

"Whan that Aprill": The influence of the General Prologue
of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* on John Steinbeck's
The Wayward Bus

by

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With respect, gratitude, and much love, I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Joan L. Kelley-Phimister. Without her love, support, tolerance, strength, and patience, I would not have been able to progress to this point in my academic career.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck was an American author whose fiction has remained popular throughout the world for most of this century. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1939 for *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. His works include many of the most widely read books in the United States and abroad, and his popular appeal has remained constant. This may be due to his portrayal of common people performing heroic acts or merely attempting to survive in difficult times and often under lethal circumstances. He wrote about minorities, migrants and immigrants, laborers and peasants, whores and hoboes and other people living on the fringes of society. Most of his characters are badly flawed in some way, but Steinbeck gave them a quality of dignity which has allowed millions of readers to sympathize with their plights. In short, all of Steinbeck's characters seem lifelike. Steinbeck's ability to create such characters may have been his greatest gift.

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902 in the small farming community of Salinas, California. He was raised in a middle-class family, but one could not consider the Steinbecks well-to-do; John's father earned his position as treasurer of Monterey County through contacts in the community rather than competence or skill at any previous position (Parini 21). When not in school, John worked in the fields. It was here and on the streets of Salinas that Steinbeck became familiar with the types of people who would later appear as characters in his fiction.

Steinbeck attended Stanford University sporadically throughout the early and mid-1920s but never received a degree. He worked a series of odd jobs until the early 1930s, when commercial success gave him the financial freedom to focus on his writing career. For the next thirty-five years, Steinbeck was a writer of many kinds: a social critic, a novelist, a reporter, a playwright, an essayist, and a short story writer, often mixing two or more of these styles together in his work. Despite his success, he is not accorded a central place in the American canon. The investment in Steinbeck as a serious writer worthy of academic discussion and discourse is less than that granted to many of his contemporaries. A possible reason for this may be his popularity among those readers outside of the academy. Millions of people around the world have read his novels and short stories or have seen his plays and film adaptations; according to the Steinbeck Center Foundation's fact sheet on *The Grapes of Wrath*, 100,000 copies of that novel alone are still bought each year. Those who determine curriculum choices and develop course syllabi may feel that Steinbeck novels do not require in-depth discussion, at least not in a university classroom. Another reason may be that his works are taught in junior and senior high schools. The reasoning may be: "If *Of Mice and Men* can be taught to thirteen-year-old students, then certainly it need not be treated seriously and taught to twenty-year-old university students."

There is no question that most of Steinbeck's characters are earthy, and that his novels appeal to a wide audience due to the lucid quality of his prose. An individual can read a Steinbeck novel and interpret without much difficulty what kind of statement he was trying to make; one can read or see a film or stage adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*,

for example, and understand the tropes of loneliness and responsibility to one's fellow man without a background in literary theory. Despite these qualities of his fiction, Steinbeck was not just a popular writer the way John Grisham or Tom Clancy are today. His work drew deeply from literary classics, and he was an extremely well-read writer throughout his life. In his youth, Steinbeck's reading habits included:

novels by Flaubert, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Charles Dickens, and of the Bible and mythology, (which) was supplemented by equally dedicated reading at school of Shakespeare's plays, parts of *Paradise Lost*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, English romantic poetry, and other classics . . . (McCarthy 8)

John Steinbeck was quite familiar with the traditionally canonical authors of literary history and was cultured enough to know what great literature was. One of the strengths of his fiction is that he incorporated into his tales of 20th century Americans various ideas used previously by a number of great authors.

This is why I find fault with the reasoning behind commonly held arguments why the novels of John Steinbeck do not belong in the university classroom; there is great value to be had by engaging in detailed discussion about many of these works because of the profundity they possess. My objective in this project is to demonstrate the great depth to which a Steinbeck novel may be analyzed using academic discourse and conventions. Through this, I hope to support my contention that John Steinbeck deserves a more conspicuous place in both the canon and the university classroom.

The second author I will discuss in this project is Geoffrey Chaucer. He was among the first and most famous in a long line of great English poets, and he has had a tremendous influence upon those who have come after him. His treatment of character and plot development, in addition to his use of literary devices, were highly innovative. Chaucer's work is a fixture in university English departments, in part, for these reasons. Despite this, Chaucer's poems are somewhat inaccessible to the modern reader; the initial

and sometimes lingering difficulty of reading a work in Middle English is frustrating. Also, Chaucer's texts are dense and layered; it is difficult to read *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, and understand well the essence of the poem without extensive group discussion and repeated study. In short, a casual reader, or a reader unfamiliar with Chaucer's work—regardless of his or her capacities and abilities—for the most part cannot select it from a book shelf, sit down and digest his poetry with anything more than partial comprehension.

At least with an author like Chaucer, it seems that in order for a work to be considered serious enough for academic study at the university level, it must be difficult to read, it must be dense and layered, and it must not be generally accessible to the masses. It is clear that Steinbeck's works are relatively easy to read, they do not appear to be dense or layered, and they are very accessible to the masses. For these reasons, one would infer that Steinbeck's work may not need nor deserve to be studied at the university level. Yet, by dismissing from consideration any text that is easily accessible and popular as unworthy of university study, the academic engages in a dangerous form of literary elitism. I believe that this is what has happened to the fiction of John Steinbeck generally and *The Wayward Bus* specifically. This is a novel which deserves to be reconsidered.

Steinbeck borrowed heavily from *The Canterbury Tales* when writing *The Wayward Bus*; there exist a number of similarities between the two works. To analyze Steinbeck's novel with the Chaucerian influence in mind opens a realm of new critical opportunities, and students of Chaucer may find that reading *The Wayward Bus* is an excellent opportunity to see how far-reaching Chaucer's influence is on other writers. Also, *The Wayward Bus* is an excellent example of how authors have entered into the Chaucerian tradition, borrowing from the poetry of Chaucer to enhance a new work. Whether the primary author of concern is John Steinbeck or Geoffrey Chaucer, I believe

there is insight to be gained from reading *The Wayward Bus* with *The Canterbury Tales* in mind or vice-versa.

CHAPTER TWO: A SURVEY OF THE SCHOLARSHIP

In the spring of 1947, John Steinbeck was interviewed for a feature in the April issue of *Cosmopolitan*. He was writing *The Wayward Bus* at the time and was asked by the interviewer to give a brief synopsis of it. Steinbeck's response was guarded, but he offered a very sparse description. In reply, the interviewer observed:

. . . that it seemed to me an allusive book, that I thought I had caught in it some echoes of *The Canterbury Tales*.

"Well, sure," Steinbeck responded. "Chaucer, the *Heptaméron* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*—it has an indefinite number of echoes of these. It is very carefully and elaborately built. Its architecture is—well—Gothic."

But when I started to discuss possible meanings of *The Wayward Bus* he cut me off.

"It isn't a light book, though it may read like one. Readers will find their own meanings in it, depending on what they bring to it." (van Gelder 44)

Even before it was completed, then, *The Wayward Bus* was called "Chaucerian" by both Steinbeck and an observer of his work. Despite this, no one has fully analyzed the Chaucerian overtones found in the fiction of Steinbeck, not to mention in *The Wayward Bus*. I find this to be rather unusual, since a common motif in his fiction is the pilgrimage, whether the destination is a physical location, like California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, or a renewed spirituality, as in *The Pastures of Heaven*. A short list of Steinbeck titles in which a pilgrimage plays a central role includes—in addition to the three titles I have listed above—*Cup of Gold*, *To a God Unknown*, *The Pearl*, *Sea of Cortez*, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, and *America and Americans*.

In spite of the lack of detailed comparison between the two texts, some critics have alluded to Steinbeck's "Chaucerian" quality. In a description of *The Wayward Bus*, F. W. Watt states that "it (the bus) carries a representative assortment of human beings on a sort of modern Canterbury pilgrimage" (87-88). Jackson J. Benson guesses that

Steinbeck, who had originally set his novel in Mexico, shifted the setting to central California because he "reread *The Canterbury Tales* and realized that the parallel he had planned would not work unless each 'pilgrim' had a different reason for his trip" (576). Despite Benson's hypothesis, in which he seems to suggest that Steinbeck had attempted to write a modern day version of *The Canterbury Tales*—just as it seems Chaucer did with Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*—he makes no other mention of Chaucer nor of his poem, so the reader is left to speculate to which planned parallel Benson refers.

That Steinbeck was attempting to write a novel in the Chaucerian tradition—where one "borrows" from the work of other authors (much of *The Canterbury Tales* was influenced by Boccaccio's *Decameron*) to create "new" works—seems to be suggested from the evidence demonstrated above, but what proves to be conclusive evidence of Steinbeck's intentions is the title he had originally given to the work: *Whan that Aprill*, the first three words of the General Prologue from *The Canterbury Tales*. Steinbeck's friend Nathaniel Benchley suggested that he should choose another title, claiming that *Whan that Aprill* might be a bit obscure for most readers, who would be unfamiliar with Chaucer's poem and would therefore miss the title's meaning (Benson 582). Steinbeck changed the novel's title, but he did not abandon his attempt to borrow from *The Canterbury Tales* often and freely.

Bobbi Gonzales and Mimi Gladstein claim in their essay "*The Wayward Bus*: Steinbeck's Misogynistic Manifesto?" that *The Wayward Bus*'s original title "suggests that Steinbeck had in mind a Chaucerian medley of pilgrims, a representative microcosm of our society" (158). This is the only reference they make to Chaucer. The rest of their essay examines important and cogent issues involving Steinbeck's treatment of his female characters in this representation of society, but I will not stray from my thesis further to discuss their claims here. What is salient is Gonzales and Gladstein's mention of the tie between *The Wayward Bus* and *The Canterbury Tales*. It is the only reference to the

Steinbeck-Chaucer relationship—other than the reviews mentioned above—that I could find in my survey of available scholarship.

With the exception of this short list of essays, reviews, and books in which the pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* are connected in any way with those in *The Canterbury Tales*, there is no other scholarship on this topic. In the absence of published evidence, then, most of this discussion will be based on speculation supported by the primary texts and essays devoted to Steinbeck and Chaucer separately. I will draw parallels using the two texts, discuss their differences, and make suggestions as to how Steinbeck used Chaucer's poem to create his novel. Through this speculation, I hope to demonstrate: how knowing Chaucer's General Prologue can help us to better understand Steinbeck generally and *The Wayward Bus* specifically; how Steinbeck, arguably the most "American" of authors, has placed himself in the literary tradition of Chaucer; how Steinbeck used Chaucer's material to create a commentary about Americans in the twentieth century; and why all of these topics are important and beneficial to Steinbeck studies.

CHAPTER THREE: STEINBECK'S AUTHORIAL INFLUENCES

One very important way to consider the fiction of John Steinbeck as serious and worthy of study is to examine how the writing of others influenced him. Although most of his characters seem to be unaffected by book learning and operate in circles where the value of formal education plays a minor role (if any at all), it would be negligent to assume that Steinbeck was not well read. Beginning at an early age, the importance of reading was impressed upon him. "Some literature was in the air around me. The Bible I absorbed through my skin. My uncles exuded Shakespeare, and *Pilgrim's Progress* was mixed with my mother's milk" (*Acts of King Arthur* xi). These early influences made a lasting impression upon Steinbeck.

Steinbeck's first commercial success, *Tortilla Flat*, was influenced greatly by the Arthurian legends. Danny and his friends are "the knights of the round table," and they engage in adventures and battles, following closely the story line of the *Morte d'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory in the 15th century. The Arthurian legends fascinated Steinbeck; he read them as a boy and studied the Winchester manuscript of *Morte d'Arthur* toward the end of his life with noted Malory scholar Eugène Vinaver. This later effort produced Steinbeck's posthumously published *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*.

This information lays the groundwork for three claims regarding how Steinbeck was influenced by Chaucer. First, Steinbeck had a history of using previously published work to produce a "modern" story, in which there is not a one-to-one borrowing (that is, it is not a straight translation), but there is enough similarity to suggest a definite relationship between the two texts. Second, it demonstrates Steinbeck's familiarity with medieval texts. Third, it establishes that Steinbeck was familiar with Middle English;

this common obstacle to the comprehension of medieval texts like *The Canterbury Tales* was not a hindrance for him. These details make it easier to see how it is likely that for *The Wayward Bus*, Steinbeck had in mind a novel based on *The Canterbury Tales*.

Steinbeck's library included titles by Chaucer and the poets who influenced him: he owned a translation of the *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio; he owned a copy of *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, a treatise which influenced many of Chaucer's poems; and Steinbeck owned two copies of *The Canterbury Tales* (Demott 15, 26-27). One of these copies was a modern translation published by Viking, Steinbeck's publisher for the majority of his career. *The Portable Chaucer* first appeared in 1949, one year after the release of *The Wayward Bus*. Steinbeck received a copy of it from his editor at Viking, Pat Covici, immediately upon the time of its release. "Covici sent me the new Viking Portable Chaucer. It looks very fine" (qtd. in E. Steinbeck and Wallsten 383).

Steinbeck wrote *The Wayward Bus* shortly after the end of World War II. During the war, he wrote for *Newsday*, a Long Island newspaper, as a war correspondent. He spent time with American troops in Great Britain, North Africa, and the Italian peninsula, and he wrote about Americans and Europeans in this time of conflict. Much of the material that appeared under Steinbeck's by-line was factual, but because of military censors and the often vague manner in which he described locations, situations, and people, these essays take on a fictive quality. Many of these reports were collected and published under the title *Once There Was a War*. By 1945, after the controversial success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the time he spent writing about the war, he was ready to try new types of writing which explored "some reaction toward a world whose basic values had plunged it in turn from eleven years of severe economic depression into the massive aggression and destruction of a world war" (Lisca 112).

Steinbeck began work on a short story called *The Pearl* as the end of the war

neared. This was his attempt to move away from the type of work he had done previously. *The Pearl* is an allegorical story of a man who attempts to break away from the bonds of his lowly station only to lose what little bliss he has to the powerful hands of a capitalistic society. Steinbeck wrote it in terms of a dichotomy between good and evil, right and wrong, black and white. It is a sparse, tightly structured story, a drastic departure from the non-teleological ideas Steinbeck used while writing previous works.

Non-teleology rejects the notion that natural phenomena can be explained by final causes. In non-teleology, "there is no ultimate purpose in the universe" (Lisca, 78); everything just *is*. Steinbeck adopted this doctrine largely through the influence of marine biologist and close friend Ed Ricketts, who co-wrote with Steinbeck *Sea of Cortez*, a factual account of their specimen-collecting trip to the Gulf of California just before the United States' entrance into the war. In *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck and Ricketts compared the characteristics and tendencies of many of the marine specimens collected in the Gulf's tide pools to those of humans using non-teleological principles. The specimens served as the subjects of the tide pool, a society in microcosm. Ricketts had a tremendous amount of influence upon Steinbeck, and it was through the scientist's advocacy of non-teleological thought that Steinbeck wrote many of his books. This departure from non-teleology in *The Pearl* seems to be Steinbeck's attempt to demonstrate his ability to write many types of literature; he was trying to show his diversity as an author. His use of *The Canterbury Tales* when writing *The Wayward Bus* appears to be motivated by this same reason.

The Wayward Bus and *The Pearl* were both published in 1947, and although they are both allegorical, they are very different works, most importantly because of Steinbeck's return in *The Wayward Bus* to a non-teleological approach. It lacks the "set-aside and raised-up feeling" Steinbeck himself used to describe *The Pearl*'s aesthetic distance from the reader; it does not have the dichotomy of good and evil. Many of the

novel's characters contain both good and evil qualities. Steinbeck's return to non-teleology may also be seen in the treatment of *The Wayward Bus*'s characters. "(They) are presented more than ever before in the 'non-teleological' fashion, revealing their 'whatness' while the 'whys' form themselves, if at all, in the reader's mind with the minimum of intervention by the author" (Watt 88). In other words, Steinbeck's does not label his pilgrims as both "good" and "bad"; they possess a little of both, and because of this they appear more realistic. Even Alice Chicoy, easily the meanest character in the novel, has her redeeming qualities; Juan likes the way she cooks beans. This non-teleological portrayal of the pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* is similar to the way in which the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are portrayed, especially as they are described by the objective narrator, Geoffrey, in the General Prologue; his description of the characters is in general offered without a judgment regarding their virtues or lack thereof.

Despite the differences between *The Pearl* and *The Wayward Bus*, the latter seems in many ways to be Steinbeck's continuing effort to produce material different from his popular fiction of the 1930s. One possible approach to gain the attention of critics such as those who minimized the brilliance of *The Grapes of Wrath* is to utilize in some aspects a canonical writer's work. To take nothing away from its beauty and well-deserved praise, Jane Smiley's 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, is based largely on and follows closely the story line of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The positive reception of Smiley's novel, it could be argued, is due more to its use of a recognized classic in world literature than its independent radiance. Where the strategy of working within this literary tradition worked well for Smiley, however, it did not work for Steinbeck.

The Wayward Bus was a commercial success; 600,000 copies were sold to the Book of the Month Club and another 150,000 to the trade before publication (E. Steinbeck and Wallsten 296). This was probably due to Steinbeck's mass popularity, for

the novel was a critical failure. F. W. Watt explained that it was not well-received by critics because “Most readers are incorrigibly teleological, and the cry of ‘why’ cannot be stifled.” Readers need to be told the reasons why a particular character is the way he or she is (91). Today, this novel is rarely given much attention, even by Steinbeck scholars. It is passed off as a badly flawed work. “(It) suffers from the intrusive allegorism so damaging to much of Steinbeck’s later fiction” (Owens 69). According to Paul McCarthy, Steinbeck lacked the command of insight into American ideas and people he once demonstrated in earlier fiction (2), and Frank O’Malley stated in the *Commonweal* that “Steinbeck’s dreary, prurient pilgrimage has no real human or universal significance. It is nothing more than an unusually dismal bus ride—more dismal, depraved and meaningless than any man elsewhere has ever taken” (qtd. in Parini 369).

While there is no question that *The Wayward Bus* is one of Steinbeck’s lesser known novels, I contend that the primary reason for its lack of critical success can be attributed to its reliance on the reader’s familiarity with *The Canterbury Tales*. In order for the reader to understand fully the tropes with which Steinbeck was working, he or she must know Chaucer’s poem and must be able to recognize the similarities between the two texts. Through the recognition of these similarities, the meanings of *The Wayward Bus* are enhanced; the novel’s connection to Chaucer is a way of establishing its critical importance. Steinbeck listened to Benchley’s urgings about the obscurity of Chaucer and decided to not use *When that Aprill* as the title, for Chaucer is obscure to most people outside of college towns. However, while Steinbeck changed the novel’s title to avoid this obscurity, he refused to surrender his intentions of using *The Canterbury Tales*. As a result, the novel was received by an enthusiastic but uninitiated popular audience that had no way of understanding the rich layers beneath the surface of “an unusually dismal bus ride.”

CHAPTER FOUR: INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE GATHERING OF PILGRIMS

The Wayward Bus was influenced greatly by *The Canterbury Tales*. This is evident in the similarities between the descriptions of the land in chapter one of *The Wayward Bus* and the opening lines of the General Prologue. Some other parallels between the two works include the way the pilgrims gather, the manner in which they are described, and how—as the stories progress—they contradict the qualities attributed to them initially. In this chapter, I will discuss these parallels and interconnections in turn. The topics here are organized as sub-headings for the sake of clarity.

The Setting of the Pilgrimage

The description of the land in chapter one of *The Wayward Bus* and the opening lines of the General Prologue describe the environment in which the pilgrims of both works will make their physical and spiritual journeys. Both are set in the spring, and the descriptions of how the landscape has begun to blossom are similar. Chaucer says that April has “bathed every veyne in swich licour/of which vertu engendred is the flour” (I [A] 3-4). Similarly, Steinbeck says “the lupines and poppies made a splendid blue and gold earth, when the great trees awakened in yellow-green young leaves . . . A little wind blew in over the fields and brought the smell of lupine and the smell of a quickening earth, frantic with production” (500). Both writers allude to the sun as well; Chaucer says that the flora and fauna “Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth/inspired hath every holt and heeth” (I [A] 5-6), and Steinbeck says that the beauty of the land “caught you in

the throat in the morning and made a pain of pleasure in the pit of your stomach when the sun went down over it." In short, Steinbeck's words seem to be a paraphrase of the beginning of Chaucer's General Prologue. In both, we have a landscape that is fresh and vigorous.

Similarly, both passages suggest a sexual imagery. Arthur Hoffman, a Chaucer scholar, has noted that "the phallicism of the opening lines (of the General Prologue) presents the impregnating of a female March by a male April" (qtd. in Railsback 91). The paragraph taken from *The Wayward Bus* presents sexual imagery in a more overt fashion, describing the "season of flowering and growth." Steinbeck says that the land possessed a beauty one could not ignore; "The sweet smell . . . set you breathing nervously, set you panting almost sexually" (500). This paragraph could be used to describe a person's reactions to a pent-up sexuality as well as to describe the fertile land, and this double entendre is no doubt what Steinbeck had in mind. The notion that Steinbeck is paraphrasing Chaucer is reinforced by a passage taken from the final chapter; here, Steinbeck once again describes the environment in which the passengers of the bus find themselves in erotic terms: "The night was very black, but a new breeze had come up, bearing the *semenous* smell of grass and the spice of lupine" (661, italics mine). The use of the adjective "semenous" to describe the smell of the valley's carpet of grass implies a relationship between nature and the emotional and biological states of the passengers. It also implies both a literal and figurative climax to the story and the personal experiences of each pilgrim on the bus. The passage suggests as well that the "sweet smell (that) set you breathing nervously" has been a constant influence throughout

the novel, just as the theme of sexuality is a constant thread which begins in these initial lines of the General Prologue. Lastly, we can find in the General Prologue the equivalent of the adjective “semenous;” Chaucer says that “April bathes March ‘in swich licour/of which vertu engendred is the flour’” (Railsback 91).

What both the General Prologue and chapter one of *The Wayward Bus* accomplish by describing the land through which the pilgrims will travel is a sense of rebirth and the opportunity to “start anew” with the spirit of the season and the nature of their pilgrimages. Taken as a whole, this is the first indication to the reader that Steinbeck had in mind a band of pilgrims on a spiritual quest to regain what has been lost, just as the Canterbury pilgrims are going to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket to renew their faith, an act of spiritual affirmation.

The Gathering of the Pilgrims

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims gather at the Tabard Inn before commencing their pilgrimages to Canterbury. They make this journey to worship at the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket and to enjoy a holiday. The Host of the Tabard, Harry Bailly, suggests to the gathered pilgrims that they agree to a contest to pass the time on the journey to and from Canterbury. Each in the party will tell two tales on the way, and two more during the return trip to London. According to the rules established by the Host, whoever tells the best tale will receive a meal at the Tabard paid for by the others. Each pilgrim must tell a tale upon demand; if unable to fulfill this obligation, he or she forfeits the contest and is bound to pay for the expenses of all in the group during the trip. This game serves as a device to bind together the pilgrims who tell the tales of the poem.

Also, it provides a framework for *The Canterbury Tales*; the pilgrims are bound by the common journey and the rules of the contest to speak. There is no way to avoid speaking, and in so doing, they reveal a great deal about themselves to the rest of the party and to the reader. Each pilgrim's temperament, mores, behaviors and beliefs are demonstrated through what he or she says.

The pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* gather at the Rebel Corners before leaving for San Juan de la Cruz. Four of the eight passengers on the bus have been stranded there overnight when the bus breaks down. Also, the pilgrims eat in the lunchroom before departing. In these ways, Rebel Corners is like the Tabard Inn. They gather, eat, and sleep there before their pilgrimage commences. Juan Chicoy, the owner of the Rebel Corners lunchroom and service station, is also the driver of the bus, and in these ways his role is much like that of the Host, Harry Bailly. Although Chicoy does not propose a contest nor a prize of food or any other kind, he does offer to the passengers the opportunity to decide among themselves what road the bus will take. This offer binds together the group in much the same manner that the contest does in *The Canterbury Tales*; they are stuck together for better or worse. It is when they are together—particularly when they are indeed stuck together with the mud-mired bus—that they speak and reveal to the other passengers and to the reader what kind of people they are.

The similarities in the pilgrims' destination and the way in which they gather reinforces the notion that Steinbeck incorporated much of the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* when beginning *The Wayward Bus*. These similarities suggest—especially when coupled with the like manner in which the setting is described (spring,

the lushness of the land, and a pent-up sexuality)—that Steinbeck had in mind a story in which the pilgrims aboard the bus are presented with the same type of opportunities for spiritual renewal sought by Chaucer's pilgrims in their pilgrimage to Canterbury.

It is at the “inns” that the pilgrims of each story gather and are introduced to the reader. In the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, each pilgrim is described in detail. They are presented as types, and the reader bases his or her initial assumptions about them based on these capsule descriptions. For example, the Shipman is described in the General Prologue in this way:

And certainly he was a good felawe.
 Ful many a draughte of wyn had he ydrawe
 Fro Burdeux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep.
 Of nyce conscience took he no keep.
 If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,
 By water he sente hem hoom to every lond. (I [A] 395-99)

The Shipman—the Pirate may be a more accurate moniker for him—is described in vivid detail. The reader may interpret what types of behaviors and story he will present based on his occupation, his mores, and his habits.

The Clerk is described in terms of his threadbare clothes, his lean silhouette, and his scrawny specimen of a horse, for he had yet to find an ecclesiastical position (I [A] 285-308). The Franklin is described as a jolly man:

Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in wyn;
 To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
 For he was Epicurus owene sone
 That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit
 Was verray felicitee parfit. (I [A] 334-38)

The Squire is described as “A lovyere and a lusty bachelor” who played on his flute, danced, sang, and fought valiantly on the field of battle in the hopes of impressing his lady (I [A] 79-100). These and other pilgrims are presented as stock characters.

The pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* are presented similarly. As they gather at Rebel Corners to begin their pilgrimage, the reader learns a great deal about these individuals; a description of each character serves as a kind of General Prologue. For example, Pimples Carson, the seventeen-year-old assistant mechanic in the Rebel Corners garage, ogles the women on the Coca-Cola calendar, and he consumes a great deal of sugared foods which, as Alice Chicoy reminds him, he cannot afford and should not eat:

“What do you want to eat all that sweet stuff for? . . . Why don’t you lay off for a while?”

“It’s rich in food energy,” he said. “Fellow’s going to work, he needs food energy. Take about three o’clock in the afternoon when you get a let-down. Why, you need something rich in food energy.” (509)

Through this passage, we learn a great deal about Pimples. First, he lacks self-control. Despite knowing that sugar-laden food stuffs are detrimental to both his complexion and his pay check, he cannot help but give in to temptation. Also, we learn that he is impressionable; his explanation of why he eats such things—“it’s rich in food energy”—was probably told to him in some form of advertisement. This reinforces what the reader can infer from his gaze at the Coca-Cola calendar girls and what he or she is told earlier about Pimples: He is, in general, an immature and impressionable young man.

Another pilgrim about whom the reader learns a great deal in the “prologue” to

Steinbeck's novel is Norma, the young waitress in the cafeteria. She is in love with Clark Gable, the Hollywood actor who during the 1940s was the icon of the glamorous motion picture industry and an object of veneration to young and star-struck women like her. Norma writes Gable love letters that she never sends, has pictures of him which she treats like holy relics, and daydreams about their meeting, when he will be enchanted by the sight of her and will sweep her away. She is a young, romantic woman who is deeply impressionable, and becomes a passenger on the bus to San Juan de la Cruz so that she can go to Hollywood and pursue her dreams of a glamorous motion picture-star life. To Norma, Gable is the saint to whom she makes her pilgrimage, much as the riding party in *The Canterbury Tales* travel to Canterbury to worship Saint Thomas Becket. In short, both Pimples and Norma—in addition to other pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus*—are presented as types. Steinbeck's capsule descriptions of Pimples and Norma at the beginning of the novel support this when he suggests that they are just like the series of mechanic's assistants and waitresses who worked at Rebel Corners and left at some point for Hollywood.

Although these capsule descriptions quite often prove to be prophetic, some pilgrims in each story contradict the types in which they are placed. For example, in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath is described as a lecherous type of woman. She has had five husbands and—apparently—other lovers, and she is described as knowing how to play the game of love. She reinforces her image as a lecherous woman in her prologue. Despite the image she projects, she tells a fairy tale in which true love is found. This tale suggests she is in search of true love as opposed to a

purely physical relationship, something contradictory both to her lecherous image and to what the reader is led to expect. Likewise, the Franklin is a pilgrim who contradicts the type into which he is placed. He is a wealthy landowner and politician and is devoted to the pleasures of food. According to Margaret Hallissy, fasting “denies the body but nourishes the soul” (37). The Franklin is described as a man whose soul is less than pure, for he is a vociferous eater. However, the Franklin does not tell in his tale of earthly pleasures. Rather, it demonstrates through the story of Dorigen and Arveragus his views of women’s chastity and equality in marriage. The tale told by the Franklin is another example of how the initial impression of these pilgrims is contradicted by the tale he or she tells.

The pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* similarly contradict the types by which they are described initially. For example, Camille Oaks—in a fashion similar to the Wife of Bath—is described in terms of her sexuality. “In some subtle way this girl smelled of sex” (546). She is a provocative and beautiful woman, and while all the men in the novel react to her presence with a sense of arousal, all the women react to her with a sense of jealousy and hatred. Despite her appearances and her occupation as a stripper, however, she wants only to settle into a tranquil domestic life, one in which she feels secure and normal.

Elliott Pritchard is described as a captain of industry and a leader of men, but as the novel unfolds, the reader is presented with a man who is not the leader of his family nor of himself; he has allowed the guidelines of his occupation—executive in corporate America—dictate what he likes and dislikes, and he has allowed his wife to manipulate

and control him. During the course of his marriage, his wife had slowly strangled any sexual impulses he had “until he himself believed that he was reaching an age when such things did not matter” (527). He is a follower, not a leader.

Another pilgrim on the bus who contradicts the type given to him is Ernest Horton. He is a traveling salesman of novelty items like the Little Wonder Artificial Sore Foot he presents to his fellow pilgrims in the lunchroom of Rebel Corners. He seems to be kind of a simple-minded, earthy character, much like the Miller in *The Canterbury Tales*. Despite this, he is bright enough to realize what Elliott Pritchard wants out of his proposed business venture, and he possesses a self-awareness that most of the other pilgrims lack. By the novel’s end, all three of these pilgrims have demonstrated how they differ individually from the type to which they have been assigned. It is these differences which mark them as characters who are distinct from others like Pimples and Norma whose actions, behaviors, and habits demonstrate how they have not distinguished themselves from the paradigm.

The Pilgrims as a Society in Microcosm

The pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* can be viewed as a representative group of fourteenth century England; they are a small group which is used by Chaucer to comment about his society’s state of affairs. Many different types of people are represented by the Canterbury-bound pilgrims: heroes, villains, warriors, dishonest clergymen, scoundrels, fools, and sinners of all kinds. Some of them possess two or more of these qualities. *The Canterbury Tales* was a commentary which scrutinized Chaucer’s community and institutions. For example, the Church in Chaucer’s time was often populated by corrupt

members; men and women entered convents, monasteries, and other orders of Christian worship not to serve God, but rather to support themselves. His less than flattering description of the Monk is a criticism of all monks; his description of the Summoner indicts all summoners of his time. The group of pilgrims heading to Canterbury, then, is a microcosm of the society of which Chaucer was a member, and his depiction of the individual pilgrims as stereotypes is a critique of their kind.

Steinbeck uses the same types of devices and conventions. The travelers in *The Wayward Bus* represent a number of personality types found in post-World War II America: restless youth, disenchanted veterans of the war, women who do not fit into the prescribed archetypes of female behavior, controlling housewives, and manufacturers of war goods. The status of American society in this era has seemed to have left them out of touch with themselves. These American pilgrims, while at Rebel Corners or on the bus, are placed in circumstances that compel them to interact with the other members of the group, revealing in the process their personal qualities to all, including themselves and the reader. In this way, Steinbeck's pilgrims are types just as Chaucer's are.

This similarity in the way the two stories introduce their characters cannot be denied. Each character is introduced to the reader according to what they wear, how they behave, what they do, and what place in society they occupy. In both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus*, the reader is presented with personality types that are synecdochical in nature. Pritchard represents all businessmen in 20th century America just as the Knight represents all knights in Medieval England.

The similarity in how both Chaucer and Steinbeck develop a society in

microcosm is one more indication that Steinbeck had *The Canterbury Tales* in mind when he was writing *The Wayward Bus*, and that he was consciously entering into the Chaucerian tradition. Steinbeck needed a means with which he could comment about the spiritual state of his nation, and he found it in the example provided by Chaucer.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE PILGRIMS

I see the most striking similarities between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus* in the comparison of each story's pilgrims. The ways in which these pilgrims behave, interact, and reveal themselves to the other pilgrims and to the reader are the strongest indication that John Steinbeck used *The Canterbury Tales* to a great extent as he wrote *The Wayward Bus*. In this chapter, I will compare and contrast the various ways in which Steinbeck uses Chaucer's pilgrims to create his own. The topics of discussion will be the similarities of the pilgrimages, the development of the characters, similarities between the characters, and allegorical elements found in each story.

Similarities of the Pilgrimages

One similarity between the pilgrims of both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus* is that they take part in their pilgrimages both voluntarily (no one has forced them to go and no one is keeping them in the group) and involuntarily (there are external forces which keep each member from leaving the group). For example, the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are bound together. These pilgrims are not forced to take the trip to Canterbury; they are making it by choice. The Knight, for example, could elect to make the trip later, possibly after he has been home from battle for a time. They are making the trip voluntarily, and they choose to enter into both the riding party and the contest on their own accord. In the General Prologue, Harry Bailly does not insist on a contest. Rather, he suggests it:

“ . . . I maken yow disport,
 As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort.
 And if yow liketh alle by onn assent
 For to stonden at my juggement,
 . . . But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow my heed!
 Hoold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche.”

The pilgrims agree to the contest voluntarily. “Oure conseil was nat longe for to seche” (I [A] 771-84). This, and their decision to ride together, are choices which they make individually, but it also binds them together as a group for the duration of the trip. If one was to break the rules of the contest—decide by one’s volition—he or she would forfeit and have to pay for the prize on his or her own.

Another consideration which binds the riding party is the fear of bandits on the road to Canterbury; one was less likely to be attacked if he or she was in a group. This is incentive to not only join the riding party but to stay in it as well. Although a pilgrim has the freedom to head out on his or her own (i.e., there is no rule to keep all of the contest members together), he or she is influenced by factors operating outside of the group which compels the pilgrim to stay within it. Thus, once the pilgrims leave the Tabard Inn, they are a group whether they like it or not.

The pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus* join the group voluntarily and involuntarily in a similar fashion. For example, each of the nine passengers going to Los Angeles and Hollywood decides by their own choice to take the trip aboard Chicoy’s bus. Norma and Pimples take the trip voluntarily; she could have hitched a ride with a passing auto or could have taken the Greyhound bus to San Ysidro, and he is making the trip so he can stare at the provocative and glamorous Camille Oaks. Juan Chicoy leaves the bus after he drives it into a ditch, but he returns to it by choice. Camille is taking the bus in order

to save money. Van Brunt decides to make the trip after changing his mind about leaving on the Greyhound. The Pritchards are taking the bus to “see the country.” Horton takes the bus for business purposes, but he—like the others—chooses to stay with the group when the going becomes difficult. Any one of the pilgrims could have departed from the others at Rebel Corners, Breed’s store, or after the bus gets stuck, but they stay together as a group voluntarily.

Despite this, there are elements which force the pilgrims aboard the bus to stay together involuntarily. This is another similarity between *The Wayward Bus* and *The Canterbury Tales*. With the exception of Pimples and possibly Van Brunt, all of the passengers need to make their connections at San Juan de la Cruz. Norma feels that she must leave the Chicoys after she catches Alice reading her private letters to Clark Gable. The passengers are forced to stay at Rebel Corners when the bus breaks down, and they are forced to remain together when the bus becomes stuck—they must wait for Juan to get help. In essence, they have chosen to remain together, and that choice, in a sense, is the only one they can make.

Like the members of the riding party to Canterbury, the passengers of Steinbeck’s bus are making a pilgrimage. All are going to the fictive mission town of San Juan de la Cruz. It is here that the passengers will transfer to the bus line running south on the state highway to Los Angeles and Hollywood, a site of worship to which people make pilgrimages. This is the final destination for most of the passengers. Steinbeck describes the mechanic apprentices at Rebel Corners like Pimples as cocky young men to whom “opportunity beckoned constantly, drawing them ever southward toward Los Angeles

and, of course, Hollywood, where, eventually, all the adolescents in the world will be congregated" (497). The same lure of opportunity could be used to describe the young women in the novel. Indeed, Hollywood can be seen, then as now, as the holy center of the twentieth century American religion of popular culture in which youthful glamour is celebrated, and everyone aspires to dreams of discovery and stardom. Hollywood is like the Canterbury Cathedral in that pilgrims travel there to pay homage to their saints and to visit the shrine.

The final destination for three of the passengers is Mexico, a staunchly religious country in which the saints play a large role. These three passengers, the Pritchards, constitute a misguided family. Although their reason for going is pleasure, they are not going to Mexico to worship at any shrine but their own self-centeredness. This differentiates them from not only the other passengers on the bus, but also from Chaucer's pilgrims, who use the pilgrimage to Canterbury as an opportunity for both worship and holiday. Although the novel does not document the travels of the Pritchards beyond San Juan de la Cruz, the reader can assume that they will not enjoy their time south of the border; neither Bernice nor Elliott want to go, and Mildred does not want to go there with her parents.

In this sense, there are two pilgrimages taking place on the way to both Canterbury and San Juan de la Cruz; one is a physical journey to a place of worship of one kind or another, the other a personal journey in which the pilgrims either recognize a part of themselves which had previously not been actualized, or demonstrate to the reader how they are honestly in touch with themselves and know how to cope in difficult

situations.

Stuck in surroundings and circumstances in which they have relinquished the comforts of familiarity and physical security, all of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*—through the nature of the tale contest—are compelled to speak and reveal some quality of themselves. This causes the tale-telling pilgrim to place him- or herself in a position of vulnerability, for when he or she speaks, the other pilgrims and the reader are given the power to pass judgment. By the end of *The Miller's Tale*, for example, a fabliau which “quites” or responds to the tale told previously by the Knight, there is no question to which class the Miller belongs nor of his mental and social capacities (Benson 8). His tale reinforces the manner in which he is described in the General Prologue and his membership in the lower classes. Likewise, *the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* reveal her intelligence, insight, and beliefs concerning marriage and power. By the end of her tale, the other pilgrims have been moved enough to continue to address the topic of marriage.

The self-confrontation which the pilgrims experience is most intense when they are stranded on the old road, but it occurs in the lunchroom of Rebel Corners as well. For instance, no one is more put out by his unfamiliar surroundings than Elliott Pritchard. He is a man whose “business was conducted by groups of men who worked alike, thought alike, and even looked alike” (514). He does not know how to act or what to expect when he is outside of his closely-knit circle of like-minded associates. This pilgrimage—one which he did not want to take in the first place—is difficult for him, for he is separated from his protective devices the same way they are stripped from

Chaucer's pilgrims by the tale contest being played. In this foreign environment, Pritchard must face how out of touch he is with himself and the world at large. Like the Miller, each time Elliott Pritchard opens his mouth, he reveals his weakness and his foolishness.

The pilgrimage in each story serves as a platform on which the individual pilgrims gather and are forced to interact with one another in comparable manners. It is under the terms of this forced interaction that each pilgrim demonstrates his or her strengths and/or weaknesses.

Development of characters

The reader is first introduced to the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* during the General Prologue. Each is described in terms of attire, appearance, and habits. These descriptions indicate what type of person he or she is and foreshadow the type of tales the reader can expect from each. For example, the Miller is described in terms of his physical stoutness, his prowess at wrestling, and his great strength, used to accomplish such tasks as ripping doors off of their hinges or breaking them down with his body. A grotesque wart on his nose is described graphically, and his reputation as an indecent person is detailed. Similarly, the Summoner's face is badly pocked and blemished:

(He) hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,
 For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe,
 As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,
 With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
 Of his visage children were afered.
 Ther nas quyk-silver, lytarge, ne brymstoon,
 Boras, ceruce, ne oille of tartre noon,
 Ne oynement that wolde clense and byte,
 That hym myghte helpen of his whelkes white,
 Norof the knobbes sittynge on his chekes. (I [A] 624-33)

These physical imperfections indicate a flaw in the character of one of Chaucer's pilgrims. "In keeping with medieval theories on physiognomy, the pseudoscience of reading character in the face, the Summoner would be seen as a man whose ugly body houses an equally ugly soul" (Hallissy 48). The reader can reason with some of the pilgrims—as I said in the discussion of stereotypes in Chapter Four—what type of tale a character will tell based on their physical description. As with the Summoner, the character of Pimples can be explained through a description of his complexion. For example:

He was a slender-waisted boy of seventeen, with narrow shoulders and a long foxy nose and eyes that were pale in the morning and became greenish-brown later in the day . . . (he) kept his hands at his sides as much as he could, but in spite of himself his fingers would move to his pitted cheeks until he became conscious of what he was doing and put his hands down again. (502)

As *The Wayward Bus* progresses, the other characters learn more and more about Pimples, just as the reader of the novel does. This is the case with all the characters; no one's qualities and inner conflicts are left unexamined and undeveloped. Pimples is a young man overwhelmed with the symptoms of puberty; his appetites for sexual intimacy and the sweet foods of the Rebel Corners restaurant are prodigious. These symptoms drive Pimples's actions; his lack of voluntary action and muscle control (picking at his face), defines him. "His mind and his emotions were like his face, constantly erupting, constantly raw and irritated" (502). No character in *The Canterbury Tales* is exactly like Pimples, but he and the Summoner have in common a flawed complexion. If physiognomy accounts the Summoner's ugly face by claiming that he possesses an ugly

soul, Steinbeck seems to be implying that Pimples is flawed both physically and spiritually. The way in which Pimples and the other passengers on the bus are described is similar to the way in which the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales* are described.

The reader of either story learns a great deal about the characters based on what they wear. For example, in *The Canterbury Tales*, many of the characters who serve the Church wear clothing or jewelry which seems at odds with their vocations. The Prioress's clothing is described in this way:

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first write a crowned A,
And after *Amor vincit omnia*. (I [A] 157-62)

Although she is taken a vow of poverty and has sworn to serve God, she possesses expensive and beautiful garments and jewelry. These details call into question her faithfulness and make the reader wonder about her character. The Clerk is another pilgrim to Canterbury about whom the reader can infer a great deal based on clothing. He does not spend money on his attire; as a student dedicated to his studies, he spends whatever money he has on books:

Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy,
For he hadde gotten hym yet no benefice,
Ne was so worldly for to have office.
For hym was levere have at his beddes heed
Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,
Of Aristotle and his philosophie
Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie. (I [A] 290-96)

He is a man who—unlike some of the other pilgrims, most notably the Prioress, the Sergeant of the Law and the Doctor of Physic—is not concerned with his appearance. He

is more concerned with what he knows than how he looks. Because of this, the reader can accept him as a trustworthy narrator of a tale. Clothing is described with the same attention to detail in *The Wayward Bus*. Ernest Horton, the traveling salesman, has his clothing described in this way:

He was dressed in a double-breasted suit; his shirt was of that light brown color worn by traveling men and known as a thousand-miler because it does not show dirt. His suit was a neutral pepper-and-salt for the same reason, and he wore a knitted dark green tie . . . He had a brushed look about him, as though he had cleaned the lint from his suit with his hairbrush; and his shirt had the strained appearance that comes from washing the collar in the hand basin and patting it flat on the dresser top to dry. (513)

This passage reveals much about Ernest Horton. He spends a great deal of time on the road, and he knows how to take care of his clothing and make it appear clean. He is a working man who relies on his appearance to make sales; he needs to “appear” hardworking. He is concerned with his appearance, for it denotes his role in the world.

Norma is also described in terms of her clothing and her habits. “(She) wore the wash dresses featured by the National Dollar Stores, though, of course, she had a sateen dress for parties. But if you looked closely you could always find some little bit of beauty even on the wash dresses” (499). She owns many pieces of jewelry, including a gold-filled wedding ring and a Brazilian-type diamond ring, both of which she brought out from her locked suitcase at night to wear to bed. She took them off every morning and replaced them in the locked suitcase. Through this description alone, the reader can surmise correctly that Norma is a deeply romantic young woman who fancies herself to be more attractive than she really is. Mildred Pritchard is similar to Norma concerning jewelry, but in her case personal beauty is enhanced by the removal of an accessory: her

glasses. When Juan Chicoy enters the lunchroom at Rebel Corners, Mildred removes her glasses as quickly as possible in order to appear more attractive, but in order to focus her blurry sight she must push a finger against the skin around her eyes. This comical maneuver—which unlike Mildred, Camille finds so conspicuous—deprives her of the eyesight she needs to look at Juan, and demonstrates her inner weaknesses.

These are a few of the ways in which the characters in *The Wayward Bus* bear a resemblance to those in *The Canterbury Tales*. I suggest that Steinbeck, as he described each character in turn, had in mind the General Prologue, and that he chose to borrow the ends accomplished by these initial descriptions without using the means of a set-aside prologue. At any rate, a general prologue would have been difficult to incorporate into the story line, for unlike the pilgrims, most of the passengers of the bus did not want to spend the night at Rebel Corners; they were stranded there overnight due to mechanical failure. They would not have entered into “the riding party” if they were given their own free will; they would have made the trip to San Juan de la Cruz as individuals on the bus and would have kept to themselves and their own fetishes and self-deception. Like Chaucer’s pilgrims, however, they must stay together in a group.

Peter Lisca, in his book *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth*, splits the ten major characters of *The Wayward Bus* into two groups. The first includes Juan Chicoy, Camille Oaks, and Ernest Horton. These characters are similar in many ways. They are sexually attractive, have distinct ability in their professions, and share a self-awareness, an objective view of their relationship to the world. They are in touch with who they are and what they want. This is brought out clearly when the bus becomes stranded. Juan

leaves the bus with the intention of running away to Mexico, but ultimately he returns to free the bus, to drive the pilgrims to San Juan de la Cruz, and to head back to his life with Alice. Camille's patience is tried by Norma and Pritchard, but she stands her ground with them and all others who try her. At the novel's end, she is still intact. Horton does not give in to Pritchard's less-than-noble designs either and heads to Hollywood with both his plans for pleasure and business in Hollywood and his integrity intact.

The members of the other group in *The Wayward Bus*—Norma, Pimples, the Pritchards, Van Brunt, and Alice Chicoy—are clearly inferior. "Each is in some way hypocritical or weak and lacking in most or all of the first group's qualities" (143). Some members will probably outgrow this group; Norma will outgrow her infatuation with Clark Gable and will through maturity and experience become more aware of who she is and what she wants. Pimples will overcome his uncontrollable weaknesses for sweets and lust as he leaves his teenage years. A foreshadowing of this can be seen when—after forcing himself on Norma—he pays a sort of penance by ruining his shoes and clothing trying to free the bus from the ditch. He knows his behavior is unacceptable, but he cannot control the adolescent cravings he will outgrow. Mildred Pritchard will come to know what she wants and what type of person she wants to be once she comes to grips with who she is. Perhaps, this self-discovery will be attained by Mildred once she leaves school and the control of her parents. Also, some of their defects are physical and can be corrected (Bernice's weak eyes with corrective lenses; Pimples's blemished complexion with age and/or medication; Norma's naiveté with experience).

The remaining four "inferior" characters in *The Wayward Bus* have less hope.

Alice Chicoy uses alcohol to soothe her pains, and Van Brunt, the misanthropic old man, has a near-fatal stroke before changing his views of mankind. The time for him to act has passed. Bernice Pritchard uses her husband's aggression in the cave as an opportunity to regain in the end the power in the relationship—or *soveraynetee*, as the Wife of Bath calls it, and Elliott Pritchard, by the end of the novel, returns to his normal subservient manner when interacting with his wife.

A similar division of characters can be made with the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. The members of the “good” group include the Knight, the Squire, the Clerk, the Franklin, the Parson, and the Plowman. For example, the Knight is a man of virtue and principle, as he demonstrates when he intervenes in the quarrel between the Host and the Pardoner. The Squire is a young man in training to become a knight, and from the description of his conduct in battle, it seems likely that he will one day be a good one. He seems to be a fine young man, and his tale, although unfinished, reinforces this belief. Likewise, the Clerk, the Franklin, the Parson and the Plowman seem to be “good” characters who are noble and self-aware. Their tales also reinforce their admirable qualities.

There is an “inferior” group of pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* as well. This group includes the Monk, the Friar, the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Cook, the Shipman, the Doctor of Physic, the Manciple, and the Reeve. Although there is no direct correspondence between this group and the inferior pilgrims in *The Wayward Bus*, they all abuse the power of their positions to benefit themselves. For example, the Monk has—by the nature of his position with the Church—taken a vow of poverty, yet he eats

and dresses very well, which suggests that he is abusing his position. The Friar also knowingly breaks his vows; he violates his vow of chastity, spending time with women. He eats and drinks at the taverns of London as well, habits which are at odds with his duties as a mendicant. The Shipman, as I mentioned earlier, is a scoundrel. His reasons for taking part in the pilgrimage to Canterbury at all seem to be dubious, for the profit of worshipping at the shrine of a saint seems to be diminutive for the Shipman. He is a pilgrim whose rationale for being on the trip may be underhanded. The Doctor of Physic is a good medical man but seems to be in the profession for personal gain. Likewise, the other characters in this group either abuse the power of their positions (the Summoner and Pardoner, the Manciple, and the Reeve) or are diseased (the Cook, for example, is too drunk to tell a second tale when he is called to do so by Harry Bailly).

In *The Canterbury Tales*, there is a third group of pilgrims which consists of people who are either in between the “good” and “bad” groups, or about whom there is not enough information given to put them in either group. This group consists of the Yeoman, the Prioress, the Second Nun, the Merchant, the Five Guildsmen, the Wife of Bath, the Sergeant of the Law, the Miller, the Host, Harry Bailly, and the narrator, Geoffrey. For example, there is not enough information about the Five Guildsmen, but we do know that they have banded together in order to increase their profits. This could be seen as their effort to protect their economic stability, or it could be seen as simple greed. The reader does not know which it could be, however, because there is not enough information supplied to us by the narrator for him or her to make a judgment. Likewise, we know very little about Harry Bailly. None of the pilgrims question his integrity to

keep up his end of the contest; he is given a position of leadership of both the contest and the riding party. The Miller is a big, ugly, aggressive, and earthy type of character who tells a tale one would expect him to tell; he offers the pilgrims a fabliau. Yet, despite his appearance, demeanor, and story-telling abilities, he does not do anything which would warrant his inclusion in the group of “inferior” pilgrims. The same can be said of other members in this “in-between” group. There are hints that they are less than honest and forthright, but other qualities blur the reader’s image of them. They must be placed in a gray area between black and white. Although there is no one-to-one comparison among the various members of, say, the “good” groups, there is enough similarity to suggest that Steinbeck had in mind this type of separation when writing *The Wayward Bus*.

This comparison between the division of “good” and “bad” pilgrims in each story demonstrates another similarity between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus*. Steinbeck used this dichotomy of character groups to create a band of pilgrims who—despite their possession of both strong and weak personality features—are divided between those whose spirituality is strong and those whose spirituality is not.

Character similarities

As I have stated, *The Wayward Bus* is not a retelling of *The Canterbury Tales*; it borrows elements of Chaucer’s poem and incorporates them into various aspects of the novel. In this same sense, there is not a pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales* who is exactly like, say, Juan Chicoy. Rather, Juan possesses the qualities of a number of the pilgrims.

Steinbeck has done this before. In *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck borrows from Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (Hayashi 20). In *Tortilla Flat*, which is based

loosely on the Arthurian legends, he used many of the qualities found in the different knights to develop each of his *paisanos*. For example, Danny is much like Arthur, but in other ways resembles Launcelot. The Pirate is like Percival and Galahad (Lisca 60-61). Ironically, many critics were critical of *Tortilla Flat*; their claims that it lacked significant unity belies the fact that Steinbeck used the Arthurian legends to achieve this end. “Later, to answer criticism and clarify purpose and structure in the book, he added to the second edition a preface which begins:

“This is the story of Danny and of Danny’s friends and of Danny’s house . . . of how these three things became one thing . . . Danny’s house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny’s friends were not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organization beautiful and wise.” (McCarthy 38)

In other words, Steinbeck had to announce overtly what the interconnections were so that the structure would not be overlooked. It seems as if a similar preface announcing how the passengers of *The Wayward Bus* were “not unlike a band of Chaucerian pilgrims” might have helped readers understand the relationship the novel has with *The Canterbury Tales*. This seemed to be the purpose of the novel’s original title, *Whan that Aprill*. When Steinbeck abandoned this title, there was nothing left to let the reader know in an overt fashion that this novel contains many Chaucerian overtones, and that its characters are composites of the Canterbury pilgrims.

There are ten primary characters in *The Wayward Bus*, but I will focus only on two of them here—Camille and Juan—to demonstrate the qualities they all have in common with the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. The first, Camille Oaks, bears a strong resemblance to the Wife of Bath. Both are strong-willed women who know how

to handle men. The Wife of Bath tells the other pilgrims that she has been married five times, and she welcomes her sixth husband. According to Larry D. Benson, "the Wife of Bath's Prologue" is "a lecture to a young woman on how to outwit men" (11). Certainly, Camille knows how to outwit men, and she tries to pass on some of this knowledge to Norma. More than just their similarities of will, Camille resembles the Wife of Bath in some aspects of appearance. The Wife is described physically as a lecherous type, and the description of Camille through the eyes of Louie indicates that she is likely to be full of lust. In short, they are women who both appear to be driven by their carnality. In actuality, neither is. The tale told by the Wife of Bath is a fairy tale, not a bawdy story of lust. This indicates her character as someone whose drives are more substantial than sex. Similarly, Camille Oaks is not consumed by thoughts of intercourse; her dream, rather, is to find someone who will give her the peace she desires. Lastly, both women possess an anonymous quality. Camille Oaks is a name she concocts to establish a distance between herself and the men on the bus (the name is taken from a Camel cigarettes advertisement and the oak trees outside of Rebel Corners). The Wife of Bath is addressed by this title because she has been married and because she comes from the town of Bath. Neither the reader nor the pilgrims are given any other name. The non-specificity of the title makes the Wife of Bath somewhat anonymous.

Camille is similar to the woman in the tale told by the Wife of Bath as well; the knight is forced to choose between a wife who is ugly and faithful and a wife who is beautiful and possibly faithless. Camille finds herself in this position when she is offered a job by Elliott Pritchard to be his personal secretary. She forces Pritchard to see that the

job he offers to her is nothing more than a guise to solicit her as his mistress. In essence, Pritchard must choose between his wife, who is old, ugly and not sexually attractive yet faithful, and Camille, who is young, attractive, and sexy, will probably not be faithful. The choice, of course, is not Pritchard's; Camille merely points out to him what he is really trying to do by offering her a job.

Juan Chicoy, as the owner of the Rebel Corners service station and cafeteria, can be compared to the Host, Harry Bailly. Juan lets the Pritchards and Ernest Horton sleep in his bed and those of his wife, Pimples, and Norma. Also, Juan feeds them breakfast before they begin the trip to San Juan de la Cruz. He is like Harry Bailly in another way as well; as the driver of the bus, he commands the same type of authority that the Host does in the story telling contest. His decision is final and cannot be challenged, as Van Brunt finds out. However, he possesses also the qualities of the Knight. He is strong, noble, and battle-scarred; he has lost half of his left ring finger, and there is a scar on his lip. Also, just as the Knight is described as the highest ranking pilgrim in the riding party, Juan is the pilgrim who is the most self-aware and the most courtly. When Mildred asks him questions about their tryst in the barn, he does not lie to her. Juan tells Mildred exactly how he feels about her and in which direction their relationship is headed. In addition, Juan is like the Yeoman, for both are working men who are good at their tasks. Juan knows how to both drive and repair the bus, and he takes charge of the effort to free the bus once it is stuck in the ditch. Also, both Juan and the Yeoman are rustic countrymen, indicated by the work clothes they wear. Lastly, the faces of both men are brown. The similarity here is that both pilgrims are simple, down-to-earth men

who do not attempt to be what they are not.

Allegory

As I mentioned early in this thesis, *The Wayward Bus* is an allegory:

"(it) follows man's wayward journey through the modern world in which a diverse group of men and women . . . are forced by circumstances to reexamine themselves and inspect the way in which they relate to one another. Before the end of their trouble-filled journey, they either destroy or in some way redeem themselves, depending upon their willingness to alter and re-channel their thinking." (Hayashi 16)

Steinbeck was attempting to express his feelings about the state of society in post-World War II America and to critique it through his group of pilgrims. He created with this group on the bus trip to San Juan de la Cruz a contemporary symbolic representation of America. Steinbeck felt that the citizens of the United States in the mid to late 1940s were out of touch with themselves and their spirituality; they worshipped false idols, clung to their insecurities and tried their hardest to maintain their self-delusions. In this sense, *The Wayward Bus* is prophetic; only a few years after the novel's publication, the era of McCarthyism and the Red Scare devastated the careers and lives of many people, including many who worked in the shrine of modern idolatry: Hollywood. This destruction was caused by the self-delusion of a nation who feared infiltration by foreign spies. The years of the McCarthy "witch hunts" are a time at which modern-day Americans can look back and recognize how misguided their nation was in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The Canterbury Tales served the same purposes in Chaucer's time. His pilgrims were a symbolic representation of the status of a kingdom in the midst of the Hundred Year's War with France. The Black Death killed people in large numbers. The Peasant's

Revolt of 1381, in which the Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered, created a great deal of turmoil for the English people. *The Canterbury Tales* is an allegorical look at Chaucer's society amidst a time of great upheaval.

The similarities between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus* are many and varied, and they seem to suggest that Steinbeck used the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* as a model when writing his novel. The pilgrims of both stories are in pursuit of pleasure, learn a great deal about their fellow travelers as the journey progresses, and reveal their inner selves at the same time. In addition, the passengers on the bus to San Juan de la Cruz possess qualities and behave in ways that correspond directly with the pilgrims of Chaucer's poem.

According to Larry D. Benson, "The portraits of Chaucer's pilgrims . . . owe a great deal to medieval traditions of literary portraiture, including the series of allegorical descriptions in *The Romaunt of the Rose*" (5). According to Margaret Hallissy, allegory was a popular genre in the Middle Ages, and "it fulfilled what many saw as the ultimate purpose of literature: to teach religious and moral values" (96). Chaucer wrote his poetry in the allegorical tradition of his time, and *The Canterbury Tales* can be read as an instrument with which a reader can learn religious and moral values. The poems can demonstrate both desirable and undesirable methods of living, and it can present it within the context of an entertaining and socially enlightening story.

Peter Lisca claims that the seven "inferior" characters in *The Wayward Bus* embody the seven deadly sins of wrath, pride, avarice, sloth, envy, gluttony, and lust. For example, Alice Chicoy (wrath) snaps at Pimples, Horton, and Norma before the bus

leaves Rebel Corners in chapter eight. Bernice Pritchard (pride) isolates herself from the other passengers of the bus; she insists that her breakfast be served to her in the bedroom instead of in the cafeteria, and she does not help the others push the bus out of the ditch toward the end of the novel. Elliott Pritchard (avarice) is a man who capitalizes on the work of others. He tries unsuccessfully to enter into a business partnership with Ernest Horton to produce his tuxedo trouser-stripe gadget idea; Horton recognizes that Pritchard will take advantage of him and steal his idea. Old Van Brunt (sloth) criticizes Juan at every turn, and refuses to take any responsibility for the passengers' decision to follow the old stage road and continue toward San Juan de la Cruz. Norma (envy) is so consumed with the Hollywood lifestyle that she lives in a world of make believe. It is this quality that compels her to make the trip to Hollywood, of all places, when she leaves the Rebel Corners cafeteria. Pimples (gluttony), as I have stated earlier, cannot stop eating sweets, and is preoccupied with sex. Mildred Pritchard (lust) engages in sexual indulgence, both figuratively and literally with Juan Chicoy (143-44).

Although Steinbeck was fond of allegory throughout his writing career—he used it in such early works as *To a God Unknown* and *Of Mice and Men*, and in such later-life works as *The Winter of Our Discontent*—it is not unlikely that he returned to it (after moving away from fiction altogether throughout the early and mid-1940s) because of a fresh interest in Chaucer's poetry. In other words, this is one more example of how Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* influenced Steinbeck as he wrote *The Wayward Bus*. Chaucer used allegory to “teach religious and moral values” to his countrymen, and Steinbeck used it for the same reasons in an effort to reach out to his own nation.

Because of these similarities demonstrated in the presentation and development of the pilgrims of Chaucer's poem and Steinbeck's novel, in addition to the comparable use of allegorical constructs by these two writers, I feel *The Wayward Bus* deserves to be reconsidered as a work of art. With the Chaucerian influence in mind, this novel is hardly, as Paul McCarthy said, a "dreary, prurient pilgrimage (that) has no real human or universal significance," for Steinbeck borrowed from the great English poet the means by which he could write about his society on a personal level. Like Juan Chicoy returning from his flight out of America to free the vehicle of his community from its constraints, John Steinbeck felt an obligation to call for a spiritual reawakening as the nation faced the post-World War II era.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

The Wayward Bus was not the first novel in which Steinbeck used a literary predecessor as an aspect of his work. All of his stories were influenced by the Bible, for example, and from his first successful novel, *Tortilla Flat* (in which he borrowed heavily from the *Morte d'Arthur*) until his last, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (in which he borrowed from Shakespeare's *Richard III*) Steinbeck engaged in this literary tradition. What is fascinating is that the literary allusions, precedents, and influences of these and other Steinbeck novels have been discussed often in literary journals since their publication dates. The reasons why Chaucerian influences in *The Wayward Bus* have not received the same kinds of attention and criticism are puzzling. It would be interesting to know whether Steinbeck ever thought of a return to Chaucer after the poor reception of *The Wayward Bus*, or whether he accepted Nathaniel Benchley's theory that Chaucer was too obscure for a modern reading public.

This comparison of the intertextual similarities between *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wayward Bus* demonstrates a lack of academic attention paid to Steinbeck. He is an author who deserves better treatment and more respect in the universities and by the critics of this, his own, country. In the future, I expect to see more attention paid to him, as he is one of America's greatest authors.

As we have seen, there are many ways in which John Steinbeck worked closely from Geoffrey Chaucer's poem. From its original title to the description of setting, the theme of pent-up sexuality, similar characters and character development, the journey

motif, the pilgrimage to a holy destination of worship, and the use of allegory, there are many interconnections between the two works. There is not a strict one-to-one relationship between the two; Steinbeck's novel is not a modern translation of *The Canterbury Tales*, but they have an overwhelming number of similarities.

This relationship to *The Canterbury Tales* indicates an underrated value of *The Wayward Bus*. This is not, as Frank O'Malley called it, "an unusually dismal bus ride." *The Wayward Bus* needs to be reevaluated, just as Steinbeck needs to be reconsidered.

At an early stage in his career, John Steinbeck entered into the literary tradition of borrowing from the great writers who have come before in order to add a unifying structure to his stories. This notion is important, for it is an indication that Steinbeck was not writing novels that operated solely on the basis of the time, place, and context in which they are set. The passengers aboard *The Wayward Bus* are engaged in a timeless quest after the same types of spiritual replenishment and self-actualization that the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales* sought at the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Steinbeck is a part of a tradition, and he needs to be studied within that context.

Students and scholars of both John Steinbeck and Geoffrey Chaucer will benefit from examining and comparing the two stories; Steinbeck students will gain a greater insight into the rationale and meaning of *The Wayward Bus* by reading *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer students will benefit from reading Steinbeck's novel because they will be able to see how influential and far-reaching Chaucer's tales, character descriptions, settings, characters, and plot development have been and continue to be.

John Steinbeck, who was awarded both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes for his

achievements in literature, is a vanishing author in today's anthologies and course syllabi. His work may be considered time-specific and no longer relevant because of their settings and subjects, but I have demonstrated here how one of his least-known novels, *The Wayward Bus*, can be viewed as a timeless artifact when it is considered as part of the Chaucerian tradition. It is my contention that nearly all of his writing breaks through the situational constraints typically associated with novels like *In Dubious Battle* or *The Moon is Down* and maintains a relevancy that cannot be confined to an era. The novels, short stories, and plays of John Steinbeck possess a classic quality that cannot be dismissed with any amount of justification. It would be a shame if the gifts he has given us are allowed to disappear.

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