

BAD LUCK, BAD HABITS, BAD CHOICES AND THE LUCK YOU MAKE – AMOR TOWLES' *THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role played by either good or bad luck in one's life in Amor Towles' novel The Lincoln Highway. We present how the notion of luck or chance is seen both as a given, something implacable, and as of one's own making, the result of working with the system – if destiny were a system – and thus something malleable that can be tuned to one's advantage. To this aim, we look at the main characters, organizing the research into separate sections named after them, taking them in groups – the Watsons as a family, and in relevant pairs – Duchess and Woolly, following those who are closest or whose destinies intertwine more. The perspective is cultural and identity studies.

Keywords: journey, identity, luck, destiny, self-fulfillment

JEL Classification: Z10

1. Introduction

The novel begins with the early release of Emmett Watson from the Salina detention center, on account of his father's death to cancer, and him being transported by warden Williams in car to his home in Morgen, Nebraska. There, he is awaited by a bank officer who informs him that his house and possessions are foreclosed because of his father's debts. He makes the decision to leave with his eight-year-old brother, Billy, in his Studebaker car, following the Lincoln highway, towards San Francisco, California – the assumed whereabouts of their mother, given the postcards she sent to her children after her abandonment of the family. The two are accompanied on this trip by Duchess and Woolly, aged eighteen, who have escaped from Salina riding hidden in the trunk of Williams' car.

The journey occasions the story and accompanies and engenders various developments of the plot, as adventures “seem to spring from the landscape itself, the propulsive rhythm of the road” (Preston, 2021). Three boys out of the four are at the coming-of-age time, about to take responsibility for the lives that they can now begin in a full-fledged manner as a series of making choices, which justifies the name of the book and makes the symbol of the Lincoln highway a good metaphor, as Towles points out himself (Towles, 2023). The representation of the highway journey as a material parallel for the road to maturity is justified by the importance of the concrete achievement of the 1912 transcontinental artery

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for the history of the United States: “The Lincoln Highway ushered in an era of land transportation in which American civilization has been changed more profoundly, within only a few years, than in the century preceding.” (*The Lincoln Highway: The Story of a Crusade that Made Transportation History*, 1935: VII)

Duchess steals the car and follows, alongside Woolly, his own route and unfinished business, planning to rejoin the Watson brothers again on the road. Emmett and Billy need to embark on a freight train (in pursuit of their friends), on which they almost fall prey to the wicked Father John, but are saved by and make friends with Ulysses, a man of color who has been deserted by his wife because he had decided to go on the warfront.

This paper sets out to analyze the characters from the point of view of the concept of luck – the good and the bad luck that they benefit from or, respectively, strikes them unexpectedly in their lives, changing the course of their existences. Bad luck is indicated to us from the beginning as a relevant factor, at play in people’s lives, voiced and mentioned by a few of the fictional people. Luck becomes a motif throughout the novel, as it makes its presence felt in their existences, shaping these and providing the possibility to be used and abused depending on one’s personal inclinations and inner strength. Based on how willful and strong a person is, luck – with its forms and synonyms of chance or destiny (to be forged) – can overwhelm and override one’s control, be negotiated or collaborated with, become a weapon in one’s hands, or a tool to organize one’s life. We shall see in what follows how this happens and applies in the characters’ cases.

2. The Watsons

Emmett Watson served time at the Salina detention center for adolescents, and, the day of his release, his warden, Mr. Williams, brings him back to his Nebraska, Morgen home in his car. Williams says Emmett has only had bad luck to have been a factor in another man’s death. This idea of luck playing a significant role in one’s life is therefore highlighted from the very beginning, and the recurrence of the idea in various contexts draws our attention to it. Later in the novel, as Emmett revisits the place where everything happened and describes the incident, the exact words used by the warden are reproduced – the man referred then to “the ugly side of chance” to emphasize that the fault was not really Emmett’s (Towles, 2021: Ten). From the way in which the things that unfolded are presented to us, we realize that Emmett was provoked by Jimmy Snyder, a well-known bully and troublemaker, who insulted him and then his father, determining Emmett to punch him. Jimmy tripped over and fell on his back, cracking his skull on a rock. Jimmy Snyder is described by a neighbor as a punk, having gotten into problems and saved as a result of his family’s influence countless times, being an “engineer” of trouble (*ibidem*), but even though things

are like that, the fact remains that Emmett is guilty of manslaughter and Jimmy is a victim in the incident.

Coming back to the moment Emmett returns to his house, a bank officer and his neighbor, Mr. Ransom, are waiting for him there and let him know that Charlie Watson, the boy's father, was deeply in debt at the time of his death, and the bank needs to foreclose on his home and the family belongings. The bank executor, Obermeyer, calls Watson Senior's predicament a "bad luck that was too great to surmount" (*ibidem*). However, in the case of this character, the bad luck that is associated with him is different than in Emmett's case.

Charlie Watson left all his family great fortune and privilege behind and moved away from Boston to become a farmer, but was not so much unlucky as he was reckless in his choices: "When it came to bad luck, Emmett's father always had plenty to spare. But Emmett knew that wasn't the extent of the matter. For when it came to bad judgment, Charlie Watson had plenty of that to spare too." (*ibidem*) For instance, he changed the type of harvest every two years, something one is not supposed to do that often, and was also uninspired, becoming out of synch with the weather. Also, when he was done with one type of crop, he did not sell the harvester needed for it, to use the money for another investment, he just let it decay in the barn. Even kids did not climb on it while playing, as it represented a "kind of ill omen, [...] a legacy of failure" (*ibidem*). What is noteworthy in this quote is a belief in superstitions related to objects, such as the agriculture tool mentioned in our context. This means that the narrative perspective has integrated this common lore and, hence, the references regarding good or bad luck which permeate the story.

To return to the character of Emmett's father, in his case, then, lack of chance goes accompanied by carelessness, lack of planning and weakness of spirit, as the man had initiative but not the strength to pursue it – in other words, he knew the theory, but was defeated by practice, missing the ability to see things through. Given the fact that he liked books and was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson (as it will soon be visible), we could say that he was more of a dreamer and not so much a practical man, the vein of his noble upbringing preventing him, perhaps, from having in him what it took to handle a rougher existence. His affinity for nature was developed on a purely lyrical foundation, rather than on an understanding of the materiality and immediacy that the natural environment required. Hence, Charlie Watson miscalculated and did not know himself well enough to comprehend what was suitable for him, nor was he able to adapt once he made the choice of separating from a life of luxury and depend with his livelihood on something extremely material.

Despite his debts, Charlie manages to leave his son some money. Emmett checks the trunk of his car – his most valued and only possession – knowing there might be a chance to have something there from his father, and finds an envelope from the late senior, which contains a letter and some money. Next to the

message, there is also a page from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in the note Charlie refers to the passage from Emerson, which advocates for the desire to work the land and stipulates that an individual is not entitled to even one “kernel of nourishing corn” unless one works for it (*ibidem*). The resort to this quote is understood by Emmett as a defense of and excuse for Charlie’s decision in favor of practicing agriculture. It is also a statement of work ethics. Watson Senior left behind a Puritan tradition, of providing for one’s children, trying to ensure a good and prosperous life for them by striving to leave them more, materially, than one inherits in his turn from the family. This was a way of proving one’s own worth as a man, inside a logic of self-effacement that was considered the honorable thing to do. Charlie turned his back on it and on the luxury available to him, out of a desire to be a self-made man, thus doing something that could be deemed as both ethical and unethical at the same time, depending on the perspective. He betrayed his family traditions and expectations in order to live up to his own beliefs. He embraced the tenet described by the philosopher, of a need to be close to nature and earn everything with the sweat of one’s brow. Emerson’s words prompt one to have no “envy” for the fate of a fellow being, and seek no “imitation” of anyone else’s life, but believe that any given person is the only one who knows what one is capable of, and that not until one tries it (*ibidem*). This means that one’s destiny is one’s own, and unique; there is no recipe for success, no role model to be followed will ensure one’s fulfilment. Here, we reach the third implication of the content of the letter, which is, metaphorically, the encouragement to pursue one’s dreams. Agriculture also symbolizes the multiplication of the Biblical Talents. Charlie Watson took a chance, a first step, a leap of faith, but then failed to follow through with other steps. His ultimate failure as an indebted individual was a combination of subsequent bad or uninspired choices, laziness or taking things for granted, and ill luck. To some extent, the outcome was his own doing, and to some it was not his fault – just as the narrator pointed out. Perhaps part of this bad luck was precisely his intellectual descent and love of poetry, which made him rather ineffectual as a practical-minded businessman. He was too much of a poet for the harshness of untamed nature. However, his public failure is counterbalanced by the success of his private legacy to Emmett, which the boy finds in his car, a legacy that makes him a good father even in acting against the law, against ethic and against some of his own principles (for instance, by tearing a page out of a book, something he would have never done, as he worshiped books). In the note, Charlie points out the paradox, calling his gestures sacrilegious, but expressing, at the same time, his belief that they represent the right thing to do. As far as the money is concerned, he explains that he has worked for every penny while the bank increased his interest, so, in a way, it is not money he has not in fact earned.

But where his father was wanting, Emmett, on the other hand, had precisely what was needed. The boy was wise with a kind of practical-mindedness and

intuition working together, which manifested in his teenage years. As early as his fifteenth birthday, he got hired by Mr. Schulte, a local builder and realtor, and learned carpentry. In the way in which he witnessed his father turned into a victim by agriculture at the mercy of weather changes, he saw chance. He thought there would always be a need for constructors, as houses decay at the whims of weather conditions, its caprices representing for him a form of help instead of a sabotage for human effort, as in farming. He speculated the context, transforming a disadvantage into leverage. For him, the bad omens that destroyed his father's livelihood became good signs, predicting prosperity. Emmett's father acknowledged the choice for carpentry as a wise one, and did not mind his son's leaving for "another man's trade" – and "maybe that was a sign of a bad judgment too", the narrator's comment goes (*ibidem*). It may have been bad for Charlie, as there was no son to continue his trade and to prevent him from failing, but it might have been the best opportunity for Emmett, as he walked away from a life of failure. Hence, it must have been a blessing in disguise. Since he believed in pursuing one's dreams, Charlie's choice to let his son decide what he wanted to do may not have been a lapse in judgment, after all.

Billy, Emmett's younger brother, is eight at the time of the elder sibling's return from detention. He is instrumental in the decision of the two of them taking the road, accompanied by Duchess and Woolly. Hence, despite being a small child, Billy determines where the characters are heading, and this due to a love of logic that may seem a bit strange and definitely prodigious at his young age. When Emmett explains that they need to leave, as the house is no longer theirs, Billy comes up with a plan that he has figured all out by himself. Taking into account the postcards that they have received from their mother after her departure, putting them in chronological order, Billy has recreated the woman's itinerary, and realized she has been travelling along the Lincoln highway, which starts from Times Square in New York, crosses the United States from the east to the west, ending up in Lincoln Park in San Francisco, California. That is where Billy wants them to go (even though Emmett's choice of a state was a different one), and has a very good argument to support it. In that park, every year on the 4th of July there are huge fireworks, and the boy is convinced that, since their mother liked fireworks and always watched the ones organized on the national day, she would be there to admire the show on that particular day. Billy's faith is endearing. He even has all he needs already packed in a rucksack that he had looked for and made sure to get beforehand, and the night before their departure he sleeps in his outerwear to make sure they catch an early start. All these details point to a child who has had to learn to always be prepared for the unexpected, to plan every aspect carefully and to think hard about everything all the time. Besides the quality and advantage of brilliance, this mindset also points to trauma and hardships having hit hard at an early age. Billy has already experienced the shock of being left by his mother and the ongoing insecurity present and

characterizing the life of his father, which have left an imprint on him and the desire to never be caught off guard. Emmett also displays this penchant for overthinking and planning things. We have seen it in his choice of craft, we witness it in the way in which he comes up with a plan of his own for making a living in their place of destination, and then, upon Billy's express wish as to which this country should be, Emmett checks whether his plans are compatible with this new location. To be precise, Emmett wants to buy decrepit houses and restore them, and the country where they will settle needs to have a significant increase in population, as this would give it an ascending trend in economy. Emmett's intended one was Texas. Hearing his brother's request, Emmett checks this data at the local library before acquiescing to go to California. Both Watson boys have learnt that the luck one makes for oneself needs careful planning and consideration, as well as the use of logic and mathematical calculations; one cannot rely on something as random as pure chance.

3. Duchess and Woolly

Duchess (Daniel Hewett) and Woolly are the two older boys that hide in the trunk of the warden's car and thus escape from detention the day the man drives Emmett back to his house. Duchess gives the impression that he is always scheming and plotting, always after something, and he does not flinch in the face of danger or shy away from tricking the ones around him, or from a lie or two. He is willing to force his luck or make it in dishonest, shady or manipulative ways, as if luck was something that he were prepared to rough up, pick a fight with or give a beating to. Ambiguity is there whenever an action performed by him is presented to us, as Duchess plans his deeds according to his own logic that seems intricate and is a derivative of the one he has learnt from the nuns at the monastery where he grew up. Sister Agnes, the one who ran the orphanage of St. Nicholas, noticed that there was goodness in him, but in an incipient stage, before having had the chance to become full-fledged. She inspired him the guidelines that he follows in life, except that his interpretation is an *ad literam* one, supported by the overarching principle of keeping scores and balancing accounts: "the only way to get a good night's sleep is to balance the accounts" (*ibidem*: Nine). Duchess is calculating things, so as to neither be in debt nor owed anything. He pushes this logic very far in everything that he enterprises. To give a relevant example, he takes Woolly and Emmett's car and leaves in search of his father (planning to come back to pick up the Watsons), but making a few stops in the same spirit of settling the accounts on the way of his own, personal journey. One is at Ackerly's house (a mean warden who liked to beat the boys) and, finding him asleep in his chair, hits him with a frying pan, but just once, as, he thinks, doing it twice would surpass what the man owed him, and then Duchess would be in his debt – and Daniel's objective is to be even. He then finds Townhouse, a friend of his at Salina, a person of color who was once punished

by taking an eight-blow beating because of him. As he reaches Townhouse's home, he asks the young man to apply him three blows – the other five up to the full eight being subtracted on account of Duchess having stolen some Oreo biscuits for him while in detention: "It was a credit to my account all right, but as credits go, I knew it wasn't enough to offset the eight strokes of the switch that Townhouse had received on his back." (*ibidem*: Five) We notice how Duchess is trying to be very precise in his estimations regarding debts owed and incurred. A juggler of good and bad luck, we can say indeed that Duchess negotiates with destiny, penetrating the system that destiny may represent and becoming a factor in effecting it, so the contention that "fate, in the form of a sympathetic but volatile character named Duchess, forces [...] [the characters] to travel in the opposite direction" is an appropriate depiction of events (Gates, 2022). Even Towles himself points out that Emmett and Duchess' encounter is "through chance", so luck played a part in shaping their complicated and ultimately intricately meaningful interaction (Towles, 2021, August 4).

Talking to Billy, Duchess explains that his father was a thespian and his job made them move from city to city, which made it difficult for Duchess to stay in school. This meant that the boy's academy was the thoroughfare and the "fickle finger of fate" (Towles, 2021: Five). In other words, he learnt how to be at fate's mercy, as well as how to become sly, paying attention around him, watching his back all the time, as well as watching out for opportunities and taking advantage of these. His father's career of an actor taught him to act quite well in real life, to pretend and lie skillfully. By observing the people he engages with and giving them what they want, he manages to extract information from them, gain their trust and get them to help him. This is how he proceeds with Billy, from whom he finds out what the family plans are, or with Sally, whose jam he steals and gives to the nunnery, also knowing that he can leave Emmett without a car, because Sally will come to the rescue in her van. However, his intentions are not always bad, because he also has a sense of justice, even though twisted at times. For instance, he punishes an instigator cowboy in the scene where Snyder beats up Emmett, by following him and punching him, explaining that he had no right to do what he had done. Hence, we could say that Duchess is streetwise, that his rationale for acting relies on a negotiator's mentality and that the lines between right and wrong are for him adjustable, as he disposes of a wide range of greys in-between a potentially black-and-white reality. A trickster and a symbolic juggler, he performs his tricks with a kind of nonchalance, as if they were the most natural actions in the world.

Duchess is the one that points out again, indirectly, the notion of superstition being alive in people's mindsets throughout history, irrespective of the age. He does it by bringing into discussion the play *Macbeth*, explaining to Billy that it was always called the Scottish play instead, because it was associated with bad luck and eerie unfortunate events happening around its performance at various

times in history. This occurs as Duchess is trying to draw Billy out to understand what the brothers are up to. In order to make himself pleasant and gain the little boy's trust, he starts reciting from the play.

Out of all people, Duchess manages to determine Woolly to follow him and break out together, even though they had little time left from their sentence. To Emmett, Duchess lies as to the reasons why he has persuaded Woolly to fall suit, inventing a story about how Woolly took a knife and Duchess was afraid he might use it, given his mental issues. Woolly had a rich family, but he perceived having everything as a kind of pressure that built up, straining his nerves. As Duchess puts it, "there's something about all that good fortune that can become too much" (*ibidem*). Too much good luck may break things. To a delicate soul, to a sensitive nature, it can become stifling. This picture is Duchess' depiction of Woolly's mental instability in the face of his family's abundance and privilege, which made him anxious, giving him a sense of "looming trepidation", as if the whole amount of property could crumble upon him, burying him alive (*ibidem*). This feeling shattered his nerves and upset his mental balance. Hence, he needed something to shelter him from this environment and keep "the world at bay", at a distance (*ibidem*). His subsequent addiction to substances and strange habit of watching commercials on television or listening to them on the radio as a soothing activity play the same part, of shielding him from a reality that may become too harsh at times. Duchess, nevertheless, acknowledges the fact that Woolly has a big heart. Hence, for Duchess, the plan of relieving Woolly of a part of this burden represented by his fortune might seem a logical thing to do.

Woolly was left one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a trust fund which he was supposed to enter in possession of when he came of age. However, his brother-in-law declared him temperamentally unfit and thus he could not access the money. However, coincidentally or not, his father hid an equal sum in the walls of a family property house in New York. Duchess calls the coincidence regarding the amount of money "fateful" (*ibidem*). To Emmett, Duchess explains that he has proposed to Woolly to accompany him (together with the protagonist) to the said house to retrieve the sum, which they will then split into three equal parts. Duchess also says that it was in fact Woolly's idea – which Woolly confirms – but, just like Emmett, we have our doubts regarding this authorship, while we cannot help but notice, nevertheless, how Duchess managed to convince his friend that he was the initiator of the plan. That being mentioned, there are other facts that can be deemed as fateful in the story, or happy coincidences. These tend to provide a thread that connects the characters despite their very different personalities. It gives us the impression that what is going on and uniting a group that seems so random are not in fact accidental, but somehow fated and meaningful beyond appearances. One instance in which this invisible thread manifests is in how Woolly's natural talent for drawing and an architect's eye for proportion helps him put on paper Billy's ideal home with unusual, rare

precision, just by listening to the boy's description of it. Also, the house where Woolly's money is happens to be in New York, the city where the Lincoln highway begins and where Billy wants them to start their journey.

One other aspect that can be detached from the elements introduced above is that wealth may have a negative impact on one's personality and feel like a burden. It happens to Woolly, the way it also happened to Charlie Watson. There is, in some of the characters' cases, a tendency to run away from it, leaving it behind, as if it were something to grow out of, to overcome on the way to personal growth and evolution.

4. Conclusions

One aspect that is stressed in the story from the very beginning is the genuineness of the notion of bad luck, which is highlighted linguistically to draw our attention to its validity and manner of being at work in the characters' lives. It affects people from all generations. From the older one, Charlie Watson seemed to be up against a significant amount of bad luck, besides his share of flaws that he could nevertheless be guilty of himself, for the situation he ended up in. Ulysses wanted to be an honorable man and went to the front, losing his whole family, as his wife refused to understand him. The boys are all in detention over questionable situations in which they were indeed a factor, but ill luck played a part as well, and they also suffered, as a consequence, a kind of injustice: Emmett is guilty of manslaughter because he defended himself in a fight that the victim provoked; Duchess was framed for theft by his own father; Townhouse borrowed a car to take his girlfriend in for a ride, the car being stolen, and refused to tell on the ones who rented it to him; Woolly caused a fire burning a dictionary of synonyms because it drove him crazy to have so many possibilities for a word, but the fire accidentally extended and he was accused of arson. Therefore, we may conclude that bad luck is indeed a salient element in Towles' fictional world, and, when at play, it can destroy someone's life if one has too much of it.

There is also a type of *hybris* at work in some of the characters' cases. For Charlie Watson, it was his refusal to ask anyone's opinion – something pointed out by Emmett, who thinks about it and notices how it can impact one's existence negatively on the occasion of taking the wrong train route because he did not want to ask for directions, which makes him remember his father's bad habit. Duchess' fatal flaw is his penchant of conning and manipulating people – something he has in his blood from his father and the world he has been raised in, of people lying and playing tricks for a living. Woolly's is being too sensitive and trying too hard to shut out the world around him, as a result of not being able to handle the pressure put on him by his family. Emmett's is his anger – which Billy asked him to attend to by counting to ten every time he feels it surging. (Could it be that the number of chapters is ten as a kind of prefiguration of something being brought to maturity, or of a cycle to be completed?) One's

qualities may also sometimes work against him or her. Billy is too credulous and trusting, sociable to the point of becoming gullible and thus getting him into trouble. Emmett is genuinely a good person, acquiescing to take Duchess and Woolly along, and forgiving the ones who have harmed him and Daniel despite his trespassings. Sally is the eternal helper and savior.

Being able to make an important decision, to take the first step in one's life journey, and pursuing a goal using one's intelligence, intuition and keeping one's attention alert is synonymous with making your own luck and being a self-made person, which always works out for the best. The courage of having and following through an initiative with perseverance is key to success and building oneself a fulfilling life. Courage attracts good luck, proving the saying that fortune favors the bold right – an illustration of which being the fateful encounter with Ulysses on the train. Also, trying to be fair and do the right thing helps one be successful. Even Duchess, in his twisted logic, is attempting to strike a balance in the universe, which helps him achieve what he wants, up to a point. The journey in car along the greatest highway in the US is a symbol of a quest for identity, self-fulfillment and personal evolution, as it has been pointed out by others, and as a well-known motif in literature throughout centuries.

The ending is telltale of our topic of luck, chance and bad or good choices. Once the Watson brothers and Duchess retrieve the money Woolly has led them to, Emmet, angered by Duchess' schemes and having knocked him unconscious, leaves him in a broken boat, afloat on a lake, his share of the money next to him, knowing that he cannot swim and having patched the hole in the boat with stones. As Duchess comes to, the wind stirs and he has to decide between holding on to the money or emptying the water building up in the boat; he dies trying to stop the fifty-dollar banknotes from being blown away. Ironically, he needs to strike the most important balance yet, to find the right equilibrium between the gives and the takes – what he has tried to do all his life – and fails this time, out of all the times when he could have failed. He makes a final choice, and it is not the right one. Or is it? Is it the price he pays for all his mistakes? He seems to go peacefully, the last visions being of his friends' futures in fulfilling lives, so we cannot help but wonder – is it that, at some level, he calculated the gives and takes one last time and the result was that he needed to go?

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