's beliefs and practices to recognize how the schemes of Bender, Charlie, and Kellogg's adopted son George threaten to undermine the reputation of Kellogg and his Sanitarium. Once these points have been established I will then analyze the episodes where Charlie and Bender try to make their cereal company succeed at the expense of Kellogg's name and demonstrate why Charlie's fate at the novel's end reflects the picaresque tradition. To avoid confusion and maintain consistency when referring to the various characters in the novel, I will follow Boyle's lead. Characters such as Charlie Ossining and George Kellogg will be identified by their first names, while Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Goodloe H. Bender shall be identified by their last names.

Like the typical picaresque narrative, Charlie's story is episodic in structure and interwoven through the alternating chapters of the main narrative concerning Kellogg. Charlie's narrative depicts how he is constantly subject to forces and events beyond his control. Just as his picaresque predecessors, he leads the chaotic, marginal existence of an outsider, though he does receive some lucky breaks early in life. He is a character who comes from humble origins and he has limited opportunities in life. His parents were Irish immigrants and alcoholics who managed to obtain jobs as domestic help on the estate of Mrs. Amelia Dowst Hookstratten. Once her own son had become successful on Wall Street, she took a liking to Charlie and began to share with him many of

the privileges of her wealth and cultivation, including paying for his education at an exclusive, private boarding school. This experience gave him an unforgettable taste of what it is like to live the good life, which shaped his future aspirations. The narrative describes the change that occurred in Charlie during his attendance at this school:

Yes, Charlie had had all the advantages, but as so often happens under such circumstances, he rejected them. Not outright of course, but in the long run, in a growing repudiation of the expectations society had for him and a corresponding fascination with the life of those who live outside those expectations, who live by their wits, instincts, poise and balance. (270)

These characteristics recall some of the classic features of picaresque protagonists. They reflect Charlie's desire to live life on the edge and take risks. With good fortune and the assistance of Mrs. Hookstratten, he was offered ample opportunity to earn a decent living through conventional means, but this path is neither exciting enough nor as financially promising as Charlie wishes. He recognizes that honest means will not get him what he wants out of life. He is not interested in studying and obtaining knowledge; he wants to go out into the world and make money, quickly and easily. He quits school and tries to make a living by gambling, but all he is able to do is break even, after his living expenses are factored in. These experiences allow him to easily interact with all spheres of life, from the affluent to the destitute, as he knows both sides well. He is an ambitious character who wants to do more than simply get by in life.

Charlie wishes to base his American Dream on the life of C. W. Post, a man who began with nothing and became a tycoon with a cereal empire through dedication, hard work, and vision. He is the living embodiment of the American Dream:

Was there an enterprising man or boy in America who didn't know the story of C. W. Post's rise from feeble health and poverty to the very first rank of America's industrialists? Here was a man who'd come to Battle Creek in ruins, barely able to walk, who'd worked in the Sanitarium kitchens to pay for his treatment while his wife sewed suspenders by the piece in her unheated garret. Yes: and six years later

he was a millionaire. (89-90)

Since the breakfast cereal industry is pretty well established by the time Charlie gets involved in it, he must use brains and savvy in order to gain entry into an already glutted market. Charlie is quite prepared for these circumstances because he has no sense of ethics. He is opportunistic and willingly takes advantage of what he is given to attain his success. Charlie's lack of ethics stems from a formative, enlightening experience he had when he was still attending school. He wanted to become a better student without applying himself and when he saw an ad for memory pills he could not resist sending his money to get them. Eventually he realizes that the pills were utterly worthless. Though he was temporarily disillusioned, Charlie turned the situation around to use it as a source of inspiration. He discovers the practices of confidence games and how to separate people from their money by selling them illusions:

He'd been sucked in because he was vulnerable, because he had a need, a weakness, the gull's hope. . . . Who was the man who'd dreamed up the idea of memory tablets to begin with, who'd placed the ad and watched the money pour in from a legion of dupes and half-wits that stretched coast to coast? . . . There was a real genius. There was a man they should be studying. (271)

Getting taken advantage of was a valuable early lesson that shaped Charlie's approach to business. It opened his eyes to the ugly reality of the business world by showing him how confidence tricks work. This situation is an important base of knowledge he will need if he hopes to succeed, and he cannot learn it in school. He seeks to exploit the vulnerability of others for his own financial gain. By merging the ideas of C. W. Post and this unknown con-artist, Charlie makes a fumbling attempt to fulfill his aspirations of wealth. What is interesting about Charlie's character though, is how he is never able to shake the materialistic desires that create his weakness and vulnerability. These traits of his interfere with his thinking and do not allow him to always perceive when others are luring him into their own schemes. He is a novice still learning this complicated, illegal, and lucrative trade. Boyle's portrayal of Charlie satirizes the many mistakes he makes while learning this profession.

The majority of Charlie's traveling in the novel takes place early when he takes the train from New York to Battle Creek, Michigan. He desires greater financial success, so he seeks out new opportunities until he comes across Goodloe H. Bender, the entrepreneur behind the bogus cereal company Per- Fo. Bender convinces Charlie that the company is ready to begin operating and instructs him to come out to Michigan. Once he is in town, he suddenly finds himself in a completely different environment than he is accustomed to. He leaves New York believing that he and Bender have a great opportunity with their cereal company. Charlie has been set up to believe that he will be a millionaire in six months. His arrival in Battle Creek is a rude awakening, since the train station is besieged with amateur hustlers peddling phony or worthless shares of cereal stock to anybody gullible enough to buy them. It is only the beginning of a series of dashed expectations and comic humiliations for Charlie. Living in Battle Creek is when his drive for subsistence begins in earnest. He desperately needs money to survive because all of Bender's promises of prosperity have fallen through. The novel accurately conveys Charlie's sense of desperation as well as his subjective point of view about his circumstances and all he must endure in his failed attempt to get rich.

The relationship between Charlie and Bender is an extension of the traditional master-servant relationship in picaresque novels, except that Charlie is free to leave at any time. It is his deep desire for money and Bender's persuasive talk that keeps him around. Once Charlie is in Battle Creek, he assumes he will be staying at a comfortable place with reasonable accommodations. But while Bender is ensconced at the luxurious Post Tavern Hotel, Charlie is forced to stay at Mrs. Eyvindsdottir's rooming house, a tiny, cold, dilapidated and windowless nightmare. He should have recognized this marked discrepancy and walked away right then, but in spite of his reservations, he keeps prodding himself along with the thoughts of what might be if he follows through with the company. Bender deftly cons Charlie to believe in him by carefully contriving an illusion of success. Bender excels at playing this game to get other people to have confidence in him, which is why he resides at the Post Tavern Hotel. He must keep up appearances, even if they are expensive. There may be some truth in Bender's assertion of needing to stay in a luxury hotel, but

there is also the sense that he is living the good life while it lasts because he knows it will not be around forever.

Charlie observes significant changes in Bender's personal appearance when they first meet in the hotel: "Charlie noticed that he'd dyed his beard to contrast the white fluff atop his head, and not only that, but he'd taken to parting it aristocratically in the middle of his chin, too. He looked like a general home from the wars, looked like a senator, a banker, a captain of industry" (96). Bender cultivates an image of success to make it much easier for him to manipulate others and to gain their trust. An example of this behavior occurs shortly after Charlie greets Bender. Rather than going through the pleasantries of asking Charlie how he is doing, Bender reveals his priorities when he asks Charlie if he has the money he is supposed to bring. It is an obvious indication of Charlie's expendability and the main reason he has been included in Bender's plans. Charlie is understandably put off by such obvious rudeness, yet Bender is quickly able to read this consternation and turn the situation in his favor. He is a predator who smoothly uses Charlie's lust for money, as well as his better judgment, against him. By understanding what motivates Charlie, Bender easily overcomes any sense of distrust or reservations. Creating a sense of trust is one of the reasons why Charlie has the title President-in-Chief, a largely meaningless title in a company that only exists in their minds, but having a title makes Charlie feel as if he is significant and plays a role in developing this new business.

Charlie's ability to get large sums of money from Mrs. Hookstratten is the main reason Bender includes him in the operation. These men need funding to start their business and compete against the other entrepreneurs who hope to gain a share of this suddenly lucrative market. Initially, Charlie espouses a principled view about making good on his promises to Mrs. Hookstratten:

No matter how much he rationalized or how much he resented Bender's extravagance, Charlie didn't like to part with money--Mrs. Hookstratten's money, in particular. Yes, he told himself, he was cold and cynical and ruthless and calculating, a tycoon in the making who was born to fleece the rich, but Mrs.

Hookstratten had been good to him and he truly wanted to see her get a fair return on her investment--while he himself coincidentally made his own fortune, of course. (134)

Charlie has a deep sense of loyalty and appreciation toward all his benefactress has done for him and he does not want to disappoint her, but as the novel progresses, he finds his devotion waning as his situation grows progressively worse. Charlie is susceptible to Bender's deceptive words and soothing talk because he is an outsider who desperately wants to be an insider to the lifestyles of the rich. The partnership with Bender appears to be the best opportunity Charlie will have in his life to make a fortune. He does not want to lose this chance, which is why he tolerates Bender's reckless spending. Charlie naively hopes that Bender's affluent posturing will facilitate the realization of their dreams. As a consummate confidence man, Bender is utterly efficient in appeasing, at least temporarily, the many misgivings Charlie has about their venture to reassure him that everything will turn out fine in the end. Of course, almost all of Bender's talk is utterly unreliable, yet Charlie admires and despises Bender and the ways in which he manipulates people.

This situation is an embodiment of the picaresque disproportion of the employer-employee relationship, as it indicates how thoroughly Charlie is being exploited. As Bender is indulging himself with all of the benefits of living in luxury, Charlie is the one who has to make all of the sacrifices, for the sake of the company. The disparity of their partnership is also displayed when Charlie is forced to do all of the company's undesirable grunt work. The astute management of funds is not one of Bender's better qualities and Charlie must pay the price for this shortcoming. The novel offers an unsavory description of the so-called food Charlie must endure eating at the boarding house:

Charlie nodded, barely able to stomach the broth, strewn as it was with pike bones and bits of scale, fin and other unidentifiable debris. He'd always been a good eater and he was ravenous after the night he'd gone through, but the broth had an unfortunate aftertaste of muddy bottoms and pondweed, and the sight and smell of the fish on the drainboard didn't improve matters any. Mrs. Eyvindsdottir's knife

flashed as she deftly worked the blade up under the gill slits of two huge slack yellow-green pike, removed their heads and dropped them into a gleaming pot.

Charlie caught a glimpse of blood-rich gill and the flat cold gaze of an extinguished eye and had to look away. (129)

This supposed food is one of the many indignities Charlie must tolerate if he is to make his fortune. It is quite a difference from Bender's steady diet of steaks, oysters and fine wines or whatever other culinary delights are available. He knows Bender is nothing but a confidence man by this point, but Charlie is under pressure. He feels obligated to do something to earn back Mrs. Hookstratten's money. In desperation, he hopes that by sticking around long enough he can salvage some of his losses if the company turns a profit, but the prospects of that happening grow dimmer by the day.

Charlie starts to question the feasibility of Per-Fo when he sees the waste and detritus of the empty, decaying cereal factories on the edge of town. He cannot see how he is supposed to make a fortune and realize his dreams where so many other entrepreneurs, much like himself, failed miserably. Charlie desperately wants to fulfill his materialistic desires but he is beginning to recognize the stark reality of the boom and bust cycle of the emerging breakfast food business. The competition is intense and there is no pity for those who lose. Stock that was valuable at one point rapidly becomes worthless and very few business men survive long enough to become tycoons in the industry. Charlie can hardly believe that Bender wants to acquire one of these broken down buildings and its shoddy equipment to begin production for Per-Fo. These corroding factories are a symbol of the futility of Charlie's dream, as they painfully show the steep odds he is up against and all that he must overcome if he is to even make a profit. It is when Charlie is inspecting an abandoned factory that he encounters a very drunk and stinky George Kellogg for the first time.

At this point in the chapter it is useful to discuss the characteristics of Kellogg and his unusual health practices, followed by a brief examination of his adopted son George. Even though these characters are part of the novel's main narrative, they intersect the narrative dealing with Charlie, as he and Bender commence their grand scheme to have Kellogg buy them out of the cereal business. In *Wellville*, the picaresque is used to show the futility of perfectionist schemes,

particularly the ones espoused by Kellogg. Traditionally, picaresque novels reveal the many flaws of humanity through the often comic behavior of picaresque characters. With *Wellville*, Boyle uses a picaresque character to help undermine Kellogg's principles by showing the negative effects his idealism generates. As a character, Kellogg is part of the American tradition of the eccentric hero. He is a self-made man who is on a crusade to reform the dietary practices and health habits of Americans. He is an embodiment of the American Dream who has an unwavering belief in the perfectibility of the human body. His Sanitarium and food business ventures are quite successful, which encourages unethical imitators like Charlie and Bender who want to steal these ideas for their own benefit. Since Kellogg is not a picaresque character, I will not cover his character in its entirety, but I will explore his significance to Charlie's narrative by choosing selected traits and episodes to give an understanding of his idiosyncratic ways and his idealistic purposes for running the Sanitarium. These ideas will offer better insight into the nature of Charlie's venture and why his character is picaresque.

Boyle's disturbingly funny and graphic portrayal of John Harvey Kellogg is meant to demythologize this historical figure to offer a more satiric perspective of his personality and his practices, which have been gradually forgotten over the years. Kellogg was one of the first physicians to warn people about their dietary habits, but he mixed this notion with a number of unusual obsessions that he imposed upon his patients. Some patients revered him as a savior, while others reviled him as a charlatan and a quack. In exposing Kellogg's methods, Boyle is also drawing contemporary inferences and critiques about the fanatical belief in social ideals, particularly when it comes to dieting and the consumption of food. By satirizing Kellogg's militant espousal of radical vegetarianism, Boyle pokes fun at the notion of humans achieving moral and physical perfection, or even immortality, through diet.

Boyle's portrait of Kellogg is meant to be understood as a satire of the idealistic practices of the health industry, which serves as quite a contrast to the cynical practices used by Bender and Charlie. They ruthlessly seek to exploit the ideals of this industry for their own financial gain and they could not care less if their product has no real health benefits. Through the use of caricature,

Boyle consciously distorts and intensifies the characteristics of Kellogg's personality to reveal his less flattering side, which is often concealed beneath his contrived persona. One of Kellogg's most notable features is his overweening pride in himself and his work. John Clark explains why pride is usually one of a satirist's favorite targets: "Other vices deserve a satirist's attention, to be sure, but pride — particularly the unwarranted or excessive pride of a learned man concerning his intellectual ability and attainments — draws some of satire's sharpest assaults" (37). Humility is a trait Kellogg knows nothing about. He fully believes that he has the answers to everything that ails the human body, which should be strictly controlled with a proper vegetarian diet. He has the unmitigated audacity in assuming that he alone can improve upon the flaws of nature's design for the human body. That is why he often prescribes his own special colon surgery for his patients. Kellogg asserts that a natural kink in the bowels hinders swift and proper digestion, so his solution is to remove this defect for the benefit of his patient, even there is no legitimate medical reason for doing so, other than his own self-serving opinion.

As a physician, Kellogg is devoted to the health and well being of his patients, yet he is also quite concerned with his own reputation. He is highly conscious of his image and does everything he can to manipulate it. Kellogg is a power hungry demagogue who rigidly controls his sanitarium with an autocratic hand. He adamantly believes himself to be infallible in all of his pronouncements. His way is the only way to achieve good health. There is no room for flexibility, compromise, or even moderation in any of the treatments he prescribes, which helps to foster an "us versus them" mentality among his patients and the non-believers in the outside world. He is a firm believer in the reforms of the Progressive Era at the end of the nineteenth century, combined with a "messianic belief in the perfectibility of the human race" (52). He strongly disapproves of sexual relations, even among married people, because he believes such activity to be damaging to an individual's health. As a fanatical devotee to gastric correctness and a sworn enemy to autointoxication--his term for poisoning the body through improper diet--the heaviest insult he levels toward anyone is to call him or her a meat eater.

In her overview of Boyle's fiction, Maril Nowak observes in *Wellville*: "Boyle's satire shows Dr.

John Harvey Kellogg as his own worst enemy, not society's demon (without heroes, there are no monsters)" (40). This quote is an accurate assessment of Kellogg's character because his attitudes and his narrow, unbending beliefs create many of his problems. He believes that the human mind and body can be brought to a state of perfection through rigid discipline, frequent exercise and a strict adherence to vegetarian principles. These ideas are quite beneficial, especially if a person's health has been neglected, but they are incapable of correcting all of the flaws and other uncontrollable features of the human body. What Kellogg wants to show his patients is how to take complete control of their bodies through his methods. The problem is, not all of Kellogg's assertions and techniques are as helpful as he claims them to be. He fails to recognize or even admit his own shortcomings, let alone accept responsibility for the occasional death of one of his patients. In an interview with Bill Rodriguez, Boyle states one of his reasons for writing about Kellogg:

"I really am suspicious of cant and programs and people to whom you give over your life so that they can make you better. . . . I'm very suspicious of that sort of thing and have always written to deflate people like Dr. Kellogg. I did it, I think, with Mungo Park in *Water Music* and there are probably other examples that people could dig up too."

Kellogg has one notable similarity with Mungo--the unchecked desire to establish a secure, untarnished reputation that will last long after he is gone.

In the Sanitarium, Kellogg relentlessly proselytizes his patients by promoting his interests. This behavior encourages smug, sanctimonious attitudes in his patients, particularly when they refer to real and imaginary evils of the outside world. Although he claims to be interested in helping the world at large, only certain types of patients are admitted. Those who are seriously ill and destitute are not welcome. Class distinctions are a very important element of the Sanitarium's social hierarchy:

The San's patients tended to be of a certain class, and they really had no interest in sitting across the dining table from the plebeian or the pedestrian or those who had the bad grace to be truly and dangerously ill. No, they came to the San to see and be

seen; to mingle with the celebrated, the rich and the preposterously rich; to think positively, eat wisely and subdue their afflictions with a good long pious round of pampering, abstention and rest. (18-19)

Kellogg is an egomaniac, but he is no fool, and he knows exactly where to market his products and services. He is quite effective in catering to the affluent, which correspondingly helps with his cash flow and the dissemination of his ideas. In creating this trendy appeal, he is guaranteed repeat business and many new patients who desire entry into this elitist and exclusionary bastion of health and well being.

Kellogg's patients at the Sanitarium are not allowed to think for themselves or question their treatment. They must accept everything he says or leave. Most stay because they are desperate for results. Kellogg's methods do produce results, but they are not without problems. He has a tendency to distort scientific facts and discoveries in his favor, and his method of teaching his patients the evils of a poor diet, particularly the consumption of meat, is to use heavy-handed didacticism. A prime example of this notion occurs before Thanksgiving when Kellogg places a live turkey in the dining room. It is his way of emphasizing to his patients that they are morally superior for forsaking meat when others are glutting themselves on it. The narrator describes the situation:

Here was this noble bird, this avatar of winged flight and oven-browned skin, this provider of drumstick and wing, white meat and dark, their fellow creature who had every right to his life, liberty and pursuit of wattled happiness, here it was strutting about its pen and eating the same nuts and grains they were, spared forever [from] the butcher's block and the fatal drop of the cleaver. This was what it was all about, the vegetarian ethos, a new kind of spirituality and moral bonding. (153)

If this turkey is meant to represent Kellogg's visionary practices and the mutual affinity of his patients with all of the living creatures of the world, what are these people to think when the bird unexpectedly dies? Kellogg fails to account for critical aspects of this turkey's care, which results in its death. Kellogg mistakenly assumes that the nutritional requirements of all living creatures can

be met by following his dietary regimen. It is part of his unflagging belief that all aspects of life, including death, can be controlled through diet.

Another example of Kellogg's heavy-handed methods occurs when Will Lightbody, a reluctant patient at the sanitarium, confesses to Kellogg that he has not been able to have successful sexual relations with his wife. All Kellogg can do in response to Will's problem is to sternly lecture him for jeopardizing his already frail health and failing to heed the doctor's stern warnings: "I'm happy for you, sir. Your own body revolted at what you were about to subject it to. If you were capable of saving yourself — and sparing your wife — you should get down on your knees and thank the heavens that nature intervened. You say you're impotent? I say congratulations'" (203-04). Kellogg demands that his patients forego all aspects of regular life to restore their health, even if that means abstaining from marital relations. It is part of the fanatical control Kellogg exercises over every feature of his patients' lives. He adamantly believes that sex ruins the body, even in marriage and he refers to this natural bond as "*legalized prostitution*" (196). Kellogg encourages the repression of healthy sexual desires to build character and moral fortitude, while asserting that sexual relations are the direct cause of many of the health problems experienced by married women. These strange claims by Kellogg clearly demonstrate his methods in action. He uses half-gathered facts and assumptions to make ridiculously judgmental conclusions and diagnoses while failing to consider any other scientific possibilities other than his own supposedly infallible judgment.

In an interview, Boyle explained his method for depicting a character like Kellogg: "It turned out that I focused on Kellogg and just exaggerated his actual qualities. I mean, the book is pretty much true. He wrote those books, he felt that way, he was an autocrat. I exaggerated him a little bit to reflect my point of view, which has to do with making fun of today's obsession with all the latest health developments" (qtd. in Summerhill 190). Given what we know today about the human body and maintaining it in a healthy manner, many of Kellogg's ideas seem a bit unusual and unnecessary, which is exactly why Boyle deliberately goes into close detail about them. He wants people to recognize how the same principles are at work in the contemporary world. Boyle defended the accuracy of his portrayal of Kellogg by stating:

“The book represents him in a true light. No one actually knows what he said or did behind the scenes, and it is a novel, and I am a satirist. However, I did meet with about fifty women of seventy-plus years who worked for Kellogg, while I was on my book tour in Battle Creek, Michigan, and all of them thought I portrayed him well. I also had what was in the historical records, and I don’t think I compromised those.” (qtd. in Summerhill 191)

Boyle’s depiction of Dr. Kellogg’s obsessions with the human body and its various excretions makes *Wellville* a veritable monument to scatological humor, which has long been a part of picaresque novels. In satirizing Kellogg, Boyle emphasized, with unsparingly vivid details, many of Kellogg’s bizarre practices to show what his patients were subjected to on a daily basis in their quest for health. This idea is most evident with his strange fixation on bowel movements, human feces, and ordering his patients to receive up to five enemas a day. Kellogg came up with his ideas while observing apes in Africa. He noticed that the apes freely defecated whenever the urge arose, while humans had to train and civilize their bowels to go only at appropriate moments. From this observation Kellogg deduced that this practice was the cause of many intestinal disorders, hence the need for frequent mechanical assistance.

By exploring in full detail Kellogg’s fastidious interest in all matters of human health and his perverse obsession with fecal matter and bowel movements, Boyle is able to explore the contradictory nature of this former paragon of health. Clark describes some of the deflationary purposes of scatological humor in a literary setting:

The fecal matter of bowels and bowls, however, is more unsavory and offensive, and in polite society it is treated as forbidden knowledge. For that reason, the satirist cheerfully opens the privy door and herds us in. . . . What is satirically grotesque about such a subject is obvious: proud, self-delusional man ever aspires to elevate himself and his dignity, whereas the satirist destroys such upward mobility by reducing man to a defecating animal before our eyes. (116)

Even though Kellogg believes in the perfectibility of the human body, he denies certain

inescapable realities that cannot be changed. He thinks that if people take up his regimen they can transcend their base animal natures and urges to become fully refined and dignified humans. Boyle uses scatological humor in his examination of Kellogg to show the many inherent flaws in his thinking and methods. What is interesting about Boyle's use of this type of humor is that it is much more than simply being crude or vulgar. For the most part, Boyle sticks to medical terminology and descriptions while using creative language to elevate his scatological subject matter and keep it in the realm of satire rather than drag it through the gutter.

Boyle uses his fictional license to go beyond the monolithic image of Kellogg, to fictively suggest how he may have actually been, particularly when he was not interacting with his patients. This deflation of Kellogg's character is most evident when he must deal with his adopted son George, a belligerent and unmanageable derelict who brings out Kellogg's worst qualities at every turn. The failure of their relationship is one of the defining features of this novel. As a character, George is the complete antithesis of everything Kellogg represents. This dramatic contrast makes George the perfect comic foil for Kellogg's pretensions. George ultimately negates Kellogg's reformative efforts by becoming a business partner with Bender and Charlie, and later by burning down the Sanitarium. It is through George that Bender and Charlie buy the rights to the Kellogg name to affix to their cereal boxes. With the new name, Kellogg's Per-Fo, Bender and Charlie begin a picaresque scheme to deceive cereal buyers into thinking their product is endorsed by John Harvey Kellogg himself. George's alcoholism and lack of discipline are completely opposite to Kellogg's iron rigidity in all aspects of life. In the novel, Kellogg does not have any biological children of his own, but he adopted and successfully raised forty two children. But George proves to be the exception to this record of success, which has much to do with his tragic early childhood.

When he was six-years old, he was found next to his alcoholic mother in an unheated shack in the slums. She was dead and badly beaten. By adopting George, Kellogg sees an opportunity to demonstrate to the world the irrefutable value and efficacy of his methods. Reforming George was a challenge Kellogg could not refuse. The narrator describes Kellogg's idealistic philosophy in adopting George:

Conditions made the man, he asserted, wagging his finger for emphasis, and any child of the ghetto, any poor unfortunate from the stockyards or the shantytowns that stood awash in sewage behind them, would grow into as valuable and decent a young person as any if only he were given the opportunity. "Give me the worst case you can find," he said, "the single most deprived child in all of Chicago, and I'll raise him as my own son, just as I've raised the others, and I guarantee you he'll turn out a model citizen." (52)

Kellogg makes a rather bold declaration, yet despite his best efforts, he is not able to get George to cooperate and behave properly. George knows exactly how to embarrass, frustrate, and manipulate his adoptive father, utterly disrupting Kellogg's finely crafted air of calm composure, especially by accusing him of paternal neglect. At the end of *Wellville*, George has an epic battle with Kellogg by inciting all sorts of mayhem, which includes setting the Sanitarium on fire. When George accidentally falls into a vat of macadamia butter, Kellogg shoves him further into the thick paste to suffocate him. Kellogg is permanently ridding himself of the only failure he has ever known, but he is also exacting revenge for the destruction of his beloved Sanitarium where he rules as if he were a king. George's role as Kellogg's nemesis reaches its height when the Sanitarium is completely destroyed, but this role has its beginnings in the partnership with Bender and Charlie.

Even though George no longer resides at the Sanitarium, he periodically sneaks in to extort money out of Kellogg's deep pockets. The only power George has is to threaten to make a highly disruptive scene by hurling epithets and denouncing Kellogg. He cannot allow such antisocial behavior to happen under any circumstances, as it would disturb the patients, while causing them to question him and his ability to manage the Sanitarium. He reluctantly concedes to these demands for money out of a sense of failure and a little bit of guilt as well, but he knows the money is going to be squandered on liquor. He is desperately afraid that George will undermine his finely crafted image as "a veritable saint" and wishes to remove George from the premises as quickly and quietly as possible (47). Out of all of the projects Kellogg has taken on, the only disappointment he has ever experienced is with George, who comically negates Kellogg's principles throughout the

novel. The other adopted children went on to lead productive, even highly successful lives, but George is unable to escape from the tragic forces that shaped his life at an early age. Not once does he ever show Kellogg any gratitude for rescuing him from a life of misery and offering him an opportunity to improve his prospects in life. This point becomes especially evident when Bender happens across George and a seemingly brilliant scheme is hatched.

In a novel filled with enterprising characters, Bender is by far the most opportunistic. Although he never admits the possibility of failure to Charlie, Bender knows that the odds for starting a cereal company from scratch and surviving long enough to turn a profit are slender. If the right prospect comes along he is willing to settle for less money. The sole interest Bender has in George Kellogg is the right to use his last name as a marketing ploy. For George, it means he gets easy money to fuel his endless drinking binges, and he does not have to do anything to get the money except sign over the rights to his name. With this unexpected good luck, Bender changes the company name to Kellogg's Per-Fo Company, Incorporated, of Battle Creek Michigan. He then pays a visit to Dr. Kellogg with the hope that he will buy out the company. If Kellogg goes along with this scheme, these three men will have a chance to gain a large sum of money. If Kellogg does not go along with the buyout then he stands a substantial chance of watching others gain at the expense of his reputation and the misappropriation of his name, which people will inevitably associate with the product.

Through George's connection to Bender and Charlie, Kellogg is placed in a truly picaresque dilemma with no way to escape. The worst part of this infuriating situation for Kellogg is that there is nothing he can do to legally protect himself from this encroachment upon his name and business interests. He is quite an innovator with developing and selling his ideas about nutritious food and healthy living, but he is unable to withstand the imitators trying to cut into his substantial share of the market. This scheme is where Charlie's picaresque behavior comes to the forefront because it helps to expose concealed aspects of Kellogg's character. Once someone comes up with a valuable idea, there will always be ruthless predators attempting to steal it or insidious parasites attempting to cut into the profits by creating cheap imitations or operating scams. These circumstances reflect

the inherent difficulties of capitalism as well as the devious nature of humans who are faced with the prospects of gaining money. These parasites will let nothing stand in their way and their eager willingness to do whatever it takes is directly connected to the picaresque novel.

Walter Reed, in his study *An Exemplary History of the Novel; The Quixotic Versus the Picaresque*, states an essential function of the picaresque novel: “The picaresque emphasis on the lowliness of men is a response to the literary assertion of man’s dignity” (31). Throughout *Wellville*, Kellogg is always caught up espousing his lofty ideals of human behavior and dignity, but Boyle comically subverts Kellogg’s pretensions by placing him in situations where he must contend with the tainted motives of a picaresque character like Charlie. Kellogg has created a distorted and unrealistic fantasy of human perfection that cannot possibly account for any deviation, failure or shortcoming except by assigning blame to a lack of willpower. The fact is, not everybody is going to buy into his notions and there will always be people whose ideals are the opposite of his, which leads them to behave in undignified ways. The grim irony of Kellogg’s situation is this: the more success he has in finding acolytes and converting them to his program, the more he must contend with the baser aspects of humanity through characters such as Charlie and Bender who want to gain from his reforming efforts without even sharing the same set of ethics. Kellogg regards their scheme as a serious affront because it will tarnish his name while negating his efforts to improve humanity. He has already had the stock from his cereal company surreptitiously bought out from under him by his brother and another humiliation in this business market would be intolerable.

Kellogg has an intense and thoroughly understandable desire to maintain his public credibility as well as his ethics. His reputation and income depend on it, but it is also a matter of personal integrity, which he refuses to compromise under any circumstances. What is interesting though, is how he is not above manipulating his seemingly objective scientific demonstrations to achieve the desired results that promote and support his ideologies. His favorite target to rail against is the consumption of meat and he sees no harm in practicing a bit of deception to persuade his patients of the correctness of his beliefs because he thinks he will be saving their lives. The most obvious example occurs with the demonstration he arranges with the Sanitarium’s white timber wolf

named Fauna. In the wilderness, wolves exist as carnivores, yet Kellogg believes this dietary practice to be deeply flawed and since Fauna was obtained before she was weaned, she has never been fed meat. He raised this wolf as a vegetarian instead, which runs counter to her natural inclinations. Kellogg claims that this vegetarian diet is what has made her so docile and friendly. To provide a contrast on the stage, he brings out a ferocious black timber wolf that was recently caught in the wild. He then throws each wolf a piece of meat and Fauna refuses to touch it, thereby presumably proving the validity of his practices.

At this point the reader is aware of what is really taking place behind this seemingly objective demonstration: “What he [Kellogg] didn’t mention was that she had been trained, through negative reinforcement, to view meat as the prelude to a beating--just touch her tongue to it and she was whipped--or that her vegetarian diet had so weakened her, that she wouldn’t have had the strength to chew it in any case” (311). Fauna does not really have any free choice in this matter, yet Kellogg refuses to let this small detail stand in the way of advancing his agenda to reform the American diet. He has no ethical problems with this practice either, which ironically aligns him, in a small way, with the likes of Bender and Charlie who have no problem with lying and deceiving to forward their ideology of greed.

Since Bender and Charlie were rebuffed in their attempt to sell their undeveloped cereal company to Kellogg, they must look elsewhere to raise capital to obtain funds to make their business operational. Although the company’s prospects are looking worse, neither Charlie nor Bender wants to quit. Both men are constantly on the lookout for potential investors and are always ready to pitch their product. By selling the company stock, Charlie is selling his dream to others and their purchase affirms a belief in his aspirations. In a chance meeting on the train to Battle Creek, Charlie meets Will Lightbody, a Peterskill socialite who is in bad physical condition. Charlie’s deceptively friendly demeanor during this encounter helps to define him as a picaresque character because he sees Will as a potential dupe. The main reason he is at the Sanitarium is to please his wife Eleanor, a devoted follower of Kellogg. After submitting to Kellogg’s treatment for a few weeks, Will becomes disillusioned. When Will witnesses the accidental electrocution of a patient, he fears for his life and

runs away from the Sanitarium into the soothing embrace of The Red Onion, a restaurant and drinking establishment situated right across the street from the Sanitarium. The Red Onion is quite a contrast to the strict dietary austerity enforced by Kellogg, which makes this restaurant a temptation for his patients. The sight and smell are enough to lure patients who lack sufficient willpower:

The sign over the door proclaimed "The Red Onion" and beneath it, in hand-painted letters, white on a barn-red background, there was this further inscription: Tired of Bran and Sprouts? Try Our Famous Steaks, Chops & Fries & Our Detroit Special Hamburger Sandwich. Inside, the place smelled incorrigibly of grease, stale beer, sweat, cheap cigars and the gut-clenching ambrosia of a good sixteen-ounce steak in the pan on a bed of onions. (147-48)

This restaurant is a complete antithesis and refutation of everything Kellogg stands for, and the owners are quite successful. The sign is an attempt to lure in weak or disgruntled patients who are tired of Kellogg's strange menu. Will goes to the restaurant to get irresponsibly drunk while thoroughly glutting himself with forbidden food to forget why he ever came to the Sanitarium. It is the only bit of solace he has known in the past few weeks. At this moment he is a weak and vulnerable man who feels completely abandoned by his wife. Then he meets Charlie who, rather than sympathizing with him, sees an easy opportunity to get a new investor in the company.

Picaresque characters have the ability to relate to characters from all levels of society, which helps to instill confidence when a scheme is being enacted. Charlie's pitch to buy Per-Fo stock is smooth and persuasive, reflecting some of the lessons he has learned by observing Bender. Charlie practices these lessons on an unsuspecting Will, who thinks of him as a friendly face from Peterskill with no ulterior motives. First, Charlie leads Will further down the road to gastronomic abandon by ordering a plate of raw oysters. These delicacies are strictly denounced and forbidden by all of Kellogg's militant followers, and Will's wife is no exception. When he and his wife met Charlie on the train he was enjoying a plate of oysters. Kellogg's self-righteous followers feel it is their duty to berate people who eat food that is strongly disapproved of and oysters are high on this

list. The idea is to nag and badger an offender's conscience into submission by reminding him or her of the errors of their eating pleasure and create guilt. If that does not work, the next step is to reform through repulsion. Will's wife informs Charlie that every oyster he consumes is like drinking a teaspoon of urine. As a picaresque character and an aspiring con artist, Charlie is immune to such tactics because he can easily see through such heavy-handed and obvious persuasion. He does not care what other people think and his response is to slide another oyster down his throat. For Charlie, eating oysters is symbolic of living a life of luxury and indulgence. It is something he can rarely afford to do on his own, so he appreciates the oysters whenever he can, particularly when the money he is spending belongs to somebody else. At the Red Onion, Will gladly accepts the offer of oysters, especially because it is a conscious rejection of everything he has been subjected to in the past few weeks at the Sanitarium. Charlie is subtly building a sense of camaraderie and trust in Will, whose reservations are also lowered through his heavy consumption of beer and liquor, which are strictly forbidden at the Sanitarium.

Charlie's methods reveal a complete lack of ethics since he has absolutely no regret or shame in fleecing Will under the guise of friendship. Such behavior is certainly not admirable, but it is typical to see in a picaresque character trying to get ahead in the world where the opportunities are limited. When Will is thoroughly inebriated and disoriented, Charlie proposes to let him become an investor in Kellogg's Per-Fo by buying a some stock. Charlie is selling a piece of a dream that is unlikely to be realized. Will accepts this chance without any questions or reservations because he believes in Charlie, in part because he has an affluent connection with the eminently respectable Mrs. Hookstratten. Because the check is made out to Charlie and not the company, he must wrestle with the thought of keeping it all for himself. Charlie reasons:

But wait: why tell Bender at all? The check was made out to him, wasn't it — to Charles Ossining? Who would be the wiser if he — but no, he couldn't take the poor fool's money like that, could he? For one thing it was illegal — false pretenses, fraud, theft even. And it was seed money, money that would grow a hundred times over — he knew that and knew he had to be patient. (233)

Charlie is in a dilemma where he must decide what his priorities are. If the money is given to Bender, it will rapidly disappear. There is also the temptation to keep the money for himself, but Charlie decides that the best course of action is to hold on to the money and see what happens.

There is still one problem he must overcome though. In the excitement of the moment of this unexpected windfall, Charlie forgot to make sure Will signed the check. Charlie is back where he started before he wandered into the Red Onion that night, which is a sign that he is still learning the necessary skills of his chosen profession. He has to find a way to get Will's signature on the check and hope that he still wants to invest in the company, otherwise all of these efforts are worthless. Although Charlie aspires to make a living by deceptively separating people from their money, he still has basic lessons to learn about finalizing his deals and properly securing the money. This type of ineptitude is what leads to Charlie's downfall. He needs to learn to consider all possible angles to protect himself and not simply get caught up in the thrill of the immediate moment or the satisfaction of having a scheme work in his favor.

The only way to get access to Will is for Charlie to sneak into the Sanitarium under the guise of a friendly visit to an old and dear friend, a ruse that is occasionally adopted by picaresque characters. There is a bit of risk involved because if Charlie is spotted by Kellogg or his large orderlies, there will be no chance to get this much needed signature. Charlie is wise enough to know that talk alone will probably not be enough to obtain this signature, so he brings along a bottle of whiskey to assist him on his mission. Charlie is quite devious in his ability to appeal to human weakness and exploit it for his own benefit. He is the only person who seems to care about Will and treat him in a friendly, nonjudgmental manner, even though it is the money that matters and not the man who is giving it. Charlie's presence encourages Will to defy the doctor's orders and the desired effect is achieved. Charlie allows Will to feel good about himself despite the risks to his already poor health: "Will had reached a state of equilibrium. Somewhere in his brain a warning bell was going off, but he ignored it. After two days of misery and humiliation, he'd attained tranquillity, and all because of Charlie and the ambrosia that comes packaged in a flat little bottle" (256). Charlie knows he is taking undue

advantage of an ill man but that is what he must do if he is to succeed in the cereal business.

At this point in the novel Bender and Charlie are getting desperate for something positive to happen with their company. They must come up with new approaches to get some sort of return on their money and efforts. Because investors are difficult to persuade, there is not enough money to build a factory from the ground up. The cheapest, and least desirable, alternative is to obtain one of the many filthy, decrepit cereal factories around town and fix it up to begin production. Charlie is also in a tight spot because Mrs. Hookstratten wants to know how her substantial investment is being put to use. Since he cannot afford to disappoint her he writes glowing letters that describe all of the positive developments that have supposedly taken place as a result of her generous investment:

At Bender's urging, he'd written her a series of letters describing the immaculate new Per-Fo factory headquarters and he'd enumerated an entirely fictitious list of prominent investors. He'd waxed eloquent about the clean and thrifty Midwestern workforce, men and women alike, and the newly designed Per-Fo boxes, and the real and enduring mission of Per-Fo itself, which was, of course, to provide the good people of America with a predigested, peptonized, celery-impregnated miracle of a ready-to-eat vegetarian breakfast food. (262)

Like many picaresque characters before him, Charlie is playing a role to get himself through a moment of crisis. Charlie is forced to lie to Mrs. Hookstratten in order to placate her justifiable inquisitiveness. His letters are so effective that she continues to send the company more money to invest. Charlie does feel some guilt over these circumstances but it is too late for him to turn back. Besides, Bender has come up with a new plan to make the company work.

His idea is to create a demand for his product through clever advertising and attractive packaging. As a character, Bender has very few admirable qualities, yet he does have an entertaining presence in the novel. He is an astute observer of human behavior and motivation and he knows exactly how to manipulate these attributes to benefit him. Even though Charlie despises Bender in many ways, he carefully observes Bender's techniques to find a way to use them and

obtain a fortune. Bender's goal is to create an image of his product as being a pure, wholesome, all-American, family oriented cereal. The box is described as being: "Red, white and blue, with a representation of two cherubic children and their prim and yet somehow randy-looking mother sitting round a kitchen table. . . . and a paragraph of health-conscious gibberish had been added to appeal to the Eleanor Lightbodys and Amelia Hookstrattens of the world" (262-63). He deliberately crafts his cereal's appeal to generate interest in the lucrative market of health conscious individuals. They are the perfect targets for this type of deceptive and manipulative marketing. By describing the supposed health benefits on the box and affixing the Kellogg name to it, Bender is deviously playing to the preferences of the health and fitness crowd. He wants to take advantage of their gullibility and implicit trust in the Kellogg name to make a profit from it.

Bender's only problem is that he needs to fill the boxes with an acceptable product to catch the public's interest, and he knows nothing about the production of cereal. His objective is to mimic the other cereals on the market while beating them with a barrage of advertising. What Charlie is unaware of is Bender's real intentions. He wants to get successful enough to be bought out by Will Kellogg, who has already refused an initial buyout offer. Bender just wants to make a quick profit and get out of the business, but he lures Charlie on by talking about the long haul, which also ensures getting the best out of him by keeping him optimistic about the company's future. Making good cereal is not as easy as Bender believes and all of their efforts are wasted as they keep churning out worthless, foul tasting product. These men just do not have the practical knowledge or experience to make palatable cereal, which means they cannot market it either.

This instance is when Bender comes up with his most nefarious idea yet. Rather than create his own cereal he has a way to steal a train shipment of Will Kellogg's cereal and use it to fill their own boxes, which will be distributed as samples. Bender says to Charlie:

"I've already fixed it with a man I know down at the train yard, so don't worry about a thing-- "

"Don't Worry? What are we going to do, steal them?"

Bender simply smiled. A rich paternal smile, the sort of smile a teacher might bestow

on his prize student when the grades are handed out. Charlie was incredulous. (274)

Charlie must face a serious test of his ethics at this moment. Like most picaresque characters, he is certainly not averse to an occasional scheme to fleece somebody out of his money through deception, larceny is another matter entirely. Bender thinks nothing of the matter, dismissing it as simply the cost of doing business but Charlie seems to recognize the severity of the consequences if they are caught. This was not what he signed on for as the President-in-Chief of Per-Fo. He had much different expectations but the direction of the company is rapidly spinning out of control before it can even get started. Immediate steps must be taken if the company is to survive and Charlie to earn some sort of return on Mrs. Hookstraten's investment. His sense of desperation increases when she writes to tell him she is coming, with high expectations, to Battle Creek to see the factory and stay at the Sanitarium. The pressure is really on Charlie now and he cannot back out of the company and disappoint Mrs. Hookstraten by losing her substantial investment. He must go through with Bender's schemes, no matter how distasteful or illegal they are or face ignominy.

From this point on in *Wellville*, Charlie's fortune keeps sliding downhill in true picaresque fashion. Besides desperation, the other reason he sticks with Bender is because he is such a slick operator. Even when Charlie doubts Bender the most, Bender somehow finds a way to turn dismal situations in his favor and this keeps Charlie believing in the company through the many setbacks they encounter. Filling the Per-Fo boxes with Will Kellogg's cereal was just the trick that was needed to persuade wary investors of the viability of this new product, but it does not solve the problem of the company's inability to make its own cereal. Even though Bender has always come through in moments of crisis before, Charlie cannot think of a way around this serious obstacle. Still, Charlie is in awe as he realizes he is in the presence of a master at making money and talking away the doubts of others:

Charlie had never seen his partner in better form. Bender railed and thundered against his competitors and the naysayers who dared claim that the breakfast-food market was glutted, against the timid and short-sighted who insisted in living in

the last century. . . But he didn't simply rail. Oh no: Bender was far too subtle for that. He was a master of the art of persuasion, a virtuoso of the sales pitch. Once he'd softened them up, once he saw the doubt come to roost in their eyes, he modulated his voice, sweet-talking, seducing--he even passed around his ledger showing some \$32,000 in advance orders. (330)

As this quote demonstrates, Bender has a remarkable ability to persuade others to believe in him and invest their money in his company. He skillfully uses hype to create a demand for his product. He creates an illusion of prosperity and promise that others are willing to literally buy into. What these investors do not realize is that they are being taken in by a hustler who uses deceitful practices and fabrications to achieve selfish ulterior motives. Despite Bender's boastful claims and plans for the future, he has absolutely no intentions of running a cereal factory. All he is doing is playing a well staged part to gain the confidence and money of investors. This money will only find its way into Bender's pockets and not the company's bank account.

Just when Charlie thinks his life as an executive is finally beginning to work out and success is just around the corner, everything collapses, in a narrative that becomes an amusing picaresque misadventure portraying the chaos his life has suddenly and most unexpectedly become. Charlie is forced to live by his wits, but not in the way he expected. Bender has taken all of the investors' money and suddenly skipped town, which leaves Charlie, the President-in-Chief of Per-Fo, responsible for all of the ensuing fallout, including the enormous hotel bill containing Bender's many extravagant expenditures. There are a lot of angry people, such as bill collectors and bilked investors, searching for Charlie, and he has few places to hide. He must deal with the many corporate liabilities created by Bender, including the merchants who were required to place a fifty percent cash deposit on all of their orders in advance. The only communication he has from Bender is a hastily scribbled note which reads: "CHARLIE, YOU WILL KNOW BY THIS THAT I AM GONE & THAT THERE IS NO REASON TO LOOK TO THE PER-FO ACCOUNT AT THE OLD NATIONAL & MERCHANTS--CONSIDER IT MY FEE IN YOUR EDUCATION. WITH ALL REGRETS AND BEST WISHES, YOURS, GOOD" (Boyle *Wellville* 336). This note is Bender's final

humiliation and exploitation of Charlie. Bender had been hustling Charlie all along, but his aspirations to earn a fortune, combined with Bender's well orchestrated machinations, would not allow him to perceive how greed distorted his thinking when he clearly should have. Charlie has allowed himself to be deceived because he wanted to believe in his poorly conceived dream. Bender's note is nothing more than an arrogant slap in the face telling Charlie he has been used, discarded, and left to fend for himself while Bender seemingly gets away without having to face any ugly repercussions. (The narrative indicates that Bender is caught in Detroit.) It is certainly a difficult lesson to be taught, but Charlie does not learn from it and recognize when to stop.

Charlie mistakenly figures that his last hope for redemption is to keep deceiving Mrs. Hookstratten, the woman he affectionately refers to as Auntie Amelia, when she arrives in Battle Creek to see how her investment has been put to use. His reluctance to be honest with her is because of his inability and unwillingness to explain how her \$6,500 investment has vanished along with Bender. He would have to admit that he had been lying to her along, just as Bender had done to him and the disappointment would be too great. Since he cannot let Mrs. Hookstratten know the full truth of his financial and legal problems, he must continue his ruse by telling many lies and acting as if everything were fine with the company, even though it is beginning its inevitable collapse. To convince Mrs. Hookstratten, Charlie begins to adapt Bender's techniques of persuasion by reacting positively to all questions about the company. He realizes that this moment is his opportunity to prove himself as a confidence man, so for him, there is no turning back.

This new attitude toward Mrs. Hookstratten reflects a considerable change in Charlie's role as a picaresque character. Where he was once devoted and loyal toward protecting her investment, he is now only interested in getting more money out of her so that he can flee just as Bender did. Much of this change can be attributed to the negative influence of Bender, who has taught Charlie about the devious aspects of human behavior and how to manipulate them for his own advantage, particularly when it comes to cupidity. As Charlie picks Mrs. Hookstratten up at the train station, the novel explains his newly found thoughts:

He was thinking of money himself at the moment, wondering if he could somehow

manage to hold off the stroke of doom long enough to get more of it out of her-- love, gratitude and the Eighth Commandment notwithstanding. If Bender had taught him anything, it was this: never let mere scruples stand in your way. Bender had taken something soft in Charlie, something weak and yielding, something human, and held it over the torch of his cynicism till it blackened and shrank and grew hard as an ingot. (369)

After his bad experiences with Bender, Charlie has inexplicably lost the gratitude he once had for all Mrs. Hookstratten had done for him throughout his life. Charlie is falling prey to his own aspirations for wealth and he has no concern for how he obtains it, even if it means fleecing people who are close to him. He refuses to be condemned to the life of a small-time hustler. This change in Charlie is an example of the darkest sides of capitalism and how it motivates individuals to succeed at all costs.

Where Bender is a highly skilled confidence builder and a deft manipulator of words, Charlie is still an apprentice learning how to operate in such a fashion. Mrs. Hookstratten may be easy to deceive from a distance because she cannot verify Charlie's glowing claims and projections about the company, but in person she perceives many holes and inconsistencies in Charlie's stories and fabrications. When she is in the Sanitarium she asks many questions about the company and much to her dismay she does not like what she hears. Once she figures out that Charlie has been creating this grand charade to exploit her trust and get more of her money, she turns the tables on him to teach him a hard lesson about life by beating him at his own game. She offers to give the company another \$7,500 if he comes to a special luncheon at the Sanitarium. With this generous promise, Mrs. Hookstratten has Charlie on a chain of his own making. He naively underestimates her as being incapable of seeing through all of his calculations and quick talk, which leaves him unable to anticipate the worst that could happen to him. Once again, Charlie is taken in by his own greed, ineptitude, and an inability to learn from his mistakes. Rather than receive a check, Charlie is confronted by Dr. Kellogg, Mrs. Hookstratten and Will Lightbody, exposed as a fraud and arrested on the spot.

Charlie's dreams of achieving wealth and prosperity as a cereal tycoon have ended in shame, defeat, and humiliation. But as a picaresque character, Charlie still has one final ironic twist of fate in store for him. As he is being transported to the jail, the cart he is in overturns while avoiding an oncoming car. This accident intervenes to set him free so that he will not have to face any of the legal consequences of his actions in Battle Creek. He is flat broke, hungry and shackled, but he is otherwise a free man escaping his inevitable punishment, which he thoroughly deserves. When he is being transported he ponders his dreary future as an incarcerated convict. He contemplates all of his recent mistakes with a sense of regret, but once he is free he begins to consider new ways of making a living through his wits and deception. The end of Charlie's narrative strongly suggests that he will not reform his flimflaming ways, he will just practice them in a different place with a new product in his attempt to find his way to wealth while living an unpredictable picaresque life.

Conclusion

After *Wellville* was completed, Boyle moved in a different direction with his subsequent novels *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Riven Rock*. In his early novels he made extensive use of the picaresque genre's classic elements, particularly its biting satire and social commentary. These novels demonstrate the continuing relevance and creativity of the picaresque genre in postmodern literature. As he developed more as a novelist he moved away from the picaresque to focus on more serious and dramatic themes rather than satiric ones, although they are still present to some degree. This shift shows a desire to apply his talent in different literary directions to take on new ideas while still critiquing the fragmented state of American culture. As a novelist and short story writer, Boyle thrives on exploring the bizarre facets of life in America to show its lively, dynamic and unpredictable properties. He is a writer who openly acknowledges his desire to craft a strong critical reputation without hindering his ability to appeal to a wide audience so that his readers can be simultaneously entertained and informed, in the spirit of the best picaresque literature.

Boyle's early novels are firmly situated in the American picaresque tradition, a genre that has often been overlooked. Boyle's picaresque characters have many similarities with the American picaresque characters that preceded them, while simultaneously showing the new directions and possibilities of this genre. Picaresque characters serve as useful barometers to gauge social conditions, particularly changes and dislocations, as their experiences are vastly different from those of mainstream society. Picaresque characters serve as useful vehicles to comically expose and satirize other characters, idealistic beliefs, as well as society at large and its various practices since

these characters are not bound to uphold accepted social standards. For example, the unnamed protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* struggles throughout the novel to find his identity by associating with various groups that espouse idealistic beliefs and causes. This protagonist learns difficult lessons about the difference between appearances and actualities, as each of these groups fails live up to up to what they preach. Though *Invisible Man* contains many serious ideas and situations, they are interspersed with many instances of picaresque humor to show the absurdity of the unnamed protagonist's circumstances and dilemmas, which in turn makes society appear ridiculous. Eventually this unnamed protagonist comes to a realization that causes him to reject society as hypocritical by living in total isolation. Walter Van Brunt of *World's End* must find his identity by learning his family history. He experiences a similar rejection of idealistic causes but he reacts in a much more destructive manner rather than choosing isolation.

Even though Mark Twain's character Huckleberry Finn experiences life on a different continent than Ned Rise of *Water Music*, they both share some characteristics. Both characters are orphans who must learn the cruel ways of the world without much guidance. Through their authors, these characters make pointed and often humorous observations of how their respective societies function to indicate a deep dissatisfaction with the many flaws and shortcomings of the status quo. They share a similar rejection of society as they each search to escape from it to live life on their own terms. They are constantly tossed about by fate, which teaches them to survive under adverse conditions, and when their tales end, each character is seeking a new way of living life and exploring its opportunities after traveling downriver.

The endless desire for new opportunities and experiences is a distinctly American trait and the characters of American picaresque novels boldly search to find their way in life and make the most of whatever fate throws their way. Curiosity, daring, and resilience are features that embody the very ideals the United States was founded upon. It is puzzling that more picaresque novels have not been written because America is fertile ground for this type of novel. As a country, the United States readily absorbs many different cultures and influences that continuously bring about change. Much like picaresque protagonists, America is still in an ongoing process of creation and

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Abstract

Donadieu, Marc Vincent. B. A., Rutgers University--Camden, 1991; M. A., San Francisco State University, 1993; Doctor of Philosophy, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Spring 2000.

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Title of Dissertation: American Picaresque: The Early Novels of T. Coraghessan Boyle

Dissertation Director: Dr. Mary Ann Wilson

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T. Coraghessan Boyle is a contemporary American writer who has published seven novels and four collections of short stories so far, yet very little has been written about his work. His early novels use many of the protean conventions of picaresque fiction: episodic structure, biting social satire, first-person narration, the themes of alienation, travel, characters escaping their pasts and reinventing themselves, and frequent accidents to show the role of fortune in life, all of which are colored with a late twentieth-century American sensibility. In *Water Music* (1980), *Budding Prospects* (1984), *World's End* (1987), and *The Road to Wellville* (1993) Boyle uses the picaresque genre to generate scathing, insightful and often humorous observations of human folly, hypocrisy, and cruelty through a colorful gallery of con-artists, reprobates, social outcasts and other such antiheroic characters to explore the darker side of human experiences and the meanings behind them.

Boyle's use of the picaresque addresses the chaos and contradictions of our times and earlier eras to indicate how life is never as stable and affirmative as we like to believe. Rather than developing morally idealistic and uplifting social themes, Boyle's novels tend to dwell in the sordid aspects of life to show a fuller, more realistic account of human existence that is often overlooked because of its distasteful and uncomfortable implications about the progress, or lack thereof, in the human condition. With his vivid use of naturalistic detail, Boyle's characters embody the uncertainty and instability of their times, as well as our own, reflecting their status as outsiders in search of entry into a world of prosperity and success. Boyle's early novels are also a satire of the

American Dream, with the exception of *Water Music* which deals with elements common to the American Dream but in a British and African setting. His characters desire to achieve prosperity quickly through corrupt means because they do not believe an ethical approach is a guarantee of success. His novels suggest that the American Dream is only achieved by a fortunate few, as the subsequent demise of his characters leaves their aspirations unfulfilled. By examining these themes, Boyle's early novels show how the picaresque novel is still thriving in postmodern American literature.

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