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Descent of Man by T. Coraghessan Boyle“

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1. Introduction

1.1 T. C. Boyle and his Fiction

1.1.1 *Becoming T. Coraghessan Boyle: Upbringing, Education and Career*

Thomas John Boyle was born December 2nd, 1948 and grew up in Peekskill, New York. His parents were both raised in orphanages, his mother completing high-school there while his father was only educated through the eighth grade (see Adams). Though Boyle was raised in the Catholic church, he left his faith after taking an earth science class in middle school which led him to question his religion. He gave up going to church and became an atheist (see *Stories II* xvii), a belief he still holds to and one which influences much of his writing.

Believing himself to be meant for becoming something extraordinary, though at that point thinking rather of the field of music than literature, and feeling his name to be too common for that, he changed his middle name to Coraghessan at the age of 17 to distinguish himself (see Boyle in Steiner min. 2-4). The new middle name, coming from his mother's side of the family, was also "his attempt to distance himself from his lower-middle class upbringing and parents, both of whom died of alcoholism-related illnesses before he was thirty" (Gleason 1). This desire to leave behind his heritage, a heritage that Boyle felt did not predestine him for his future career in the same way as other writers with more privileged upbringings (see "This Monkey"), can also be perceived in the epigraph to his first collection of short stories, *Descent of Man*, where he quotes from Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy": "I could never have achieved what I have done had I been stubbornly set on clinging to my origins."

At 17 years, Boyle started going to college, the first in his family to ever do so. In his autobiographical essay "This Monkey, My Back" he offers two reasons for his choice to go to the State University of New York, Potsdam: It was known for having an emphasis on liberal arts and music, and he had originally planned to become a musician, playing his saxophone. And secondly, his grades were "hopelessly mediocre" and he was so certain of not being accepted into any other university that

he did not even apply. After failing his audition to be accepted into the musical department, Boyle decided on becoming a history major. Concerning this choice he stated: "Why history? I didn't know at the time, or I couldn't have defined it, but it had to do with writing".

It was during his time in college that Boyle discovered his love for books and reading, also realizing his talent for writing essays. He started taking literature courses, and though not applying himself to it as much as he could have, he gained a sense of having found a discipline in which he was able to excel. In his Junior year, Boyle took an elective course in creative writing with Krishna Vaid, who became an important tutor for him. There, Boyle wrote his first piece of literature, a play with the title "The Foot" (see "This Monkey"). His recital thereof in class was a great success: "When I finished, flushed with the sort of exhilaration that only comes from driving the ball over the net and directly into your opponent's face, Krishna began to applaud, and so too, though it killed them, did my fellow students. That was it. That was all it took. I was hooked" ("This Monkey").

Boyle graduated from SUNY Potsdam in 1968, having received degrees in both History and English, and went on to take a job as a high school English teacher to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War (see Gleason 2).

As the title of Boyle's autobiographical essay suggests, addiction has been a heavy influence in his life. With both parents struggling with alcoholism, Boyle was introduced to substance abuse early on in life. Even after his initial success in literature, Boyle was pulled into the hippie scene of drugs, drawn by the easiness of pleasure without having to apply oneself, as literary efforts would require (see "This Monkey"). He used heroin for two years, though mainly on weekends. Only upon having the frightful experience of one of his friends overdosing did Boyle realize that this was not the direction he wanted his life to go: "I was no junkie moron, I was a writer" ("This Monkey"). Though it took him another two years to fully get out of this scene, he focused back on his writing and managed to get the short story "The OD and Hepatitis

Railroad or Bust” about those times published in *The North American Review* (see “This Monkey”).

In 1972, Boyle started his graduate studies at the University of Iowa, where he was accepted into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (see Gleason 2). Boyle finally started giving himself over to writing with great dedication. Often he describes writing as a new addiction he has given himself over to. Just like heroin, writing creates a high that he wants to experience again and again (see Boyle in Steiner min. 48). Boyle has no inclination to ever retire (see “This Monkey”) and works seven days a week, writing in the morning. “I’ve described creative writing, or any artistic endeavor, as an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and I believe that’s true” (Ulin) he stated in an interview. Yet Boyle likes to keep a work-life balance by spending his afternoons outdoors in nature, with his wife and three children, or in a bar (see Boyle in Steiner min. 48-50).

Boyle earned a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in English literature, specializing on the Victorian period, in 1977 (see Gleason 4). He went on to the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, where he founded the creative writing program and worked until 2012 (see *Stories II* xix).

1.1.2 *The Works of T. C. Boyle: His Influences, Style and Reception*

Even though there are too many people that have influenced T. C. Boyle over the years to all be mentioned, some should be pointed out. For example, there are the various mentors he had during his schooling. Before Krishna Vaid, who is mentioned above, there was Dr. Vincent Knapp, who first recognized his talent in writing. Later, at the University of Iowa, Boyle got to learn under the writer Vance Bourjaily. The encouragement of these men set Boyle on the track of becoming the writer he is (see “This Monkey”).

In the interview with Juri Steiner Boyle stated that one learns to be a writer by reading and absorbing other writers (min 38-39). Various writers had an impact on Boyle. In the class with Krishna Vaid he was introduced to Beckett and other absurdist writers

and their works particularly inspired him as it was apparent to him that these were “wise guys” (see Gleason 2). Boyle himself had “at fifteen or sixteen [...] metamorphosed into a wise guy. A punk. A cynic. A know-it-all” (“This Monkey”). This image is “his central identity as a fiction writer, the one that informs every word that he writes [...] - that is, the intelligent, funny, and, perhaps even, arrogant and disrespectful smart aleck who makes readers laugh even as he or she teaches them a lesson” (Gleason 3). Therefore he could relate to these writers particularly, as well as to the American postmodernist novelists, especially Barth, Pynchon, and Coover, who not only chose to combine fiction with historical facts, as Boyle does in his historical novels, but are also “famous wise guys who poke fun at American mythology, politics, and institutions” (Gleason 3). As part of his specialization on literature of the Victorian period, Boyle was studying Charles Dickens, who had a great impact on “Boyle’s conception of himself as a socially engaged, entertaining, popular, and prolific writer of fiction” (Gleason 4).

T. C. Boyle claims that all art is entertainment, including literature: “If it doesn’t capture you on that level, as entertainment, movement of plot, then it doesn’t work. Nothing else will come out of it” (Boyle in Wild). Seeing himself as a showman, a role he compares to having been the singer in a rock’n’roll band, Boyle loves to have an audience and enjoys performing for them and projecting his stories on them (see Kirtley min. 1:09-1:10). “I don’t really want to discuss literature, I wanna perform it. I just do a show. I wanna turn people on as to why we love stories to begin with: Because they are electric, they are beautiful, they take you out of yourself” (Boyle in Lutz min 1). Boyle strongly believes that literature should be enjoyed by the reader rather than analyzed:

I do feel that literature should be demystified. What I object to is what is happening in our era: literature is only something you get at school as an assignment. No one reads it for fun, or to be subversive or to get turned on to something. [...] I’ve thought about this, the domination of the literary arts by theory over the past 25 years -- which I detest -- and it’s as if you have to be a critic to mediate between the author and the reader and that’s utter crap. (Boyle in Wild)

In his self-perceived role as entertainer Boyle tries to keep close ties to his audience. Besides frequent readings and interviews when he tours for book promotions, for about two months out of the year, he keeps a blog and posts news about himself on his

webpage: "I've stayed strictly away from literary and film circles, choosing rather to speak directly to my audience" (Martin C.).

In the beginning of writing stories, Boyle "was more interested in language, design and idea than in character" (*Stories II*, xix). Focussing on the beauty of the language, he claimed not to want to put to paper anything that is not beautiful (Kirtley min. 1:05). He feels that "[t]here is a beauty of the language that is the beginning of anything that we do" (Boyle in Lutz min. 7). Boyle is a perfectionist and writes and rewrites his lines until they are just as he wants them. He frequently reads his work out loud to his wife, which helps him to check if the flow of the language is just right (USC Dornsife min 9), being of the opinion that "[l]anguage has to be beautiful with a rhythm. Like music. I never have written anything without music playing in the background" (USC Dornsife min. 3). T. C. Boyle's writing is unique and "critics have remarked on the energy, verve, and highly stylized quality of his prose" (Gleason 9). Boyle's works can be recognized by his style, language use and rhythm. It is important to Boyle to be able to be identified in that way across his various works (see Kirtley min. 1:02-1:03).

Boyle's stories tend to start with an image which he then translates into words. From there he follows where the story leads him (see Kirtley min. 1:01). He feels that his short stories grow organically from the opening line (see Boyle in Wild), which is one of the reasons he loves writing: "I don't want to know the end, I want to find out. I mean, this is why it's so exciting to me and why I only write fiction" (Boyle in Orlean min. 1-2). This process of seeing something made out of nothing, not knowing what the story will be and exploring what comes next is what makes the writing process something almost magical for Boyle (see Kirtley min. 1:09).

Boyle published his first book of short stories *Descent of Man* in 1979. At the very beginning of his career, Boyle even thought he would concentrate all his literary efforts only on short stories, but changed his focus to also include novels. Still, Boyle enjoys the nature of writing short stories, with the possibility to incorporate anything interesting right away, as opposed to being fixed on a set time and writing mode for a year or longer when writing on a novel (see USC Dornsife min. 4-5). In the same way, a writer

is not locked into the same characters and Boyle feels that writing stories and being able to move from character to character is what keeps him lively as an artist (see Boyle in Treisman min. 1:05-1:06). Boyle has written a wide range of short stories and feels that he does not have any limits, unlike other writers that only write from their autobiographical point of view. Some of Boyle's works are completely surreal while others are more realistic (see Kirtley min 58-59).

Though his books of short stories are not as financially lucrative as his novels (see USC Dornsife min. 3-4), Boyle is "equally dedicated to both" (Boyle in Orlean min 0) and writes several stories after each completed novel. "I never became a writer to make money [...], I simply do what I'm going to do because [...] we are people who think deeply about things and want to express them" (Kirtley min. 1:11). Commerce is not the motivating factor for his writing (see Boyle in Wild).

Boyle's short stories have been criticised for not having constructed plots but rather just comic routines that are only supposed to be funny. While it is true that Boyle's outlandish plots serve to create a comic element in his stories, these detractors ignore the fact that there are many morally serious stories Boyle has written (see Gleason 9). Although there are people that do not appreciate the works of T. C. Boyle, as Boyle himself acknowledged in an interview with Tom Lutz, admitting that he has been called human garbage and jokingly stating he has so many enemies that "if you give them a rifle they could invade any country" (min 0-1), his fame speaks for itself. He has a large readership and his books have been translated into more than two dozen languages. On his own website, 47 awards and honors are listed, including The St. Lawrence Award for Fiction for the best story collection of the year in 1980 for *Descent of Man*, the PEN/Faulkner Award for the best novel of the year in 1988 for *World's End* and the Bernard Malamud Prize in Short Fiction from the PEN/Faulkner Foundation in 1999 for *T. C. Boyle Stories, the Collected Stories*.

T. C. Boyle has become well known and is one of the most prolific American writers. So far he has published 17 novels and 11 collections of short stories and he writes at such a rate that his books aren't always published right away, as his publisher feels

they need to be spaced out for marketing reasons (see USC Dornsife min 10). We can therefore expect to see further works of T. C. Boyle entertaining and impacting our society.

1.2 Introduction to the Thesis

Boyle is one of the most important contemporary American authors, as shown above, and as Gleason states: “There is no one quite like Boyle writing in America today” (10). I’ve chosen to write my thesis about the collection of short stories, *Descent of Man*, which was not only Boyle’s first collection of stories, but his first book ever published. In 1977 he also submitted *Descent of Man* as his creative dissertation (see Gleason 6). This book is therefore highly important to his career and his making as a writer. Boyle claims in an interview with Purdy: “I’ve been working over the same themes from the beginning,” which made me consider it best to concentrate on his first story collection. The reason I chose to write about his short stories rather than one of his novels, is the fact that though the “short story in America has for almost two centuries held a prominent, even pre-eminent place in American literary tradition” (Scofield 1), it is sometimes, in comparison to the longer literary forms, still seen as “a stepchild in the family of narrative forms” (Bonheim 27). I feel that this genre deserves greater attention and therefore I chose to write my thesis about this collection of short stories. In this thesis I want to take a look at the different features Boyle uses in the short stories in *Descent of Man*.

In the first chapter I want to analyze Boyle’s narrative technique. I will look at elements of narrative technique that highlight Boyle’s unique style, considering various features, such as narrative voice, focalization, and what kind of beginnings and endings are used in his stories. After a theoretical definition of the different features of narrative technique, I will show how Boyle uses them in his stories by giving several examples. Then I will discuss which narrative technique the reader of Boyle’s stories can expect to encounter.

In the second chapter I will focus on the recurring themes in *Descent of Man*. I will give examples from different stories and show which themes Boyle generally deals with.

The third chapter will concentrate on stylistic features used in *Descent of Man*. After defining the stylistic features, I will show how Boyle uses these features in his stories and point out which ones are characteristic for his writings. Further I will show what effects they achieve.

In the conclusion I want to summarize the results found in the previous chapters hence answer the research questions as to the characteristic features in T. C. Boyle's short story collection *Descent of Man*. What makes his writing so unique? And: What effect do these features have on the readers?

2. Narrative Technique

The term “narrative technique” can be used in a broad sense. It refers to all the different techniques that are used to tell a story (see Bal 120). We will not be able to look at all of them, but in this chapter we want to focus on some of the important ones and the ones highlighting the uniqueness of T. C. Boyle’s writing.

2.1 Narrative voice

Fludernik defines a narrative as “story plus narrator” (4). The narrator is the “agent which utters the linguistic signs which constitute the text” (Bal 120). The narrative is closely connected to the figure of the narrator (see Fludernik 2), “it is s/he, technically speaking, who presents the fictional world” (Fludernik 27). When talking about narrative voice, it is “a question of who it is we “hear” doing the narrating” (Abbott 64).

The narrator can be seen as the central concept when analyzing a narrative text. The text gets its unique character through the identity of the narrator as well as by the manner this identity is shown in the text (see Bal 120). It is the narrator that is able to comment on events and indicates the motivation behind the actions of the different characters (see Fludernik 27). Through the way the narrator presents the story world, s/he arouses “the reader’s sympathy or antipathy for certain characters” (Fludernik 27).

Therefore, in talking about narrative technique, it is important to first talk about narrative voice. As Boyle put it: “Narrative voice is the beginning, and voice controls the mode of the story - i.e., will this be narrated in the first, second, or third person and how will the tone color it - and gives rise to all the rest: development of character, theme, language, structure, and symbology” (*Doubletakes* viii).

There are different things one has to consider when looking at the narrative voice. As Abbott states, “[t]he simple distinction is grammatical, that of “person”, of which there are two principal kinds of narration: *first-person* [...] and *third-person*” (64). Boyle

himself states that about half his stories are written in the first-person and half in the third person (see Boyle in Ulin). In his interview with Purdy, T. C. Boyle explains that the way one puts together a story collection is important, since the stories play off of each other: "Maybe with one story you have an "I" narrator, and then a third-person narrative, back and forth." This is a principle Boyle applied in the story collection *Descent of Man*, though not rigorously. There are seventeen stories in the story collection, and nine are written in first-person narration ("Descent of Man", "We are Norsemen", "Bloodfall", "Dada", "A Woman's Restaurant", "Caye", "Green Hell", "Quetzalcóatl Lite", and "John Barleycorn Lives"). These stories appear in the said order as stories number 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16, so one can see how Boyle consciously distributed them in his story collection.

There are five stories solely written in third-person narration ("The Champ", "The Second Swimming", "The Big Garage", "Earth, Moon" and "De Rerum Natura"), which are stories number 2, 6, 11, 13, and 15. In the ninth story of the collection, "The Extinction Tales" is in itself a collection of four stories and various facts about the extinction of different species, and only the last story, a seemingly autobiographical story about T. C. Boyle's reaction to his father's passing, has a first-person narrator, while the rest of the stories are written in third-person narration. The final story of the collection, "Drowning", could also be considered a third-person narration, except for the fact that in the very last paragraph a first-person narrator makes the comment: "Eventually, I suspect, what is left of him will come to rest on the beach" (219).

"The Heart of a Champion", the fourth story of the collection, deserves special attention, as it is the only one written as a "we"-narration. While this is a fairly common form of narration in spoken interactions, as events are experienced together and the accounts of these experiences are given in first person plural, this form of narration is rare in novels or short stories (see Fludernik 31). Boyle effectively gives the reader the feeling of being involved in watching a program on TV, which is fitting as the story is a parody of the popular show "Lassie" that had just finished its 19th season when the story collection "Descent of Man" was published. Boyle accomplishes this effect by using this narrative voice: "We scan the cornfields and the wheatfields [...] And then

we see it - way out in the corner of the field" (37-38). Even the emotional reception of the scenes presented is set up: "Our blood races, organs palpitate" (39), and our thoughts prerecorded: "How? We wonder. How will they ever get him out of this?" (45). But as there is only one story written in the "we"-narration, we shall focus in more detail on the more commonly used narrative voices.

2.1.1 *First-Person Narration*

Bal would argue, that "[f]rom a grammatical point of view, [the narrator] is *always* a 'first-person'. In fact, the term 'third-person narrator' is absurd: a narrator is not a 'he' or 'she'. At best the narrator can narrate *about* someone else" (122). But one can define the first-person narrator as someone who "figures as a protagonist in the story" (Fludernik 88). The first person has to have a "participating role (however brief it may turn out to be)" (Abbott 65). The reader can not see inside any of the other characters, as Bal argues: "If the narrator wants to keep up the pretence that it relates true facts, it can never represent the thoughts of actors other than itself" (Bal 137).

There is a distinction between homodiegetic first-person narration, where the character is part of the story he/she narrates, and heterodiegetic first-person narration where the voice is outside the action narrated (see Abbott 68). All of the stories written by an "I"-narrator in the short story collection *Descent of Man* are homodiegetic.

Within homodiegetic first-person narration "the focus can be either on the *narrating self* or the *experiencing self*" (Fludernik 90). In the former case the narrating self looks back on the narrated situation and can clearly explain and even comment on the situation. This narrator can even take the function of an authorial narrator (see Fludernik 95). When the experiencing self predominates, the events narrated can seem disjointed and incoherent as the "protagonist is only experiencing the events at this very moment and so is not able to grasp them fully or impose any kind of order on them" (Fludernik 94).

The short story "Quetzalcóatl Lite" is an example of the first-person narrative where the narrating self dominates. The story begins with: "It is near the end of my search" (165), and before beginning to relate his story in detail, the narrator states: "But let me begin at the beginning" (166). These phrases give the reader a clear sense of being directly addressed by the narrator. He is telling a story which he is looking back on and is not just experiencing it at that moment. The "narrating self often indulges in retrospective, evaluations and the drawing of moral conclusions" (Fludernik 90). This can be clearly seen when the narrator comments on having to reevaluate his values: "I have given my life over to an anal, exclusive and narcissistic activity, a paradigm of misplaced values that breeds the sort of viciousness and alienation I've suffered in the past weeks" (183).

The short story "Green Hell", on the other hand, gives the impression that the narrator is experiencing the story as it is written down. The use of the present tense helps promote this feeling. It is clear that the narrator does not know the outcome of the happenings through statements like: "I expect [...] flames. There are no flames" (140), "I doubt that we will make it" (141). Also in "A Women's Restaurant" we see the narrator only finding out different things as the story unfolds. While he only knows the most basic things about the restaurant in the beginning - as much as he can figure out by digging through the garbage outside the restaurant (see 84) - the narrator is later able to smuggle himself into the women's restaurant and then has a better knowledge of what goes on inside. Though this story is written in the past tense, the reader has the feeling that the first-person narrator is experiencing the events as they are written down.

Out of the nine stories in *Descent of Man* using "I"-narrative, four are focusing on the narrating-self ("We are Norsemen", "Caye", "Quetzalcóatl Lite", and "John Barleycorn Lives"). The other five have their focus on the experiencing-self ("Descent of Man", "Bloodfall", "Dada", "A Women's Restaurant", and "Green Hell"). The reader of a T. C. Boyle story collection can expect to be confronted with both.

2.1.2 Reliability of the First-Person Narrator

Abbott writes that just as the grammatical person is important, so is the reader's sense of what kind of narrator she/he is confronted with. Boyle points out in his interview with Ulin: "The advantage [of a first person narrator] is that the reader can distance him or herself a bit. [...] the beauty of the "I" narrative is that we don't trust him necessarily. We can see where he is conflicted but not admitting it to himself, or where he's not aware of the moral and emotional implications of his acts". Wallace Martin points out that while it is harder to question the reliability of a third-person narrator, "[a]ny first-person narrative [...] may prove unreliable because it issues from a speaking or writing self addressing someone" (142). In looking at the different first-person narrators in the story collection *Descent of Man*, one can see that Boyle has a liking for using unreliable narrators.

In "Green Hell" the "I"-narrator's character is very questionable. As Fludernik notes, a narrator's credibility might be lost when the narrator reveals her/himself to be immoral or a dishonest person (see 27). In the course of the story the narrator can be seen stealing food (see 143), hiding it from the others selfishly (see 145) and trying to trade a can of food for a sexual favor (see 147). He is also lying to the others (see 148) and at the end of the story he is quite happy about the outcome of everything, as writing a book about the experience will make him rich. There is no sympathy or sadness about the death of all but one of the other passengers that were on the plane that crashed (see 157). Even early in the story the reader is introduced to his character when he describes the fatalities of the plane crash: "The rugby players, all twelve of them (dark-faced, scowling sorts), are dead. Perhaps just as well" (140). The reader can therefore not rely on the narrator's assessment of other people's character. Abbott talks about it being helpful to distinguish between two kinds of unreliable narrators: "those whom we trust for the facts but not for their interpretation [...], and those whom we cannot even trust for the facts" (70). In the story "Green Hell", it seems like the first-person narrator is faithfully relating what is going on. He even says what he does not know and clearly does not leave out anything to protect his own character. But his interpretation of these events cannot be trusted.

The same holds true for the “I”-narrator in the short story “We are Norsemen”. His account of the plunderings and killings is believable, but his interpretation of the events is not reliable: “[W]e subdued these screechers as we called them, sacrificed the whole lot of them to the gods (the way I saw it we were doing them a favor)” (30). According to Fludernik:

[a] reader only realizes that a first-person narrator is unreliable because s/he assumes that the implied author holds views in direct conflict with those held by the first-person narrator. Unreliable narrative discourse creates the impression that the implied author is communicating with the reader behind the first-person narrator’s back. The narrator is deliberately presented as a figure whom the reader discovers to be lacking in credibility. An unreliable first-person narrator functions, therefore, as a sign of the fictionality of the text (27).

Fludernik uses the term “implied author” in this passage. When the reader realizes that the narrator is unreliable she or he might want to look to the person who wrote the story, the real author, as a guide. But the real author is someone the reader might never have any deeper knowledge of. Most people, for example, do not know T. C. Boyle personally and even if they do, he would be too complex to be fully known and he is continually changing anyway (see Abbott 77). Instead “we posit an implied author” (Abbott 77). The implied author we understand as “that sensibility (that combination of feeling, intelligence, knowledge, and opinion) that “accounts for” the narrative” (Abbott 77). Though the real author of course supplies much of this sensibility, the implied author is, just as the narrative, constructed (see Abbott 77).

In the short story “We are Norsemen” the reader can sense that the implied author is not agreeing with the opinions of the narrator. One passage that portrays this is the last page of the story, where the narrator is about to destroy some ancient writings by burning them: “The book. What in Frigg’s name was a book anyway? Scratchings on a sheet of cowhide.” (35) He then gives a further account of why books are useless (see 35). The narrator is shown to be not only illiterate, but also ignorant, and it is assumed the implied author holds a different opinion.

The credibility of the narrator is sometimes lost when “s/he violates valid social norms in word or deed. Such an *unreliable narrator* [...] may give a distorted picture of

(fictional) reality as a result of being obsessed by certain ideas” (Fludernik 27). We see such an obsession and thereof resulting violation of social norms in both the first-person narrators in the stories “A Women’s Restaurant” and “Quetzalcóatl Lite”. In the former the narrator is obsessed with getting into the restaurant he is not permitted into as a man. This obsession leads him to go through the restaurant’s garbage (see 84), to seek entrance violently (see 91) and finally to dress up as a woman, in a process that takes two weeks of learning how to disguise himself properly, in order to gain entrance (see 94). The obsession with the collecting of empty beer cans in “Quetzalcóatl Lite” is illustrated clearly by how the narrator describes himself: “I am a collector. I collect not merely as a hobby or pastime, but as the principal business of my life, as the constellation and nexus of my being. Some men gamble, drink, challenge the Atlantic in hot-air balloons. I collect things” (166). The moment he was introduced to the idea of collecting beer cans he describes with “My life began” (169) and he cannot be trusted to make the right choices when he describes: “I began to put on weight, my liver ached, but no matter” (169).

Beside the four stories already mentioned that use an unreliable first-person narrator, the narrators of the remaining five short stories written in I-narrative are also not fully reliable. This is due to the kinds of characters Boyle likes to use, as I will show later. The reader of a story by T. C. Boyle cannot expect the narrator to be trustworthy and often has to read between the lines and look to the implied author to arrive at an interpretation.

2.1.3 *Third-Person Narration*

Third-person narrative is very common and even first person narration invariably includes third-person narration as the first-person narrator also talks about the other characters in the story (see Abbott 64). In third-person narration the narrator and the protagonist are not the same; the narrator does not feature as a character in the story. He or she stands aloof from the fictional world of the characters (see Fludernik 21). The third-person narrator does not invite the reader to look at her or him (see Abbott 65). It is commonly agreed upon in the field of narrative that the narrator should not be

confused with the author (see Abbott 63). “The narrator is variously described as an instrument, a construction, or a device wielded by the author” (Abbott 63). Within the category of third-person narration it is important to not only look at the narrator, but at the focalization used.

2.2 Focalization

Focalization speaks about the way things are presented in a story, through whose point of view the reader experiences the story (see Bal 100). It is the relationship between “the ‘vision’, the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (Bal 104). Bal argues that “[w]hen events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain ‘vision’. A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle” (100). Everything the reader is shown is, though in varying degrees, focalized - every object, landscape, character, etc. that is introduced to the reader. The focalizer’s opinion will always play into the representation (see Bal 106).

Focalization is the prime means of manipulation and “of decisive importance for the meaning the reader will assign to the fabula” (Bal 50). Abbott claims that “focalizing can contribute richly to how we think and feel as we read” (67) and Bal goes even so far as to state that “[t]he significance of certain aspects cannot be viewed unless it is linked to focalization. Moreover, focalization is, in my view, the most important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation” (116). This manipulation happens by various means, for example by the use of metaphors that are taken from the focalizer’s realm of experience (see Bal 108), or when we hear only one character’s thoughts and readers forget that the other characters know less than they do (see Bal 110).

The focalizer can be a narrator without or a character within (see Abbott 67). Fludernik makes the distinction between “embodied and impersonal points of view” (36). While an impersonal reflector figure is outside the story, the embodied reflector is defined by a “reflector figure [that] is fleshed out as a character so that one can assume that s/he

has a subjective position on various matters” (Fludernik 36). As T. C. Boyle uses the characters as focal figures rather than an external narrator in the story collection *Descent of Man*, we will take a closer look at the internal focalization.

2.2.1 *Internal Focalization*

For focalization that is limited to only one of the characters that has a participating role in the story, the term internal focalization is used (see Bal 105). The reader can have the impression of being directly involved in the action, albeit through the filter of the focal character’s consciousness (see Fludernik 94). The character serves as the focalizer through which the story is presented to the reader (see Fludernik 36).

While the illusion is given that the reader “sees” the events from the point of view of one of the characters, this is only true in a metaphorical sense (see Fludernik 114), as in reality, “the reader only sees letters on the page. The metaphor of sight and seeing is intended to convey the mimetic illusion achieved by the narrative technique. Things are described in such a way that an impression of seeing everything from the point of view of the protagonist is created” (Fludernik 114). The author is employing his artful skill to evoke the visual by power of suggestion (see 114).

Boyle sometimes chooses internal focalization so the reader experiences the world of the story through the perspective of one of his characters. Focalization “refers specifically to the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative” (Abbott 66). The focal character does not function as the narrator, but the events are seen through her/his eyes (see Fludernik 89). This perspective is more limited, for even if the narrator is outside the story as a third-person narrator, “the view is restricted to that of a single character” (Fludernik 38).

“The Big Garage” is a good example for the use of internal focalization. Throughout the whole story, the reader follows the main character, only named B., around. The reader only sees what B. sees, and is only in the location B. is. The narrator uses B.’s

point of view for telling the story, as in: “There is something wrong here, something amiss. B. can feel it nagging at the edges of his consciousness ... but then he really is dog-tired” (124). After B. encounters a mechanic that speaks to him in Spanish, “B. is encouraged: Imports must be close at hand. He hurries off in the direction from which the man came (was he Italian or only a Puerto Rican?)” (131). The narrator limits him/herself to the knowledge of B. and there is no explanation that this was indeed Spanish and not Italian, nor a translation for the utterance. When there is a focal character, the reader can only know as much as this character and is not told more than the character has found out at this point in the story. The “only” for the Puerto Rican is also clearly the focal figure’s opinion; the reader does not get the feeling that this is the author’s opinion.

Bal uses the term “emotional language” when the speaker aims at expressing himself in regard to what he speaks about (see 134). This often applies to the focalizer. When B. finally finds the German department of the Imports Division of the garage, this is expressed as “Well, ha-cha!” (132), but this is just part of the text, without quotation marks. Though the speaker is the narrator, he transports the emotions of the focal figure by using free indirect style, when the author “allows a character’s voice momentarily to take over the narrative voice” (Abbott 70). Even though it is a third-person narration, the feeling, thinking, and even the vocabulary of the protagonist seize control (see Abbott 71).

A reflector figure might also be unreliable, as he or she has a “limited view of events: he is not able to comprehend the world of the novel in the breadth and depth available to the omniscient narrator” (Fludernik 28). B. in “The Big Garage” has no idea of mechanics (see 117) and in the whole story seems rather confused about what is going on. The reader cannot trust his judgement to effectively analyze and interpret the situation he is in.

In the story “The Champ” the focal character is Angelo D., the reigning world champion in eating competitions. The story is told through the lens of this character: “He’d beaten

them all, because he has grit and determination and talent - and he would beat this kid too" (19). This is clearly not narrated by an omniscient narrator that lets the reader know at the beginning of the story how things will end, but it is rather the thoughts of the character that are related. Only briefly does the narration move away from Angelo D. to show his opponent, the Kid. After the first paragraph relating a competition won by the Kid, we read: "Angelo was rattled. He gave up the morning paper" (18). Also the second passage can be imagined to be followed by Angelo through a media channel, as the Kid addresses Angelo: "And if you're out there, Big Man, you better take heed" (20). This way T. C. Boyle manages to keep Angelo D. as the focalizer.

Bal argues that it is near impossible to maintain strict consistency regarding one single focal character (see 126). Though it is more easily attained in short stories than novels, Boyle also, even if sometimes very briefly, changes the focalizer within a story. In the aforementioned short story "The Champ" there is a passage where the preliminary weigh-in is described: "Angelo, in his coal-bucket trousers and suspenders, could have been mistaken for an aging barber or a bocce player strayed in from the park" (20). This passage is not written through Angelo's point of view, but the focalizer is rather an external narrator.

In the short story "De Rerum Natura", the inventor is the main focal character. We see the story through his eyes. The story takes place around the inventor. There is only one small section where this changes. When the inventor goes into the forest and is lost for 40 days, the story changes to an external focalizer that fills in the reader about the search for the inventor. This passage is only two paragraphs long (see 191-192). In this story, Boyle interestingly chooses to use a different narrative method as well. Some of the background of the inventor's life and details about his inventions are told through various magazine articles. Seven times during this twelve page story, do we find passages that state "from *The Life*", followed by these articles (see 185-196). The consistency of the narration through the eyes of the focal character is therefore broken up.

2.2.2 *The Authorial Narration*

The authorial narrator is defined as being “far removed from the events depicted” and reporting “on a world in which s/he (and frequently the narratees too) does not live” (Fludernik 92). The narrator has an unrestricted perspective and can shift between the various characters and different locations (see Fludernik 38). One of the advantages of this kind of narrator is that he/she can look into the minds of the characters, though this privilege might not always be exercised. Even if the narrator sees everything, not everything has to be revealed (see Fludernik 92).

Fludernik claims that every reader longs for an insight into the motives that guide the protagonists’ behaviours (see 112). “This is why the development of the omniscient narrator should not be regarded as an anti-illusionist or anti-mimetic breach of convention, but rather as the redefining of an ideal narrative technique whose inherently un-natural quality fails to be consciously noted by readers” (Fludernik 112).

T. C. Boyle used the authorial narration in his short story “Drowning”. The narrator switches freely between the different characters. The reader learns of the girl’s thought (see 213), the rapist’s embarrassment (see 217) as well as the fishermen’s “sense of accomplishment” after having raped the girl as well (see 219). The narrator is able to switch between the different locations on the beach (see 211, 213), the classroom where the girl poses for the art students (see 214) and is even able to see the drowned man tangled in the weeds at the bottom of the sea (see 219).

In the short story “Earth, Moon” Boyle also used an authorial narrator. The story jumps from the astronaut’s wife to the astronauts. The reader is, as the title suggests, shown their house on the earth as well as the astronaut in space and on the moon. The reader is shown the astronaut’s wife’s thoughts (see 161) as well as her husband’s (see 162).

2.3 *Filling the Gaps - The Use of Overreading*

Reader involvement is very important to T. C. Boyle. As he writes to entertain, he is obviously aware of the narratee, the person the story is told to (see Fludernik 23). This person Boyle imagines to be his audience while writing can be called an implied reader, the “ideal reader figure, although the real reader might not actually assume this role. In ironic texts, the implied reader position is understood to be filled with somebody capable of enjoying the ironic remarks by the narrator, and the real reader will ideally take on that role” (Fludernik 23). As Boyle himself put it “you are addressing someone, and that is how art is shaped” (Boyle in Purdy).

One of the ways the reader is involved in the shaping of the text is in filling in the gaps. Bonheim classifies a written story a “cool medium” (see 47). In contrast to a film, for example, where we are supplied not only with the story, but what the characters look like and sound, and in addition get a clear picture of the world they live in, a cool medium “leaves gaps for the reader to fill in, [...] gaps which the narrative seems to invite the reader to fill” (Bonheim 47). Fludernik points out that while the language of narrative creates the story as well as the characters and puts them into its setting and into order (see 40), “[t]his would not be possible without the help of the reader’s imagination: the reader supplies missing information using concrete pictures and ideas of her/his own, although some aspects of the fictional world will always remain vague or unclear” (40). That is why Boyle points out in his interview with Bradley: “But I think literature can uniquely give you the kind of point of view that is not available in any other art form. Simply, again, because it’s one-on-one, reader and writer, and you are filming it in your head.” Therefore the reader has the power to change the story, as “each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act, the dynamics of reading are revealed” (Abbott 85).

The reader’s involvement is also inevitable in supplying interpretation, as “[m]ost stories are perfectly senseless if the reader does not bring to them his own standards of what is normal as opposed to abnormal behaviour, of what is right and wrong. So

the reader is induced to supply some sort of comment of his own" (Bonheim 48). If the reader had no sense of the first person narrator's collecting of beer bottles in "Quetzalcóatl Lite" to be an unnatural obsession or no moral code to refer to when reading about the rape in "Drowning", she/he could not interpret the stories in any way, as the stories often in themselves do not offer comments of interpretation. Also the humor of "The Heart of a Champion" is lost, at least for a good part, if one does not have the reference of the show "Lassie" to fall back on to see the difference between the "normal" plot as presented in the show and the "abnormal" one as seen in T. C. Boyle's short story.

References to the real world by using clichés can "prompt readers to apply schemata already familiar to them" (Fludernik 42). The overreading is often cued by masterplots the reader is familiar with and especially if there is an emotional engagement to them (see Abbott 82). As the narratee is involved in shaping the story from his/her end, "one thing that becomes very clear is how vulnerable texts are to their audiences" (Abbott 79). Gaps are even more important when it comes to short stories. The passages that have to be filled by the reader impress themselves stronger onto the memory and help to enhance the status of the genre (see Brosch 136).

Though it is in the nature of narratives to be full of gaps which makes overreading, that is, filling the gaps, inevitable (see Abbott 83), Boyle has a special way of also using bigger gaps in his stories to get the reader to think. He seems to understand and utilize the principle mentioned by Abbott: "If narrative comes alive as we fill in its gaps, it also gains life by leaving some of them unfilled. In the art of narrative, less can be more" (85).

At the end of "Drowning", for example, we never get the details of the girl - whose name the reader is not told - being raped again by the men that are supposedly her rescuers. This fact is only hinted at in one sentence and the story then jumps to show the girl in a hospital bed (218-219). In the short story "Caye" we encounter many such gaps. At the end of the story we learn that one of the main characters, only called "Orlando's

uncle", was shot. There is a hint at the fact that his grandson Tito might be the murderer, but it is not explicitly mentioned. One is also left to wonder if Tito made it back to his own shack safely after the murder, or if he might have slipped and drowned: "Tito's shack is difficult to find in the dark. [...] If you step off the path you run the risk of snapping an ankle in the ruts dug by stone crabs or of touching down on the carcass of a bird or lizard, sharp plumage, wet meat" ("Caye" 114). In "Bloodfall" nothing is ever mentioned about why it is raining blood all of a sudden or if it will ever stop. The reader is left to interpret on his/her own if this rain is to be seen as a means of divine punishment and if the end of the world is upon the characters.

These gaps, which leave room for the interpretation of the text, might be interpreted differently by different readers. Though it might seem logical that the reader will interpret a story according to the point of view of the character he gets acquainted with most, one can not underestimate the power of the reader's personal circumstances and experiences to propose his or her own interpretation for the story (see Fludernik 19). For example, the reason for the protagonist of "A Women's Restaurant" deciding to undergo a sex change in order to be permitted into the restaurant at the end of the short story (see 98) will most likely be interpreted very differently by a person with a strong religious background and someone that has had a sex change him/herself.

2.4 *Reference to Other Literary Works*

Abbott would argue that all texts in some way or another come from another text and thus intertextuality is unavoidable (see 94). The reader is expected to be able to draw the connections to the references given, and the interpretation of the story is at least to a certain degree dependant on the reader's knowledge of intertextual references. Boyle often uses references to other literary or poetic works.

In "Bloodfall", we see one of the characters "muttering like Lady Macbeth over carpet stains" (52) and the simile is ineffectual, if the reader can not reference the Shakespearean play. In "De Rerum Natura" American pride is alluded to when we read

“from sea to shining sea” (196), which makes us think immediately of the song “America the Beautiful”. The whole story of “John Barleycorn lives” is based on the poem with the same name, though it is obviously an adaption, just as the satire of “The Heart of a Champion” cannot be grasped if one has not seen the TV series “Lassie” that the story is a parody of. It is also no coincidence that the protagonist in “Descent of Man” who is working with the chimpanzee and is eventually getting sexually involved with him is named Jane Good, obviously referencing Jane Goodall and her work with chimpanzees. “Descent of Man” is not just the title of the first story in the short story collection and the one giving the book its name, but a famous work by Charles Darwin. Darwin’s book argues that men are evolutionarily related to apes. The chimpanzee Konrad is even shown to be translating Darwin’s work (see 7). The irony of the fact that exactly this idea of the evolution of chimpanzees to men is rejected in Boyle’s story world can only be understood when one is familiar at least with the rough content of Darwin’s book.

“De Rerum Natura” is the title of a famous poem by Lucretius, written around 50 B.C., arguing for the atomic universe, the mortality of the soul and against the involvement of the gods in human affairs (see Wells). The inventor in Boyle’s story with the same title receives an anonymous parcel containing *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells, which is a book dealing with exactly the same topic as the short story itself: a mad scientist using vivisection to create humanised animals (see Lowne and MacCallum Stewart). Boyle also alludes to Nietzsche’s famous statement “God is dead” when writing about the inventor’s “color slides of God dead” (195). These are just some examples of many intertextual references Boyle uses to add further planes of interpretation to his short stories.

It is notable that in Boyle’s works the most prevalent sort of intertextuality are religious references. In almost every one of his stories the reader is confronted with images, quotes and ideas taken from the Bible and Catholic doctrine. The narrator in “We are Norsemen” mentions that the Thorkells, the largest group of his fellow warriors, made sacrifices to the gods, and writes as a side note in parenthesis “in those days we hadn’t yet learned to swallow unleavened bread and dab our foreheads with ashes” (28), a

clear reference to Catholic practises. In "The Second Swimming", when Hung learns that his wife Wang is about to give birth and therefore must have become pregnant in his absence, he "did not pause to consider [...] that virgin births have been known to occur in certain regions and epochs and under certain conditions" (70). In the short story "Green Hell" the pilot is specifically described, after he makes the tragic announcement that the crashed plane will never fly again: "He hangs his head (think of Christ, nailed to the cross, neck muscles gone loose, his moment of doubt and pain)" (150). In the short story "Descent of Man" the ape Konrad swallowed a tiny sandwich "like a communion wafer" (13) and in "John Barleycorn Lives" the "madwoman" - the one trying to fight against the consumption of alcohol - quotes the passage found in the Bible in the book of Proverbs 23:29-30: "Who has woe? who has sorrow? who has babbling? who has wounds without causes? who has redness of eyes? [...] He who tarries long at the wine" (198).

While there are many of these very clear biblical references, there are others that might not be so obvious. In "The Extinction Tales" the sky goes dark at three in the afternoon, a possible reference to the hour of Christ's death when there was darkness upon the earth (see the gospel of Mark 15:33) and in "De Rerum Natura" the inventor is shown to have been teaching in the temple as a young child (see 186) as Jesus is seen to be doing in the Gospel of Luke 2:46. The inventor is lost for 40 days before being found (see 191-192) as Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days (see Gospel of Matthew 4:1-2) and Schlaver, the Inventor's assistant, is back alive exactly three days after his funeral (see 194) just as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after being put into the grave (see Gospel of Luke 24:6-7). The story "The Champ" ironically deals with gluttony, considered one of the seven deadly sins, and the reader of "Bloodfall" is strongly reminded of the plagues in the book of Exodus.

The intertextual references help to add further levels of interpretation in the comprised space available in short stories. Boyle's frequent use of references to other literary or poetic works lets us assume that the implied reader is a well read, intellectual person. His intertextual references to the Bible might spring from his Catholic upbringing and can be seen as a way of Boyle distancing himself thereof, as he uses them often out

of context and in a rather ironic way. The reader understands the implied author's atheistic worldview by the way Boyle uses these references.

2.5 *The Use of Absurdity*

One of the characteristic elements of T. C. Boyle's writing is his way of putting absurd elements into his stories, often by using gross exaggeration. T. C. Boyle does not seem concerned about making his stories seem realistic, as these absurd elements clearly remind the reader of the fictionality of his writings. These absurdities are often used as the comic elements of his stories.

The short story "The Champ" deals with Angelo D., who is the champion of eating competitions and holds the record of various eating challenges. In so far this is a plot the reader could fit into his/her reality. But Boyle does not intend to give a real life account of such eating challenges. He exaggerates their importance by portraying the eating competition in the story as if it were a boxing match, even placing it into a location called "the Garden" (20). As a preparation for the match, we read that Angelo's trainer "Decoud has lured him into a deserted meat locker and bolted the door - and then for the entire forty-eight hours had projected pornographic food films on the wall" (21). Then T. C. Boyle lists the food items eaten during the final challenge, and the excess of it is so exaggerated that the reader has no choice but to recognize the absurdity. In only the first two of the fourteen rounds listed, they are eating three gallons of soup and 512 clams.

As the short story "The Heart of a Champion" is a parody of the TV series "Lassie", the whole idea behind it is to point out the ridiculousness of how smart and devoted Lassie is to her owner as well as how unrealistic it is for her owner Timmy to get himself into all these problems in the first place, from which he then has to be rescued. To point this out, Boyle exaggerates even more. Several times Timmy has to get rescued, in one instance the collie even manages to give him mouth-to-mouth (see 39). Lassie herself we see "combed and washed and fluffed", but then once again the description

is drawn into the absurd, by adding “her lashes mascaraed and curled” (39). The absurd elements add humor to the story.

Also in “The Second Swimming” the absurdities abound. For one, there are unbelievable healings in the news article and radio program which Boyle uses to make fun of the propaganda. Upon Hung’s return home, “his mouth drops. The street has been painted red. The buildings are red, the front stoops are red, the railings are red, the lampposts are red, the pigeons are red” (64). And at the end of the story, even the pig is kneeling in devotion to the leader (see 75). In “Descent of Man” the intelligence of the chimpanzee Konrad is exaggerated to such an extent that the reader must see the absurdity of it. For example, he speaks at least six languages and can translate books into four of them (see 7). Also, the studies are brought to absurd dimensions: “Jane and the Doctor were already deeply absorbed in a dialogue concerning the incident of anal retention in chimps deprived of Frisbee coordination during the sensorimotor period” (10). The exaggerations of the scientist’s inventions in “De Rerum Natura” also add comic elements to the story. At fifteen he has “his first great advance, the stoolless cat” (186). T. C. Boyle then takes the absurdity even farther when he writes about the scientist “laying the theoretical groundwork for expanding the minute” (190).

In “The Big Garage” there are also comic elements added by means of absurd exaggerations. B. has to fill out a form to apply for an appointment to see when the repairs on his car will be finished. That alone would already be an exaggerated parody of procedures. Boyle adds to this by giving the reader insight into what that application form looks like: “There are questions about employment, annual income, collateral, next of kin. Page 4 is devoted to physical inquiries: ever had measles? leprosy? irregularity? The next delves deeper: do you feel that people are out to get you? why do you hate your father? The form ends up with two pages of IQ stuff” (130-131). Not just the extensiveness of the questionnaire is absurd, but also the kind of questions asked in regard to what the form is for.

These frequent absurdities in Boyle's stories lead to reader disorientation. The reader is not familiar with the rules applying to the story world. In an absurd world anything can happen and T. C. Boyle uses this to keep his stories surprising for his readers. Boyle also keeps them entertained by the humorous elements these absurd ideas and passages add to the text.

2.6 Beginnings and Endings

There are various kinds of beginnings and endings of stories (see Bonheim 92), and "[t]he theory of narrative modes can help us define these varieties" (Bonheim 92). The narrative modes are made up of two static modes, description and comment (see Bonheim 99), and two dynamic modes, report and speech (see Bonheim 110). In order to analyze the openings and endings used in *Descent of Man*, I want to first take a look at the different narrative modes and then analyze how T. C. Boyle used them to start or end his short stories.

The narrative mode "description" can be defined as presenting "something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted, weighed or measured. The category includes the mere assertion that an object or condition exists, as well as a naming of its qualities" (Bonheim 24). Descriptive passages are often considered as "non-narrative", as there is no continuance of the plot while something is described (see Fludernik 117). In contemporary short stories description usually occurs together with other modes (see Bonheim 10): it is often given "at the word rather than the sentence-level, and thus seems so imbedded in one of the other modes that we might well overlook it" (Bonheim 41). This kind of description can be termed "fused", while an extended description can be called "expository" (see Bonheim 41). The narrative mode "comment" is defined as "the explanation or interpretation of persons, places, objects and actions. Its chief functions are to define their nature by the application of abstract terms, especially by ethical and aesthetic judgments, but also political, social and economic ones. Comment assigns purposes, causes, motivations" (Bonheim 33). This narrative mode is usually either avoided in our age, or, like description, blended with the other modes (see Bonheim 31). While the static modes used to be favored, the

dynamic modes have gained importance and many stories do not have any comment or descriptive passage other than in an embedded form (see Bonheim 110). The narrative mode “speech” is defined as passages where “the fictional character rather than the narrator or author expresses himself” (Bonheim 33). Speech can be represented in different ways, such as direct or indirect speech and free indirect discourse (see Fludernik 66). The narrative mode “report” is defined as “the depiction of actions, usually human” (Bonheim 33). As all narrative “is a form of action taking place in a world” (Abbott 134), report can be seen as the “main ingredient of narrative” (Bonheim 12). Of the two dynamic modes, report occurs far more often (see Bonheim 99), but both of the dynamic modes play an important role as “the short story generally gives preference to speech and report in both the sequence and the general hierarchy of modes: that is, these two modes are normally introduced sooner and come up oftener” (Bonheim 20).

2.6.1 *Beginnings*

In the story collection *Doubletakes* Boyle argues that the first line of a story is instrumental in both, establishing its voice and setting the table for the kind of entertainment that can be expected (see 3). Bonheim explains the great importance of the opening of a short story with the fact that due to the shortness of the text the beginning will make up a higher percentage of the text (see 91). The economy of space is tighter for a short story, and so “the initial sounding of theme and tone is likely to reverberate through the middle and end in a way” (Bonheim 91). On Boyle’s website, looking at the summary Boyle posts for each of the stories in *Descent of Man*, one simply finds the first one or two sentences of each story. Clearly the beginnings of the stories are very important and therefore require a closer look.

Beginnings can be categorized according to the story starting with “more or less exposition. *More* means that the story does not begin immediately with an action, but that the reader is supplied with a background of both time and place, that the hero is introduced and characterized, and that antecedent events are summarized” (Bonheim 91). Bonheim uses the word “more”, as no story is ever able to fully explain everything

that happened previous to the start of the story, nor give every detail about the characters (see Bonheim 91). A story is said to start “*medias in res*”, if there is no or little exposition (see Bonheim 117). “These two extremes mark a wide continuum within which most stories will be found to reside” (Bonheim 91). Though the distinction is not always totally clear, I would categorize ten of the seventeen short stories in *Descent of Man* as starting *medias in res*: “Descent of Man”, “The Champ”, “Bloodfall”, “The Second Swimming”, “Dada”, “The Big Garage”, “Green Hell”, “Quetzalcóatl Lite”, “De Rerum Natura” and “John Barleycorn Lives”. *Medias in res* openings give “clear signals to the reader that he is to find his way into the fiction without benefit, at least for the time being, of an exposition” (Bonheim 116). All these stories start with report, which is “suitable for beginning a story *medias in res*” (Bonheim 109) or a mixture of report and description, as is very common in contemporary stories (see Bonheim 97). Though speech is also a way for a *medias in res* opening of a story and has risen in popularity, it is still fairly uncommon (see Bonheim 110) and T. C. Boyle never uses speech to open a story in *Descent of Man*.

The opening line of “John Barleycorn Lives” reads: “I was just lifting the glass to my lips when she stormed through the swinging doors and slapped the drink out of my hands” (197). This is an example of a *medias in res* beginning: The reader is thrown into the middle of the story without being told who the narrator or the woman are, nor why the woman is apparently so upset. The reader experiences some disorientation, as many questions are posed for which answers are only provided later on in the story. The same is true for the story “Descent of Man”, which starts with the line “I was living with a woman who suddenly began to stink” (3). It takes the reader some time to understand both the relationship between the woman and the narrator and to know the reason for her smell. The story “The Champ” opens with the words “Angelo D. was training hard” (17). The reader wonders who Angelo D. is and what he is training for. One of the most important instruments of the short story, according to Brosch, is to withhold important points of reference; the reader has to create new hypotheses after realizing the original assumptions proved to be wrong (see 53). After initially assuming that Angelo D. is a boxer, anticipated by the title of the story as well as the vocabulary used in the first few lines, the reader realizes that Angelo D. is the champion of eating

competitions. Though in this story the reader is not led down the wrong path for long, he or she has to revise his or her assumptions. The medias in res beginning of “Quetzalcóatl Lite” is a mixture between report and description. Though the narrator offers some description of the situation, he is elusive concerning the important details. The reader is, for example, most likely unable to ascertain that the “clean cement wall eight or ten feet high” (165) refers to the narrator actually being “under a sort of house arrest” (183), a fact that is only revealed towards the end of the story. Only at that point can the reader re-evaluate the information given in the beginning.

Though the other stories provide some exposition in the beginning, they are by no means answering all the questions the reader might have. It is in fact rather unmodern to provide a “consideration of the five w’s” (who, what, when, where and why) right at the beginning of a short story (see Bonheim 108). The openings of the stories generally throw up more questions than they answer. “A Women’s Restaurant”, for example, starts with a short description of the restaurant. The reader is also told directly that the narrator himself is a man and, though curious, is not permitted to enter the establishment. But as the narrator states: “What goes on there, precisely, no man knows” (84), it is clear that the description the narrator is able to provide at the beginning is not sufficient. The story “Caye” opens with the line: “Orlando’s uncle fathered thirty-two children” (109). The reader is not only given this information, but also the detailed description about how many children were born to him by which wife. Yet the character is called “Orlando’s uncle” and no explanation is provided until later, who Orlando even is. T. C. Boyle also uses openings to create suspense. “Drowning” is the only short story in *Descent of Man* that features the narrative mode comment at the beginning. The opening of the story is a combination of comment and description, which “gives the reader a very distinct sense of being led only gradually into the story” (Bonheim 99). The reader is told about the fact that someone will drown in this story with a comment about the senselessness of the happening (see 211). As the detail about who is going to drown is left out, Boyle is able to create suspense with this opening.

2.6.2 *Endings*

Endings can be seen as even more important than beginnings, since readers have a greater expectation of them to provide a revelation of what the story was about (see Bonheim 118). Endings are often categorized as “open” or “closed” (see Bonheim 119). While in the closed ending the action is not just stopped, but various signals are given to announce the closure of the narrative, in the open ending the action continues until the end and the conflict is left unresolved (see Bonheim 119). In the open ending the “action is suspended rather than concluded” (Bonheim 119). “Closure” does not only refer to the settling of the main conflict, but the resolving of “a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative” (Abbott 53).

Open endings are a common feature in the short stories of the twentieth century (see Bonheim 120). The story “Dada” ends with the dynamic modes report and speech which often signal an open ending (see Bonheim 119). The story ends with the agreement of the first-person narrator to marry the dictator who had agreed to be the main exhibit of the Dada Fair. The ending is unexpected and the reader is invited to think about the continuation of the story beyond the ending. “Descent of Man” ends with the confrontation between the first-person narrator and the chimpanzee, after the narrator’s discovery that his girlfriend has left him to pursue a sexual relationship with the chimpanzee. The closing line reads: “I looked up into the black eyes, teeth, fur, rock-ribbed arms” (16). The reader does not get to see the end of the fight; the action is suspended. The story finishes with a mix of the narrative modes report and description. Static modes are often used for closed endings, but a short description that is functional (such as the description of the chimpanzee’s arms that tells the reader about the expected outcome of the imminent fight) and is mixed with a dynamic mode, rather points to an open ending (see Bonheim 127).

An example of a closed ending is found in “We are Norsemen”. The plot line of the plundering is closed and the narrator returns to the description of who the norsemen are, which is already given in the beginning of the story. The repetition of an element mentioned earlier in the narrative can be used for closed endings (see Bonheim 119).

The same method is used for the closed ending in the story “The Heart of a Champion” which gives the reader the impression of watching a TV program: the end is a return to the title melody and a partial repetition of the beginning (see 46). Even though “The Champ” ends with direct speech, the story has a closed ending, too. The only conflict in the story, the fear of the challenger Kid Gullet beating the current eating champion Angelo D., is resolved at the end of the story when the victory of Angelo D. is announced in the final line. There are no questions left to answer. Characteristic for closed endings are also “final symbolic events” (Bonheim 119). Such can be seen in the different stories of “The Extinction Tales”. The Anglican priest, for example, is said to give up his cloth (see 106) and the final story ends with the sentence: “I extinguished the light” (107).

Sometimes it is hard to say in definite terms, if a story can be considered “open” or “closed” as there might be mixed signals given (see Bonheim 131), but out of the seventeen stories in *Descent of Man* I would categorize six stories as having a closed ending (“The Champ”, “We are Norsemen”, “The Heart of a Champion”, “The Extinction Tales”, “Green Hell” and “John Barleycorn Lives”) and eleven, almost twice as many, as finishing with an open ending (“Descent of Man”, “Bloodfall”, “The Second Swimming”, “Dada”, “A Women’s Restaurant”, “Caye”, “The Big Garage”, “Earth, Moon”, “Quetzalcóatl Lite”, “De Rerum Natura” and “Drowning”).

When reading this story collection, readers can expect getting little exposition, possibly being disoriented at the beginning of the stories and not having all their questions answered at the end, as most of the stories in *Descent of Man* show a preference of Boyle for medias in res beginnings and open endings.

2.7 Time and Sequencing

The aspect of time is interesting in regards to how it is specified and ordered in a story (see Bal 45). The narrator is able to shape the fictional world “through the

(re)arrangement of the temporal order in which events are presented” (see Fludernik 6).

2.7.1 *Narrative time vs Narrated time*

Bonheim explains the distinction between narrative time, which is the time it takes to read the story, and narrated time, meaning the time the story covers (see 43). The narrative time, however, cannot be exactly defined, as every person has their own reading speed (see Bal 68-69). Fludernik uses the terms “discourse time” for the narrative time and “story time” for the narrated time (see 32). Comparing these two times, it is interesting to look at how the tempo or pace compares to the actual duration of the described events (see Müller 270) as well as the “structuring of the narrative in time” (Fludernik 32). The way the narrative is ordered in the story is of “utmost interest” (Bal 45).

When the “discourse time is identical with story time” (Fludernik 33) we speak of isochrony, or as Bal terms it, scene (see 70-71). “This form can only occur when the words of characters are rendered verbatim or a blow-by-blow account of a series of rapid actions is given” (Fludernik 33). Stories are therefore rarely isochronic (see 32) and none of the short stories in *Descent of Man* can be considered isochronic above sentence level for direct quotations.

2.7.1.1 Narrative time is greater than narrated time

There are two ways that the narrative time is greater than the narrated time. Either we have a slow-down or a pause (see Bal 70-71).

Slow-downs are very seldom (see Bal 75) and none of the short stories in the collection “Descent of Man” can be said to be slowed down as a whole and only very few even at paragraph level. One of the moments that can be seen as an example of such a stretch of time is the beginning passage of “Green Hell” where the airplane crashes (see 139-140), as it can be assumed that it would only take a few seconds for the plane

to crash to the floor while it would take a bit longer - though not much - to read the account of it. Mieke Bal explains: "At moments of great suspense, slow-down may work like a magnifying glass" (75), and Boyle uses this slow-down to create suspense about what will happen to the plane and its passengers.

Pauses are much more common in narration. A pause occurs when the narrator focuses on one specific element (see Bal 76), by means of using description (see Fludernik 33). We find one of these passages in the beginning of "Earth, Moon", where Boyle opens the short story with the lines: "The astronaut's house has been visited by a plague. This is how it is:" (159), followed by one paragraph long descriptions of the house and of the astronaut's wife (see 159-160). T. C. Boyle effectively accentuates the mundaneness of life for the astronaut's wife with a stand-still in time. In "Descent of Man" many such descriptonal pauses occur on a sentence level to focus on the contrast between Jane Good becoming more like an animal and the chimpanzee Konrad being highly evolved, much more so than his human counterparts (see 3-16).

2.7.1.2 Narrated time greater than narrative time

There are also two general paces for a story where narrated time is greater than the narrative time. Either we have a summary or an ellipsis (see Bal 70-71).

The most common form of narrative pace is the summary, where the discourse time is sped up (see Fludernik 32). All of the short stories in *Descent of Man* can be seen as summaries. The narrated time ranges between at least several hours in "Drowning" to several years in "Quetzalcóatl Lite", while the narrative time would not exceed an hour even for a slow reader for the longest of the short stories, "The Big Garage", which is just 22 pages long.

Ellipsis signifies "the omission of an element that belongs in a series" (Bal 41). When there is an ellipsis, something that "occurs in the fictional world is not mentioned at all on the level of narrative discourse" (Fludernik 33). Often an omitted event gains significance when brought forward in another part of the story (see Bal 41). Therefore a narrative ellipsis can also be used to create suspense (see Fludernik 33).

Such an ellipsis can be seen in “De Rerum Natura”. When Schlaver dies, the narrator skips from the inventor writing down equations right after the funeral to three days later when Schlaver is back alive, sitting in his armchair. The reader is left to wonder how this could have been achieved by the inventor (see 194). Also the short story “Caye” omits from the narration events that happen in the fictional world to a point where it is hard for the reader to follow the exact happenings. The last paragraph, for example, presents the fact to the reader that the narrator is having a sexual relationship with a woman named Ida (see 114-115), who was for the rest of the story completely unconnected to the narrator and shown to be in a relationship with someone else (see 111). Something must have happened to bring this about, but this detail is left out. In “Drowning” the narrative skips from the girl being raped on the beach to her being in a hospital bed (see 218-219). The reader never finds out how the girl was finally rescued. This ellipsis creates a gap which the readers have to fill in on their own.

In Boyle’s story collection *Descent of Man* there are no whole stories and only a few shorter passages in which the narrative time is greater than the narrated time. The genre of short story does not allow for elaborate descriptions and T. C. Boyle also uses very few slow-downs. In each of the stories, as a whole, the narrated time is greater than the narrative time; they are all summaries. Boyle uses ellipsis several times in his stories to create suspense or to enhance reader involvement by leaving gaps the reader has to fill.

2.7.2 Sequence

It is not enough to take into account only the discrepancies between the narrated time and the narrative time: one must also compare the order of the events in the story and the depiction in the narrative discourse (see Fludernik 32). The sequence or structure of a story refers to this “relationship of events in the fictional world and in the narrative discourse” (Fludernik 34).

The structure of most stories is a chronological one. Fludernik points out that this “[s]equence in time is signalled by a range of adverbs of time and adverbial phrases (*after, then, later, the next morning*). References to intervening periods of time are often located at the beginning of chapters (*six years later, the next day*)” (43). A very clear example of this can be seen in the story “Green Hell”, where, much in the style of diary entries, the passing of time is indicated by giving the different sections the title of the time of day (e.g. on page 142 there is one paragraph titled “Night”, followed by the next section “Morning”).

There can also be a deviation from a chronology structure. The story is now the result of an ordering of the events that happen in the fabula (see Bal 49). Bal writes that “in a narrative text, it is even possible to speak of a double linearity: that of the text, the series of sentences, and that of the fabula, the series of events” (52). When the author deviates from the chronological ordering, this can bring about a more intense reading of the text (see Bal 52), as Bal further points out the effects that such a deviation can bring about: “Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to empathize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides” (52-53). There are two specific features concerning this: simultaneity and anachrony (see Fludernik 43)

2.7.2.1 Simultaneity

One speaks of simultaneity when there are two or more events that happen at the same time (see Bal 41-42). These coincidences in time often serve to connect the different strands of action (see Fludernik 43). An example of simultaneity can be seen in the story “Drowning”, where the three protagonists go to the beach independently, yet at the same time. The strands of action of two of them then eventually get intertwined when the obese young man stubles upon the by then naked girl (see 216). Boyle then uses the simultaneity of the drowning and the rape to show the parallel between the irrationality of both nature and humanity (see Gleason 17). Also the story “Earth, Moon” features passages that coincide in time to point to how different the

experiences are of the astronaut compared to those of his wife left at home. Their stories eventually connect when the astronaut returns to his house (see 162).

2.7.2.2 Anachrony

The term anachrony refers to any breaks found in the chronology (see Fludernik 44). Though these deviations from chronology occur to an even greater extent in novels, as they allow for a more complex fabula, anachronies can be found in most short stories as well (see Bal 53).

The anachronies can be punctual, where only a brief moment is referred to, or durative, where longer sections of the fabula are related out of their chronological order (see Bal 62). The way anachronies are used can determine the narrative style of an author (see Bal 63) and can be a means to evoke certain feelings in the reader:

Frequent use of punctual anachrony sometimes makes for a businesslike style; systematic combinations of punctual and durative retroversions can create - or at least add to - the impression that the narrative is developing according to clear, causative laws: a certain event causes a situation to emerge which makes another event possible, and so on. If durative retroversions are dominant, then the reader quickly receives the impression that nothing particularly spectacular is happening. The narrative appears to be a succession of inevitable situations (Bal 63).

Anachronies can be separated into flashbacks, also called analepsis and foreshadowing, which can also be referred to as prolepsis (see Fludernik 34).

A flashback occurs in a story when “the event presented in the anachrony lies [...] in the past” (Bal 54). Often an analepsis is used to explain a more complex detail in the fabula or it may serve to bring together different threads of a fabula (Bal 53).

The story “Drowning” is interspersed with flashbacks. There are three different passages that look back on the girl’s experiences of being a nude model for her university’s art class. These all show events of short duration from her past and can be described as punctual flashbacks. There are punctual and durative retroversions given of the obese young man’s past. There is the account of a specific time he was

bullied by someone (see 216), mixed with a more general explanation of his sufferings at the hands of the other children and his years of separation from other people due to his social phobia (see 215-216). The reader gets a strong feeling of how the young man's experience pushed him to become who he is and how it was unavoidable for him to commit the rape that is shown in the story. When the I-narrator in the story "Quetzalcóatl Lite" is being cheated by his companions, a moment from his past emerges in his thoughts: "I was six years old, out on the playground, bullied and betrayed" (181). This short analepsis serves to give the reader an insight into the past of the protagonist and to help him or her to gain an understanding of what might have driven him to his rather peculiar obsession. In "De Rerum Natura" the flashbacks come in the form of the magazine clippings shown. There we find out about the inventor's childhood (see 188), his first marriage, how he got together with Una, his current girlfriend (see 189-190), as well as his previous inventions (see 186-187).

An analepsis is often used to compensate for gaps (see Bal 60). Boyle uses flashbacks in such a way in the story "Bloodfall", for example: "Gesh was in the shower when the TV screen went blank. Earlier, ..." (48). Here the narrator simply mentions how Gesh ends up covered in blood and in need of this shower. The narrator first leaves a gap in the story but right away closes it by giving the reader the background story to the event depicted.

Foreshadowing happens when the event depicted lies in the future of the fabula (Bal 54). Anticipations generally occur less frequently (see Bal 63). They usually allude to the outcome of a story and are restricted to a single anticipation that might even be covert in a way that it is only noticeable in retrospect (see Bal 63). By means of foreshadowing, "by pre-empting the story's climax" (Fludernik 47), the author can create suspense as the reader anticipates the coming events (see Fludernik 46). An example is the short story "Drowning" which starts with the line: "In this story, someone will drown" (211).

A narrative that has a first-person narrator who is relating his or her own past lends itself more easily to allusions pertaining to the future (see Bal 64). Such a narrator is

found in the short story “Quetzalcóatl Lite”. The “I”-narrator gives away certain information: “It was in this frame of mind that I first encountered Roger Perdoo, the man *who was to become* my principal benefactor and bitterest rival” (167; emphasis added). Right away the reader knows of the importance of this character for the unfolding of the story. The Anticipations also prepare the readers for what to expect: “What came next wasn’t all that pretty” (179). This creates suspense in the reader.

It is also important to mention that the sequence of the events is not always made clear in a narrative. Especially in postmodern texts, the time might not be specified (see Fludernik 34) and “not susceptible to the kind of structuring in which duration is measured” (Fludernik 34). Therefore the reader cannot always reconstruct the chronological sequence (Bal 51). In *Descent of Man* the story “Caye” is put together from different episodes and the exact timing of the events is unclear. Though the story does move forward, it is not always clear when certain events happen and if some episodes overlap. In postmodern texts it is often not possible to distinguish whether there is a partial or complete overlapping of the events described and even this vagueness can be significant (see Bal 41-42).

Although Boyle’s stories are for the most part chronological, all stories with the exception of three (“Heart of a Champion”, “Dada” and “Earth, Moon”) have some anachronies. Boyle uses flashbacks frequently to give further information about past events and to give insights into the motivation of the characters. Prolepsis, only appearing in a few stories, is mainly used to create suspense.

2.8 Space

Even when there is a clear chronology in a narrative, this “chronology is always interrupted by spatial indications” (Bal 97). The use of space in a story is another important narrative technique worth looking at.

Bal defines “space” as “places seen in *relations to their perception*” (93). A character who is situated in this space and is observing it and reacting to it may serve as the

point of perception (see Bal 93). Space has a predominance in human imagination and it is easier to process and understand information by assigning spacial pictures as references. In order to imagine the scene, the reader will often supply the location in their own minds, if it is not indicated in the text (see Bal 43).

A “description of space” happens when it is “not simply indicated in passing, but is an explicit object of presentation” (Bal 98). More detailed descriptions can lead to the illusion that the story is portraying reality (see Fludernik 54). In “The Extinction Tales” Boyle, despite writing fiction, wants to point to the issue of species being extinct because of the greed and carelessness of humans. It is therefore clear that he would want the reader to connect the story to the real world, which he achieves by his descriptions and real-world references: “The Union Pacific Railroad had connected New York, Chicago and San Francisco, Ulysses S. Grant was stamping about the White House in high-top boots, Jay Gould was buying up gold, and Jared Pink was opening a butcher shop in downtown Chicago” (100).

Often the description of space exploits the readers’ prior knowledge. When they are confronted with settings that allude to real places, they are able to fill in the details automatically (see Fludernik 42), drawing on their real-world experiences to round out the picture provided (see Fludernik 54). It is only really possible to conjure up an image through the means of these general characteristics known from real world places (see Bal 95). This is especially true for readers of short stories, as they are generally confronted with a lack of information, as the genre does not allow for more detailed descriptions (see Brosch 20). In *Descent of Man* the reader has to draw on her or his prior knowledge of what the jungle might be like in “Green Hell”, the beach in “Drowning” or the tropical island in “Caye”. Even if the names of places in the short stories refer to locations in the real world, “in the context of the narrative, they are just as fictional as the characters themselves” (Fludernik 54). In the story “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the first-person narrator travels to South America in search of a rare specimen of beer can. Though the images of the real South America and ancient Aztec places are conjured up in the reader’s mind, the place is still fictional. The specific town mentioned does not exist, which underlines the fact that the story is not talking about the actual

South America. When the description given of a space does not correspond to the reader's former knowledge of it, the fictionality of the text becomes clearer (see Fludernik 42). Furthermore, events situated within a space that does not resemble the real world can lose their plausibility (see Bal 99). The restaurant described in the short story "Descent of Man" does not match the expectation the reader has of a restaurant: "'where the flagstones gave way to dirt and we found ourselves on a narrow plant-choked path. [...] Wet fronds slapped back in my face, creepers snatched at my ankles, mud sucked at the plantain leaves on my feet'" (9). The reader is thus aware of the fictionality of the text and accepts the absurdity of the events in the restaurant.

When space is represented not only in connection with the events described, but for its own sake, it is "thematized" (see Bal 95). "Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula" (Bal 95). This is seen in the passage in "Caye" when the way to Tito's shack is described. Though there is no event and only the description of the difficulties and dangers of the way there, the space seems to become the acting agent, out to harm humans (see 114). The whole story "A Women's Restaurant" revolves around the place of the restaurant and the protagonist's efforts to get in there.

It is interesting to notice how dramatically space can be portrayed. The jungle in "Green Hell" is presented as a fearsome space, as the narrator has to face "trees that go up three hundred feet, lianas, leaves the size of shower curtains, weeds thick as a knit sweater" (140). This is fitting for the survival story. In the short story "The Big Garage" the main character is taken to Tegeler's enormous garage: "B. [...] follows her into the echo-haunted reaches. Their footsteps clap up to the rafters, blind birds beating at the roof, echoing and reechoing in the darkness. [...] The sheer expanse of the place!" (123-124). Boyle makes the space seem threatening just by the size prescribed. The fact that B., after trying to escape, ends up in the same place again, makes it clear to the reader that he is trapped. When there is such circular movement where a character returns to the place of departure, "space is presented as a labyrinth, as unsafety, as confinement" (Bal 96).

To summarize, it can be said that Boyle uses space in different ways. In all his stories he draws on the reader's prior knowledge to fill in what the setting looks like. While his references to real places prompt the readers to connect social and environmental issues discussed in the stories to the real world, his frequent absurd exaggeration of spatial descriptions cause the reader to remember the fictionality of the text. In more than half of his stories the reader finds descriptions that portray space in a threatening way to highlight the characters predicaments.

3. Recurring Themes in *Descent of Man*

It is important to look at the themes of T. C. Boyle's first published book, as Boyle himself claims: "I've been working over the same themes from the beginning. [...] I'm always working with the same themes because there are no answers to them" (Purdy). The themes found in this collection of stories can be found in his novels and other story collections as well. They are like a red thread going through Boyle's life's work. I want to take a look at the main themes that occupy T. C. Boyle's work and in particular his first book published.

3.1 *Man's Darwinian Existence*

In an interview with Purdy, Boyle states that "the biggest themes, of course, have to do with our existence on this planet as an animal species, and as something a little more than an animal species, too. What is the relationship between our hormone drives and our supposed free will?". When interviewed by Ulin he also talked about his "eternal theme of our Darwinian existence versus our spiritual existence". This theme Boyle has not only dealt with in his short stories, but also in some of his books, such as *Inner Circle* (see Ulin). It is the main theme that runs through his first story collection, as pointed to by the fact that the collection is titled *Descent of Man*.

The title of the story collection is taken from Charles Darwin's second book on evolutionary theory, *The Descent of Man*, which he wrote in 1871. "Darwin's book applies his theory of natural selection, which he originally outlined in *The Origin of Species* (1859), to human evolution, sexuality, psychology, ethics, and race" (see Gleason 14-15). Darwin's purpose was to see if mankind, like all other species, is descended from a pre-existing form, and to ascertain how developed humans are and whether the value of this development would set humans apart from the other species (see Gleason 15). In *Descent of Man* Boyle also "blurs the boundary between the rational or spiritual human world and the irrational animal world" (Gleason 15). His first collection of short stories satirizes mankind that thinks itself enlightened and rationally

advanced compared to the animal world (see Gleason 15). Not surprisingly, an example of this can be already seen in the first story of the collection, also titled “Descent of Man”. The chimpanzee Konrad is clearly portrayed as higher evolved than his human counterparts.

T. C. Boyle also challenges the boundaries between man and other species in his short story “The Extinction Tales”. In between the stories, Boyle inserts short paragraphs about the extinction or near extinction of various species. These paragraphs are optically set apart by their indention and font, and resemble clippings from science magazines, stating short facts. One of these paragraphs shows Boyle’s Darwinistic opinion of men: “Concerning the higher primates: there are now on earth circa 25,000 chimpanzees, 5,000 gorillas, 3,000 orangutans, and 4,000,000,000 men” (106).

The choice of the subjects of these factual paragraphs in “The Extinction Tales” is varied. While the first one refers to the crematorium in Auschwitz (see 100), the second such section is about the variola virus being on the verge of extinction (see 103), followed by a paragraph listing several animals that have gone extinct recently, stating “Numerous other lifeforms have disappeared in this century” (104). Boyle thus clearly sets all these lifeforms on the same level, be they bacteria causing illness, animals or human beings.

3.1.1 Man Driven by Primal Instincts

In his stories Boyle shows that human’s primitive desires are the driving force to their actions. These instincts are so strong that they overwrite higher ambition or a moral code. T. C. Boyle talked about these issues in an interview with Steiner, where he discusses that people give up their convictions as soon as they pose an inconvenience to themselves (see min 19). Boyle even goes so far as to call himself a criminal in that, despite being concerned with environmental issues and believing the overpopulation is detrimental to the planet, he has three children himself. He attributes it to being an animal and forgetting the environment when he saw Mrs. Boyle in her skinny jeans for

the first time (see Boyle in Steiner min 37). When it comes to following their primal instincts, people operate just as irrationally as animals, according to Boyle (see Gleason 16).

One of these primitive instincts is the instinct to survive, which is a main theme of "Green Hell". When, in the story, two of the plane crash survivors, "Tanqueray" and the "allergic man" (see 147), offer to scout for a way out of the jungle, Boyle does not allow for noble motives behind the action: "They are not actuated by blind heroism. The one has finished the miniatures, the other is out of epinephrine" (147). The narrator himself is seen stealing food (see 143) and selfishly hiding it from the others, thinking only of his own survival and not considering the other people stranded in the jungle with him (see 152). When the mime, one of the eight plane crash survivors, falls ill the night before they had planned to set out in order to walk back to civilization, they take a vote as to what to do with the sick man, and they unanimously vote to leave the mime behind: "I do not want to stay. I do not want to carry the mime. I raise my hand" (152). The moral concept of working as a team and "sticking together" set up on their first evening after the crash (see 141) gives way to the survival instinct: "No one mentions community, nor refers to the group constitution" (152). The reversion to animalistic instincts is further shown when the narrator finds a dead animal: "the strange crushed thing at my feet. I want to tear it, eat it raw, alone and greedy" (149). Boyle himself comments, in an interview with Steiner, that moral ambitions are a luxury. One might feel like fighting for the environment and animal life, but if hungry, anyone would eat even the last animal of a species (see min 27). The human survival instinct is too strong to be thwarted by a moral code. In this respect humans are just like all the other animal species.

The parody "Heart of a Champion" shows the strength of the sexual drive. The collie, Lassie, set up to be a most loyal companion, turns on her owner, Timmy, in T. C. Boyle's short story. At the end of the story, she shares Timmy as a meal with the coyote she wants to mate with. Again the primitive instinct wins over the moral inclinations to loyalty. Humanity is not shown in a more favorable light when it comes to trading in morality to fulfill sexual desires. The final story of the collection, "Drowning",

“approaches the collection’s overriding theme of human animality” (Gleason 16). The obese young man is drawn to the naked girl on the beach, seemingly unintentionally; the following rape is unavoidable and uncontrollable due to the primal urges arising (see “Drowning” 217). Also the two fishermen who could be potential rescuers choose to rape the girl themselves instead. “Boyle argues that humanity has not used its rationality to eliminate immoral and unethical deeds” (Gleason 17). The strength of the sexual drive in humans is also shown in other stories of the collection. In the story “Earth, Moon”, for example, the astronaut succumbs to his sexual desires by masturbating despite his two fellow astronauts sleeping in the same room (see 162). In “The Big Garage” the protagonist’s abhorrence of the situation he is in and initial disgust with the treatment of the customers being only named by the names of the cars they drive, is immediately forgotten when Rita, one of the ladies working there, seemingly shows interest in having sex relations with him: “One of the sleepers groans, but B. is lost, oblivious, tugging and massaging like a horny teenager” (125). The sexual drive even wins over the survival instinct in the short story “Green Hell” when the narrator is trying, though unsuccessfully, to trade in some of his secret food supplies for sex with the stewardess (see 147). In the short story “Descent of Man” Jane leaves the narrator and pursues a sexual relationship with the chimpanzee Konrad. Gleason notes that “Konrad [...] wins the primeval contest for sexual superiority” (16).

Boyle’s stories strongly reflect his belief that humans are animals and therefore are driven by their primal instincts in just the same way. People might have moral values, but they are not as strong as their natural urges and give way when challenged. The reader of T. C. Boyle’s stories will often encounter such struggles between higher moral ambitions and primitive instincts and the usual outcome is for the characters to give in to the primal animalistic drives. Mankind is thus shown in Boyle’s short stories to be just another kind of animal.

3.2 *Environment and Bleak Outlook on the Future*

T. C. Boyle is very concerned with the environment. “Many of Boyle’s novels and short stories consider the relationship between humanity and nature.” (Gleason 7). When Boyle writes about the environment and man’s effect on it, he paints a very negative picture, as “anyone addressing the world’s ecological problems needs to be pessimistic” (Boyle in Purdy). The negative effect on nature through human carelessness and selfishness is a common theme in T. C. Boyle’s stories. One of the passages that illustrates this is found in the short story “Caye”:

Orlando sets and checks lobster traps. All the men on the island set and check lobster traps. [...] When the traps are hauled the law requires the fishermen to release any lobsters whose tail is smaller than three inches, a seeding measure. The fishermen do not release lobsters whose tails are smaller than three inches [...]. Instead they [...] carry the bloodless white meat home to their pot. Orlando tells me that the lobster catch is smaller this season than it was a year ago, and that a year ago it was smaller than the preceding season (110).

This is presented to the reader without giving any moral evaluation. Nevertheless, Boyle is able to convey to the reader through this passage how devastating the short-sightedness in environmental affairs can be. The fishermen’s selfish behaviour is shown to be not only harmful to the environment, but to their own businesses in the long run.

The first story in “The Extinction Tales” tells about a man taking on a job as a lighthouse keeper. A well-meaning neighbour gives him a kitten to take along for company onto the island (see 99-100). But this careless introduction of a new species into the ecological system of the island proves to be detrimental for another native species: the cat starts bringing home dead birds, a kind of bird that had not been discovered before (see 100). The story ends with: “The man never saw one of the birds alive. After a while the cat stopped bringing them” (100). It is implied that the bird became extinct due to the cat having been brought onto the island. The theme of a foreign species being introduced to an ecological system is also dealt with extensively in T. C. Boyle’s novel *When the Killing’s Done*.

Boyle has done a great deal of research about the environment for his books. He does not see much hope for the ultimate survival of mankind due to the destruction of the environment brought on by men themselves, causing threats such as global warming along with the resulting dislocation of people (see Boyle in Lamberti). Boyle states that one “cannot expect an animal species, our species, to understand the concept of national borders. Humans move where the resources are” (Boyle in Lamberti). He reflects on these issues in his book *A Friend of The Earth*. Environmental issues are also dealt with in other novels by T. C. Boyle, for example *The Terranauts* and *The Tortilla Curtain*. Concerning the environment it is Boyle’s conviction that “there’s no good news in that quarter. Well, the only good news is that I’ve made a comedy out of it” (Boyle in Lamberti).

Even if there are not many stories dealing with the environment in the short story collection *Descent of Man*, Boyle’s attitude toward the negative effect of mankind on this planet becomes clear. Considering that Boyle returns to this topic in many other stories and novels, environmental issues can be counted as one of the recurring themes in T. C. Boyle’s books. The readers of his books can expect to be confronted with environmental topics continually, which will leave them with something to consider that goes beyond the literary work.

3.3 Randomness of Human’s Existence

The first paragraph of the short story “Drowning” not only tells the reader about the fact that someone will drown in that story, but also that there is no apparent reason for it as “it will not for example be attributable to suicide, murder, divine retribution - nor even such arcana as current and undertow” (211). Toward the end of the story, when the man drowns, the narrator states: “A random event, one that I imagine, considering the world as a whole, is quite common” (219). Boyle himself believes that the human existence is ultimately senseless. In an interview with Grant he mentioned that life “is tragic and absurd and none of it has any purpose at all.”

The reader of Boyle's stories is confronted with the randomness and pointlessness of human existence even when it might not be the main topic of the story. For example, in the short story "Caye" one reads: "The sun here is mellow as an orange. One day it will flare up and turn the solar system to cinders. Then it will fall into itself, sick in the ribbons of flame like a pale ember, gather its last breath and explode" (111). A passage in "The Extinction Tales" is similar: "Suns fade, and planets wither. Solar systems collapse. When the sun reaches its red-giant stage in five billion years it will flare up to sear the earth, ignite it like a torch held to a scrap of newsprint, the seas evaporated, the forests turned to ash, the ragged Himalayan peaks fused and then converted to dust, cosmic dust. What's a species here, a species there? This is where extinction becomes sublime" (106). This bleak outlook into the future reflects Boyle's sentiments. He talks about it in an interview with Purdy: "In the long run it really doesn't matter: individually and as a species we are doomed."

T. C. Boyle's atheistic worldview is referred to in several of his short stories. In the story "Caye", the narrator starts thinking about the universe and black holes: "Black holes, black as the moments before birth and after death" (113). The shortness and senselessness of human existence is captured in this statement.

Boyle believes that it is an accident of evolution that humans are what they are (see Steiner min 7). That there is no purpose or deeper meaning behind our existence is a recurring theme in T. C. Boyle's stories.

3.4 *Strange and Unpredictable Plots*

T. C. Boyle's stories commonly have strange plots. In an interview with Bradley Boyle acknowledges that especially the collection *Descent of Man* has "crazy off the wall stories". The events of most of the stories in this collection are not realistic.

The reader of "Descent of Man" is confronted with a woman becoming more and more like an ape who is ultimately ready to mate with a chimpanzee. In "Bloodfall" people

are living in a commune trying to understand and work against blood starting to fall from the sky without any explanation or reason. In "Dada" a woman who helps organize a Dada art exhibition travels to Uganda to bring back its leader and finally agrees to be one of his wives simply for art's sake. In "A Women's Restaurant" a man is so obsessed with a restaurant only for women that he tries everything: violence, dressing up and finally planning to get a sex change to get into it. In "De Rerum Natura" the scientist creates a boy that is a mix of human and pig, raises his partner from the dead, and is found "squatting naked in a ring of skunk cabbage" (192) after having gone missing for 40 days. All these plots are far from realistic scenarios. The "outlandish plots" Boyle employs in his short stories are part of the reason why Boyle is such a great comic writer (see Gleason 9). When the plot is unusual and does not follow a familiar pattern, it is harder to know what will happen next and where the story will ultimately take the reader.

In T. C. Boyle's stories it is also hard to predict the end as the author often gives the story a surprising twist. In "The Champ" Angelo D.'s winning of the eating competition against the kid (see 24) comes as a surprise to the reader. The story of "Heart of a Champion" also takes a startling turn when Lassie does not save Timmy from under the fallen pine and from the coyote, but bonds with the coyote instead (see 43-45). The reader is surprised at the narrator deciding to have a sex change in the end of the story of "A Women's Restaurant" (see 98). It is also an unexpected turn in the story "Drowning" that the fishermen, seemingly coming to rescue the girl that is being raped, end up raping her as well (see 218). In "Quetzalcóatl Lite" the I-narrator reflects about the destruction that collecting beer cans has caused in his life (see 183) and the uselessness of his hobby: "I am a collector. Of cans. Empty cans. The metaphor is so blatant and damning I need not bore you with an exegesis" (183). But surprisingly, in the very last paragraph, the narrator is lured into the search of another sort of beer can, by none other than the man who deserted him in the last venture.

In an interview with Bradley, Boyle talks about books by authors who are always following the same pattern: "Some readers love crap, because crap is comforting, you know what's going to happen. It's always the same, it's the same detective, somebody

dies, and then they figure it out. To me that's totally boring." Clearly, Boyle does not want to write such literature. Most of Boyle's stories in the story collection *Descent of Man* have a surprise twist at some point of the story, many at the end. By employing unusual plots Boyle keeps his readers entertained by leading them down an unfamiliar path. Because T. C. Boyle's stories do not follow predictable patterns, he is able to keep his stories surprising. Readers of his stories do not know where the story will lead them, which keeps things intriguing and interesting.

3.5 Characters

Alongside plot, characters are the most important elements in a story (see Abbott 123). Gleason states that the characters in T. C. Boyle's books are influenced by Boyle's university mentors, John Cheever and Raymond Carver (see 13). From them "Boyle learns to create mainly unexceptional white middle- to lower-class male protagonists for whom contemporary American life affords seemingly endless angst and boredom" (Gleason 13).

That the characters in Boyle's first story collection are mainly male is especially true looking at the main character of each story. The only exceptions to this are the female I-narrator in the story "Dada" and the girl in the story "Drowning", though there are two protagonists in the latter story and the other one is male. In the story "Heart of a Champion" Lassie is female and could be seen as the main character. The other fourteen stories in *Descent of Man*, have male protagonists.

Boyle tends to use flat characters in his stories. Bal defines the distinction between round and flat characters: "*Round characters* are like 'complex' persons, who undergo a change in the course of the story, and remain capable of surprising the reader. *Flat characters* are stable, stereotypical characters that exhibit/contain nothing surprising" (81). Flat characters are "limited to a narrow range of predictable behaviour" (Abbott 126). Round characters are better at resembling reality as humans really are complex beings (see Abbott 127), but flat characters have the advantage that they "can be

awfully funny, and satire can provide focus and bite by reducing a target to a flat character” (Abbott 127).

Short stories do not provide much space for character development. Some of the supporting characters are especially flat, as they are only seen through the focalizing lens of the narrator, who often does not know the others well and does not even care about them. The female characters, portrayed through the lens of a male focal character, are shown to be very stereotypical or reduced to their sexuality. This can be especially seen in the person of the stewardess in the stories “Green Hell”, ladies working at the car repair place in “The Big Garage”, and the way women are portrayed in “A Women’s Restaurant”. Boyle himself acknowledges his use of flat characters: “When I was writing my first couple of books, my wife would say, “Your female characters are very flat,” and so they were. But I countered her by saying, “So are my male characters”” (Boyle in Purdy). The reader of *Descent of Man* can expect to encounter flat characters.

3.5.1 *The Hero-Victims*

The main character of a story is often referred to as the “hero” of the story (see Bal 91-92). The hero is usually the character that the reader gets the most information about and occurs often in the fabula, especially at decisive moments. His or her actions as well as his or her relationships with a lot of the other characters can set him or her apart as the hero (see Bal 92).

Bal delineates the difference between “the active, successful hero, the hero-victim, and the passive anti-hero” (92). The most common kind of hero in Boyle’s short stories in the story collection *Descent of Man* is the hero-victim who “will be confronted with opponents, but will not vanquish them” (Bal 92). Boyle has been accused of a lack of sympathy for the characters he creates and of having pleasure in making them suffer (see Grant). In an interview with Richard Grant for “The Guardian” Boyle says this about his characters: “It’s my universe, and by god they’re going to suffer.”

We see such a hero-victim in the figure of B. in the story “The Big Garage”. Unable to fix his car himself (see 118), he is at the mercy of Tegeler’s Big Garage. He neither manages to get the mechanics to help him out (see 132) nor is he able to escape from the place (see 135-136). In the end he has to give up in defeat of the system and is ready to buy one of the cars from Tegeler’s Big Lot (see 138) despite the fact that they were described to him as “real lemons” (129). Many other stories in *Descent of Man* feature hero-victims as main characters. The narrator of “Quetzalcóatl Lite” is one such hero-victim. Controlled by his obsession to collect beer cans, he is used and cheated by his companion Perdoo (see 182-183) and ends up under arrest (see 183). In “Descent of Man” the protagonist loses his girlfriend to the chimpanzee and in the end will possibly even lose his life (see 16). Thus he can also be categorized as a hero-victim. The hero-victim in the story “Bloodfall” is not able to figure out the reason for the bloody downpour, cannot stop it, and does not even manage to go out to buy groceries. All his attempts to fight against this plague are inefficient. In “The Second Swimming” Chang is one of the main characters. His toe is supposedly healed from leprosy by “the application of Mao Tse-tung’s thought” (68) and he has set out to offer a pig to Chairman Mao. He has increasing difficulties walking due to the pain in his toe and in controlling the pig, which ends up drinking his home-brewed liquor (see 68) and eventually runs off (see 75). The other main character, Hung, comes back home after being on a tour with the ping pong team for thirteen months. His longing for his wife (see 62) remains unfulfilled as he finds his wife in labor pains (see 64). Hung’s struggle to get back at Chairman Mao, who is blamed for the happenings, ends in his encounter with “six teenagers in Mao shirts” (73) that beat him “until his flesh takes on the color and consistency of a fermenting plum” (73), and so he fails to get revenge. Both of the main characters in “The Second Swimming” can be categorised as hero-victims.

The lines of distinction between the different kinds of heros are not always drawn as clearly as in the examples above, but there are other protagonists in the short stories in the collection *Descent of Man* that could also be considered hero-victims as they have some struggles they fail to overcome. Though the I-narrator in “Green Hell” manages to survive, his attempt to bribe the stewardess into a sexual relationship fails miserably (see 147-148), and when their group is being shot at by the natives of the

land, he does not engage in a heroic combat: “It is no time to lose consciousness. But I do” (155). Despite being a successful inventor, the protagonist of “De Rerum Natura” is shown in a constant struggle to deal with the humanised pig creature and in the end is killed by an angry mob of people (see 196). We also find examples of hero-victims in the stories “The Extinction Tales”, “A Women’s Restaurant” and “Drowning”.

As shown by these many examples, the main characters of T. C. Boyle’s stories are often portrayed as hero-victims, unsuccessful in overcoming their many struggles or realizing their aims. The use of hero-victims for most of Boyle’s stories makes the protagonists more relatable to the readers, as the experience of failing at an attempt is more likely part of the reader’s real-life experience than the successful overcoming of all obstacles in life.

3.5.2 *The Use of the Guru-Leader as a Character*

In an interview with Purdy, Boyle states that he has great interest in “the idea of the small community and of the guru who will lead you to salvation. This is one thing that obsesses me”. The idea of the strong leader is one that T. C. Boyle deals with in several of his books, such as *Drop City*, which is about a hippy commune following a guru, *The Road to Wellville*, exploring the life of Kellogg, seen as a health guru, and *Outside Looking In* about a 60s commune of Harvard University students following the lead of the drug enthusiastic psychologist Timothy Leary. In the story collection *Descent of Man* there are also a few examples of such guru-leader figures.

Boyle communicates his opinion of gurus in an interview with Ulin: “I can’t stand the idea of authority, and I think it’s detrimental to the character of people to give themselves over blindly to authority. Obviously there are many disciples, and a strong man serves a need in people. But not for me.” This opinion is reflected in the short story “Green Hell” when the pilot stands up to take control of the situation and the narrator states: “I realize that we have a leader. I further realize that I detest him. I doubt that we will make it” (141). In the story “Bloodfall” a man named Gesh is the

leader of the commune (see 53). He is not shown in a very favorable light. When the blood first starts raining from the sky and the windows are all smeared with blood already, Gesh is still unaware, passing around a pipe (see 48). He underestimates the danger of the bloodfall and first goes running around in it for fun (see 48-49). When he suggests going out to get food, he forces the narrator to go with him even though the narrator mentions: "I don't want to go out there - I'll lose my lunch" (53), which is exactly what happens (see 54). At that point he is more concerned about his expensive car than the narrator. "The Second Swimming" parodies the Chinese dictatorship and makes fun of the people blindly following their leader Chairman Mao and of the propaganda spread by his regime. When Chairman Mao decides to go swimming in near freezing temperatures, the devoted masses follow: "a tangle of stiffening limbs and shocked bodies, a mass of them clinging together like worms in a can, [...] a thousand hands, the mud, the cold" (74).

The theme of the guru, or strong leader, only comes up in these three stories of *Descent of Man*. Nonetheless it can be considered one of Boyle's recurring themes, as the theme comes up in several of his novels as well.

3.6 *Connecting the Fictional World to the Real World*

3.6.1 *Referential characters*

Referential characters are characters for which the reader has a reference in the real world (see Bal 83). A lot of Boyle's novels are concerned with characters based on historical figures, such as *The Road To Wellville* about J. H. Kellogg, the inventor of cornflakes, *The Inner Circle* about sexologist Alfred Kinsley, *The Women* about the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and *Outside Looking In* featuring the psychologist Timothy Leary.

Boyle does not claim to give a perfectly accurate historical account of these characters: "I have the advantage of historical irony, of course, when developing and addressing

the characters that populate my stories set in the early nineteen hundreds” (Martin C.). For the readers, this can create a contradiction between their previous knowledge of the person and what is presented in the text (see Bal 83). In his interview with Ulin, Boyle also talks about the discrepancy between the historical persons and the fictional characters he creates based on them:

I have absolute freedom to invent anything. I like to use historical figures as a springboard to talk about something that’s happening in society, or to show how we got here from there, or to remind us that every notion has been preceded by another. But I do like to keep these figures within the context of what I discover about them. Of course, I manipulate the characters for my own purposes, but I don’t really know that as I’m doing it. I just let the character come to life.

Boyle uses referential characters not only in his novels, but also in his short stories. In “Descent of Man” Jane Good references Jane Goodall, a scientist whose work was devoted to studying the behavior of chimpanzees. Though aware of the reference, the reader should be able to see that Boyle’s representation of the character in “Descent of Man” is purely fictional.

In the short story “Dada” the I-narrator flies to Uganda to invite Idi Amin Dada to the Second International Dada Fair. Idi Amin Dada Oumee really was field marshal and president of Uganda in the 1970s when the story was written and published. The cruel acts done under his presidency, namely the human rights violations and killings of hundreds of thousands of people under his regime (see Keatley) are alluded to with his display at the fair, which has “a backdrop of severed heads” (80). In the story, his character is placed into the fictional setting of being the main exhibit at the Dada Fair, which parodies both the art movement as well as Idi Amin Dada Oumee. Chairman Mao in the short story “The Second Swimming” is also based on a real person. Mao Tse-tung was the great communist leader in China. Just as his fictional counterpart, the real Chairman Mao came up with little sayings. They were collected in the book *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, a work of propaganda which was made available to every Chinese citizen (see biography.com Editors). Though set into a fictional plot, the similarities between the fictional character and the real person are clearly recognizable.

Besides these examples of referential characters with significant roles in the plot, Boyle also references real people in some of his other stories. In "Quetzalcóatl Lite" the narrator talks about different exotic cans of beer he has been able to acquire: "[T]he first Falstaff can Bob Dylan had ever held to his lips, a Missouri Mule can found under Harry Truman's bed, the can of Via Media that John XXIII had hastily downed before the first convocation of the Ecumenical Council" (170). Boyle is able to add a comic element to the story by the contrasting picture of the real pope and the fictional image of him downing a can of beer. In "Earth, Moon" the astronaut is "pirouetting like a Baryshnikov" (160) referencing the dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. When in the short story "A Women's Restaurant" Rubie, one of the women running the restaurant, shaves her head, the narrator thinks of "Charley Manson" (90) in reference to the murderer and cult leader Charles Manson.

To be fully able to understand and appreciate T. C. Boyle's stories and novels, readers have to be acquainted with contemporary politics and popular culture, as Boyle frequently uses referential characters. While the reader can recognize the characters, Boyle does not bind himself to a realistic account of them. The use of these referential characters can add levels of interpretation as well as comic elements to his stories.

3.6.2 *Social Issues and Historic Events*

T. C. Boyle is concerned with political as well as social issues which find their way into his fiction (see Gleason 7). "I'm bringing the news, more than most writers" Boyle states in an interview with Purdy, "particularly in the short stories". Boyle's stories are touching on contemporary issues as well as historical events and people. "Some of Boyle's best and best-known fiction [...] explore his generation from many perspectives, always searching for the motivations for idealism in individual lives and the result of this idealism on American society and history," Gleason writes in his book *Understanding T. C. Boyle*, "[e]lsewhere in his fiction, Boyle extends his analysis of idealism to other eras of American history" (6).

3.6.2.1 Contemporary Social Issues

Boyle's stories are influenced by "Cheever's thematic interest in questioning ethical behaviour in a morally ambiguous society" (Gleason 13). In his stories, Boyle touches on social issues and questions people's behaviour when confronted with these problems.

In "Bloodfall" members of the commune are watching TV while passing a pipe: "On the TV screen were pictures of starving children: distended bellies, eyes as big as their bony heads, spiders' arms and spiders' legs: someone was laughing in the kitchen" (48). By presenting such a sharp contrast between the referenced starvation of children in sub-Saharan Africa and the group watching the program, the reader is confronted with the ignorance of the people to the plight of others, much as happens in the real world. The short story "De Rerum Natura" is concerned with the ethical question of genetic engineering, a very current topic in the 70s when T. C. Boyle wrote the story, as the first genetically engineered organism was created in 1973 (see Jacobsen). In the same story, the reader finds a passage that satirizes the low priority the solution of important problems sometimes gets in this world: "A committee from the Gandhi foundation had come to him asking for a solution to the problem of world hunger. He told them he would consider their petition, though engaged in other projects at the time" ("De Rerum Natura" 188). In "The Second Swimming" Boyle indicates his disagreement with the communist regime: "Hung is two blocks from home, hurrying, the collar of his pajamas fastened against the cold, too preoccupied to wonder why he and his class brothers wear slippers and pajamas on the street rather than overshoes and overcoats" (64).

3.6.2.2 Historical Events

There are some historical events that are mentioned or alluded to in the short stories collected in *Descent of Man*. It is no surprise that Boyle, a history major, shows an interest in historical events. That also reflects upon his stories and novels. "I have a love for history, a love for imagining how things might have been," Boyle comments in his interview with Cameron Martin, "I like to think about how we got to where we are now and how our life in the present era contrasts with life prior to the great dislocations

of the twentieth century, the world wars and then the period of technological innovation that succeeded the second war.” In his short story “John Barleycorn Lives”, named after the traditional poem “John Barleycorn”, T. C. Boyle references the time in American history, the early part of the 20th century, when alcohol was prohibited, as stated in the 18th amendment. The attempt of the “madwoman” to destroy the bar is unsuccessful in the end, just as the amendment did not last in the real world. In “The Extinction Tales” there is a mention of the historic event when Auschwitz was liberated by the Russians in 1945 (see 100). In the last part of the short story the narrator talks about his father’s death. This can only be assumed to be autobiographical of T. C. Boyle. When he visits his grave at night and looks at his father’s name written on the gravestone, the narrator describes it as “a three-part name, identical to my own” (107). This event most likely refers to Boyle’s own history. There are other examples in *Descent of Man* of historical references: “We Are Norsemen” is alluding to the raids of the Vikings during the Middle Ages, who got as far as the northern coast of North America (see 28-30). The story “Earth, Moon” was written shortly after the first moon landing in 1969, and the story “Dada” is a parody of the art movement of Dada from the early 20th century.

In his fiction, Boyle often references people and events from the real world. Through these connections to the real world, T. C. Boyle is able to challenge the readers by making them realize that the mentioned topics are not just fictional, but real-life concerns - thereby he has an impact beyond the fictional world. Even though Boyle in general avoids providing the readers with clear solutions, his social criticism causes them to have a greater awareness of the problems.

4. Stylistic Features

Without language there would be no narrator, no plot and no characters - language is what creates the fictional world (see Fludernik 64). When looking at T. C. Boyle's stories, it is important to consider the stylistic features he employs as the effect of the text changes according to the way an author uses the language (see Bal 49). According to Fludernik, language is not just the medium but also the object of representation (see Fludernik 64). Boyle claims that it is one of his objects in life "to turn people on and remind them of the special joys of literature" (Boyle in Purdy). "My aesthetic, as a writer and reader both, is to elevate the sense of enjoyment above all other literary considerations, to remind us all that literature is an art and that art exists to entertain" (Boyle in Doubletakes, vii-viii).

T. Coraghessan Boyle has a wonderful way with words and a unique style using language to create his fiction. "Two [...] defining characteristics of Boyle's fiction are his prose style and comic sensibility" (Gleason 9). When considering Boyle's stories in *Descent of Man* it is therefore important to also look at the stylistic features he uses to create his unique style of writing.

4.1 Humor

Boyle has no interest in writing academic literature. He sees his writing as a performance and does not want his books to be dull (see Boyle in Lamberti): "I have a lot of fun with the language. Language is the key to stories that are purely comic. They are serious because they have the underpinnings of extraordinary language" (Boyle in Lamberti). Especially Boyle's comic stories reflect his showmanship and are the reason for much of the admiration he gets from his readers (see Gleason 9). He "enjoys a strong base of devoted readers because many of his stories are funny" (Gleason 10). The readers of *Descent of Man* find comic elements in all of the stories.

In many of his works, Boyle brings out the humor in a situation by means of elements that contrast each other. In the story “Green Hell”, for example, we see that of the eight people surviving the plane crash there is a man allergic to cats as well as a cat breeder (see 140). While all the strong Rugby players die, the cats all survive the plane crash (see 140). In the announcement after the crash, the situation is made comical by the contrast of importance of subjects: “The pilot breaks the news: we’ve come down in the heart of the Amazon basin, hundreds perhaps thousands of miles from the nearest toilet” (140).

Mixing in seemingly unimportant information concerning bodily functions when describing important moments in the development of the plot also adds humor to other stories. Just after the astronaut arrives at the moon and takes his first steps on it in the story “Earth, Moon” we read: “And then something ordinary happens. Lunch (the Radarange lobster Newburg), begins to churn in his stomach. A pressure there. Gas. He shifts to let it go. This is an historic moment he thinks” (160-161). In “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the I-narrator’s anger is made into a comic element: ““You sneaking, son-of-a-bitching, backstabbing opportunist!” I shrieked, shaking the toilet paper at him in rage” (178). The reader of “The Second Swimming” is also entertained by the contrast of the grandness of Chairman Mao’s position and his propaganda statements and seeing him sitting on the toilet scratching something into the wall of the wooden bathroom stall (see 67).

4.1.1 *Use of Irony and Parody*

In an interview with Bradley Boyle states: “My natural form of discourse is to be a wise guy and use humor and irony”. Short stories in general are a genre often associated with irony, and Shaw even goes so far as to say: “If there is any single mode corresponding to short-story form, then it is neither the comic nor the tragic, but the ironic” (210). The reader of the stories in *Descent of Man* finds many examples of ironic elements.

Traditionally there is a distinction between verbal irony and dramatic irony (see W. Martin 180). Verbal irony “typically operates at the level of words and sentences that are understood by audiences and readers to carry meanings different from the words themselves when interpreted literally. (Sarcasm can be considered a form of verbal irony.)” (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Dramatic irony is embedded in the story’s structure (see Encyclopaedia Britannica). Both kinds of irony can be observed in T. C. Boyle’s stories.

An example of verbal irony can be seen in the short story “We are Norsemen” where the illiterate narrator calls the well-studied monk “idiot” because the monk is reading a book (see 35). The protagonist of the short story “Quetzalcóatl Lite” is arrested for digging at an archeological site. The way in which Boyle describes the narrator bribing the police shows the author’s talent for sarcasm: “The Policía Nacional showed depth of compassion after I carpeted the station house in traveler’s checks and the odd pink and brown bills they use for money in this corner of the world” (183). Boyle also uses verbal irony in the story “John Barleycorn Lives”, stating that they ran an editorial “just under a thought-provoking piece on the virtues of the motorcar as the waste-free vehicle of the future” (201).

Even more frequently than verbal irony, Boyle employs dramatic irony in the story collection *Descent of Man*. In “The Second Swimming”, for example, one of the storylines is about Chang Chiu-chu going to offer a pig to Chairman Mao, because his toe has been miraculously healed by the application of Chairman Mao’s proverbs. Chang even meets another man on the road that has heard about his healing on the radio, where it had been broadcasted two hundred times (see 68). But the whole time Chang Chiu-chu is struggling to walk and had problems with his feet: “The left is reluctant to follow the right, and when it does, the right is reluctant to follow suit” (66). The reader is aware throughout the story that the toe is not actually healed and the fact that Chang is going to offer a sacrifice for the healing is ironic. In the story “Descent of Man” the first-person narrator is still unaware of the main course in the restaurant being monkey brain, at a point when the reader already knows. The fact that the narrator then states: “I wasn’t really listening. My attention was directed toward what I

took to be the main course” (11), when the conversation he chose not to listen to was actually about the main course, adds to the irony, as well as him not understanding that the hair found at the side of the dish has nothing to do with the hygiene of the restaurant. Dramatic irony, as seen in the examples above, often involves the reader knowing more than a character and therefore being able to come up with a different interpretation of the situation (see Encyclopaedia Britannica). Another example of dramatic irony can be found in the story “Green Hell”. At the end of the story, the “cat man” helps the narrator to escape from the jungle, saying: “You were the only one who loved my little beauties, the only one who never meant us any harm” (156). The reader is clearly shown throughout the story that the opposite is true, which makes this turn of events quite ironic.

Situational irony, often seen as a sub-form of dramatic irony (see W. Martin 180) is defined as “irony involving a situation in which actions have an effect that is opposite from what was intended, so that the outcome is contrary to what was expected” (“Situational Irony” in *dictionary.com*) In the short story “The Extinction Tales” the Anglican priest, in his effort to save the members of a tribe, ends up causing them to go extinct. This can be seen as situational irony. In “The Big Garage” B.’s effort of calling a friend to get a ride, causes him to miss the opportunity of being able to catch a ride with one of the workers as they finish their shift (see 123).

Boyle also makes use of parody in several of the stories. Parody is defined as an “imitating the style of an author [...] in an amusing and often exaggerated way” and as a “comic imitation” (“Parody” in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Encyclopedic Dictionary*). The short story “Heart of a Champion” is a parody of the TV show “Lassie”. It exaggerates the constant plot element of Timmy getting into trouble and needing to be rescued by his collie, as well as making fun of Lassie’s perfection. The story “The Champ”, where the eating competition is portrayed in the same way as a boxing match, could be seen as a parody of the boxing movie “Rocky”, which was released shortly before the short story. “The Big Garage” can be seen as a parody of the complicated and frustrating process of dealing with car repair shops, and the story “Dada” parodies the Dada Art movement.

While some of his short stories are meant as a parody in their entirety, others only contain certain elements of parody. Elements of parody are found, for example, in the short story “The Second Swimming” where the figure of Chairman Mao is parodied as well as his writings. The first moon landing is parodied in the story “Earth, Moon”. In “We are Norsemen”, the way T. C. Boyle describes the Vikings and their raids could be seen as a parody of the real Vikings. The elements of parody add a comic level to the stories.

In summary it can be said that T. C. Boyle’s writing style contains various humorous elements. Most of the stories in *Descent of Man* can be considered funny stories and all of them contain humorous elements. Often the humor is brought out by contrasting elements, by creating a contrast between the stories and the real world by means of parody, and by Boyle’s frequent use of irony. Using irony and parody, Boyle is able to make fun of, as well as to criticise society, while keeping his readers well entertained.

4.2 *The Use of Poetic Features*

The reader of a short story generally requires a higher level of concentration than the person reading a novel (see Brosch 55). Stanzel notes that “[r]eading short stories approaches the reading of poetry in shifting attention to [...] the single word or phrase” (23). Due to the limited length of short stories, each element of the text has a greater part in bringing about the desired effect and a denser use of poetic stylistic features can compensate for this shortness of text (see Brosch 61). A story that seems to be written in every-day language is brought to life by being interspersed with a very different literary language that stands out due to the sharp contrast (see Brosch 62). The fact that T. C. Boyle often also uses coarse or even vulgar language in his stories heightens this contrast.

4.2.1 *Simile, Metaphor and Metonymy - Drawing Pictures with Words*

Boyle's short stories are marked by their figurative language. Figurative "means that a usage is motivated by a metaphoric or metonymic relationship to some other usage, a usage which might be labeled *literal*" (Dancygier and Sweetser 4). Talking about an eating competition of Kid Gullet, Angelo D's main challenger, in "The Champ", the reader is told that "Harris hit him with baklava" (19). The word "hit" is used in a metaphoric way, as the participants of an eating competition do not literally "hit" their opponents. Even if the word "hit" is commonly used in a metaphoric way (for example in the phrases "hit with bad news", "hit with a cold", etc.), it still has to be considered as figurative language. In the same way, one can detect figurative language in this story when reading that Angelo D.'s "records had stood like Mount Rushmore - and now this Kid was eating them up" (17), as records do not in the literal sense "stand" and one can not actually "eat up" a record. Boyle uses figurative language often in a conventional way as well as on a more elaborate level. Brosch mentions that especially short stories have to employ their potential for visual language due to the limited space (see 183). Through this visualisation of the short story the emotions and fantasies of the reader are appealed to and a lot of information can be communicated by these pictures with few words. This is comparable to pictures in a dream that evoke feelings (see Brosch 182). Boyle employs similes as well as metaphor and metonymy to conjure up images in the reader's mind.

Figurative language does not only add to the aesthetic value of a text (see Dancygier and Sweetser 1), but also shapes the "viewpoint of relevant content" (Dancygier and Sweetser 10), as "you experience a visual scene from some particular point rather than another. This means that linguistic expression is adapted and developed specifically to express and prompt viewpoint meanings rather than God's eye ones" (Dancygier and Sweetser 2-3). Similes and metaphors are expressive elements of the narrative and are therefore located "in the category of *voice*" (Fludernik 73). They are "produced by the narrator's discourse, in the thought of characters or by the remarks of the main protagonist" (Fludernik 73).

Boyle uses similes in all of his stories, sometimes excessively. Even though “Earth, Moon” is only five pages long, the shortest story in the collection *Descent of Man*, one finds fifteen similes in it. While the astronaut finds himself “pirouetting like a Baryshnikov, the plotting boots light as ballet slippers” (160), his wife’s fingernails have “grown long as stilettos and her axillary hair thick as moss” (160). The similes are used to draw the contrasting pictures of the experience in space as compared to the ones on the earth. In “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the first-person narrator uses similes when looking back at his previously unrefined ways of collecting. By them he brings out how disgusted he is with what he used to collect, such as “the crusted and petrified wads of chewing gum that clustered beneath counters and tabletops like the plague of boils that ravaged my grandfather’s face” (166). He is also showing his former self in an unfavourable light: “Objects, things, crafted and sleek, were my obsession: I hoarded and doted over them like some rubber lipped jungle chieftain doting over his talisman” (166). Not only does his viewpoint come out through the negative pictures he assimilates with himself and his collection, but the sheer absurdity and exaggeration of the comparison also produces humor. The simile used by the first-person narrator in “Green Hell” for Andrea, the stewardess he unsuccessfully tried to bribe into having sex with him, reflects the narrator’s objectified view of her: “Andrea, 97 percent of exposed flesh, is like a first-aid dummy” (154).

Some of the similes used refer to the theme or a motif of the story in which they appear. In “The Second Swimming” the reader sees Chang, cold and worn down from pilgrimage and the weather, but still clinging to the propaganda of Chairman Mao. He decides to stop for a drink, which “warms his digestive machinery like a shot of Revolutionary Optimism” (63). Chairman Mao, on his way to go swimming in the freezing cold river, “rides the truckbed like a marble statue of himself” (73). In the short story “De Rerum Natura” the baby boy, who is born out of a sow in the beginning of the story, is described as “red as a ham” (186), referring to the fact that the story is about a humanoid pig.

Boyle’s style of writing is very metaphorical. One of the effects Boyle is able to achieve through the use of metaphor is to add beauty to the language, making his prose writing

sound rather poetic. In “The Second Swimming” one reads: “The water is a knife. Colder than the frozen heart of the universe” (74). In “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the narrator comes to the conclusion that “illusion masquerades as reality. Reality is a tear in the veil of Maya” (166). These poetic elements are in sharp contrast to more vulgar phrases in this story. For example, right after the narrator calls his companion Perdoo a “son of a bitch” (177), he realizes the different ways in which Perdoo had only used him to finance their expedition (see 177). To describe this, he then employs a metaphor: “We were acrobats, and I’d stood on the bottom, giving Perdoo leverage to clear the wall” (177).

Often the metaphors T. C. Boyle uses are exaggerated. In “Drowning” the sweat of the obese young man is described in the following way: “Brackish creeks and streams and rivulets wash over the globe of his torso” (214). Besides this use of the metaphor of the man being a planet, Boyle is using the metaphors of him being a truck and a mountain (see 217). In the story “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the narrator states: “[W]e fought our way through the galaxies of insects” (177) and when Chairman Mao in “The Second Swimming” opens his arms, the “answering roar is like the birth of a planet” (70). The images Boyle creates through these exaggerated metaphors are memorable and therefore leave a lasting impression on the reader’s mind. These metaphors can also serve as absurd or comic elements in his stories, as, for example, when after B.’s failed effort to reach a friend on the phone, his exhaustion is explained in the following way: “He’s just gone fifteen rounds, scaled Everest, staggered out of the Channel at Calais” (122).

Boyle also uses the stylistic feature of metonymy in his stories. “Metonymy focuses on a prominent feature of a whole” (Fludernik 75). Through this, metonymy also serves to create a certain viewpoint as one can be emotionally less involved when the whole person does not have to be considered (Dancygier and Sweetser 10). Boyle uses metonymy in this way in several stories in *Descent of Man*. In the story “The Big Garage” the customers are only named after the car they drive by the employees, who thereby vince their emotional detachment from them. Even the customers themselves are at times referring to the others in the same way. The names the first-person

narrator uses in the story “Green Hell” are metonymic and are a picture of how little he cares about anyone but himself. The same is true for the pilot (see 150). The viewpoint the narrator takes in the story “John Barleycorn Lives” is emphasized by him calling the woman fighting for the abolition of alcohol “madwoman” (199) or “Mrs. Mad” (202). In the short story “Caye” one of the main protagonists is called “Orlando’s uncle”. While Orlando is only mentioned in one paragraph (see 110), by these means Boyle is able to set a greater focus on Orlando, maybe to give emphasis to exactly that paragraph, as it is concerned with one of the most important topics for Boyle - the destruction of the earth through mankind. He addresses this through the diminishing lobster population caused by the selfish practices of the fishermen.

In *Descent of Man* the stylistic features of simile, metaphor and metonymy sometimes even occur intertwined. Especially simile and metaphor are used together frequently, for example when the first-person narrator comments on having his first drink after getting into the restaurant dressed up as a woman in “A Women’s Restaurant”: “I downed the libation like honey and water” (95). The passages in “The Second Swimming” describing “a tangle of stiffening limbs and shocked bodies, a mass of them clinging together like worms in a can, the air splintering his lungs, the darkness below, a thousand hands, the mud, cold” (74), and Chairman Mao observing the crowds that showed up for his birthday celebration (“He looks down on the wash of heads and shoulders oscillating like the sea along a rocky shoreline” [70]), show how densely the figurative language and visual images are sometimes used in Boyle’s stories.

In summary, the stylistic features of simile, metaphor and metonymy are used frequently in the story collection *Descent of Man*. Out of the three, simile is used the most. The reader of T. C. Boyle’s stories can expect to encounter highly figurative language and many visualisations.

4.2.2 *Rhythm of the Language*

Though T. C. Boyle is writing in prose, there is a rhythm to the words he uses. As mentioned in the introduction, Boyle likes to read his stories out loud to make sure the language flows well.

4.2.2.1 Alliterations and Opposites

T. C. Boyle achieves the desired rhythm partly by the frequent use of alliteration. In “Bloodfall”, for example, the pictures hanging in the house are described as featuring men from the slums with “port pints in their pockets” (49), and the blood came down “hard as hail” (53). In “We are Norsemen” the I-narrator describes their weapons as “doughty death-dealing weapons” (33). While Jane is sitting in front of a heater in “Descent of Man”, the fruit pieces hidden in “hanks of her hair” (3) are “sifting silently” to the floor (4), and the first-person narrator in “Dada” explains the art to a reporter: “monuments of absurdity - acts of art. And actors” (80).

Often these alliterations are mixed with other means of adding rhythm to the language. In search of a village to raid in “We are Norsemen”, the warriors move “up hill and down dale, through brakes and brambles and bogs and clouds of insects that rushed up our nostrils and down our throats” (29). The flowing rhythm of this passage is not only brought on by the use of alliteration, but the repetition of the contrasting words “up” and “down”. Boyle frequently uses opposites. In “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the group is eating “black beans and white rice” (172). Again alliteration is used together with opposites. Further on in the story, the narrator talks about the backpacks that stand out as “on a black and white canvas. [...] White sun, black shade” (176).

4.2.2.2 Use of Staccato Rhythm: Lists and Short or Incomplete Sentences

As mentioned in the introduction, Boyle compares the rhythm of the language to music and is always listening to music while writing. It seems fitting therefore to describe his style by the musical term staccato. He frequently makes use of short, sometimes incomplete sentences as well as writing down various list.

The story “Green Hell” has many lists. When the plane crashes, the narrator gives a description of the things happening: “We gasp once and then we’re down, skidding through the greenery, jolted from our seats, panicked, repentant, savage” (139). Later in the story the diary entry for the night consists of just a list of 28 different insects and small animals (see 142). With this list Boyle is able to convey how terrible the night in the jungle must have been for the narrator without writing about it explicitly. In “Heart

of a Champion” the coyote is described in the following way: “He is stunted, scabious, syphilitic, his forepaw trap-twisted, his eyes running” (40). Just as in this example, T. C. Boyle often combines his lists with the use of alliteration to give them their special rhythm.

In “A Women’s Restaurant” Boyle makes use of lists as well as short or incomplete sentences frequently. This style can be used to indirectly portray the thoughts of the narrator, as thoughts do not form in clear, complete sentences. “It was dark. Candlelit. There were tables, booths, sofas and lounge chairs. Plants, hangings, carpets, woodwork. Women” (94). The indirect portrayal of thoughts is also clear when the narrator is asked for his name after entering the restaurant dressed up as a woman: “I froze. A name, a name, a name.” (95). Some of the lists given in “A Women’s Restaurant” are quite extensive, such as the imagined list of women who could be found in the restaurant that stretches over seven lines (see 85), or when the narrator reads an actual shopping list of fifteen women’s beauty products he wants to acquire (see 93).

The use of the staccato rhythm of sentences can also work towards the suspense of a moment, imitating fast heartbeat: “Rubie’s Fiat. I lost my head. Ran for the gate, tripped, scrambled back toward the house, frantic, ashamed, mortified. Trapped” (“A Women’s Restaurant” 88). In “Green Hell” the pilot gets struck by several arrows and the narrator describes the excitement: “We watch, horror-struck. His eyes glaze, the arms twitch at his sides, the giggles rising like a wave, cresting higher, curling, and then breaking [...]. We panic. The professor screams” (154-155). The staccato sounding rhythm can also portray excitement, as in the last paragraph of the story “Caye”: “I kneel, work myself into her, poke at her mouth with my tongue. Ida, I whisper, burrowing into her, dark blood beating, rooting, thrusting, digging, deep as I can go” (115).

To recapitulate, one might say T. C. Boyle uses various stylistic features to give his stories the rhythm he desires them to have. He uses alliteration to a great extent, and

his alliterations are often mixed with other stylistic features. In *Descent of Man* Boyle frequently uses short, incomplete sentences as well as lists of elements that give his stories a recognizable, staccato-sounding rhythm.

4.3 Word Repetitions

Despite the necessary limitation of text in the short story, the use of repetition is a commonly used stylistic feature in this genre (see Brosch 61). Repetitions are often used as a means to structure a text or to highlight something as having great significance (see Brosch 61). In a narrative, a “web of recurring mentions and repetitions gives rise to a kind of symbolism” (Fludernik 77). When looking for the interpretation of a text, it can help the reader to look for repeated words (see Abbott 88). In *Descent of Man* T. C. Boyle makes use of repetitions to achieve various effects.

Boyle’s frequent use of word repetitions is especially noticeable in the story “Bloodfall”. Throughout the story the word “white” is repeated fifteen times and the word “red” twenty-one times. Recurring key words can “become symbols which suggest connections and arguments at higher level” (Fludernik 76-77). The reader is aware that the colors are bearing significance. In the beginning of the story the word red is mentioned seven times before the word blood is even used once. This creates a suspense about what the red rain really is. The repeated mention of the word white, a color which traditionally symbolizes innocence, is used mainly to describe the clothes of the people living in the commune. As the story has an apocalyptic theme, the white clothes can also be seen as an ironic reference to the white garments promised to the believers in the Book of Revelation 3:5, as Boyle does not portray his characters in a favorable light or as having Christian virtues.

Repetition can be used for the purpose of emphasis. In “Bloodfall” the narrator shows how scared he was by the downpour of blood by repeating the word “scared” three times: “I was scared. I’d been scared all along, scared from the moment I’d noticed the first drops on the window” (53). In “Green Hell” two of the passengers, trying to get help, have their heads cut off and staked by people of a native tribe. The terribleness

of the image is emphasized by repetition: "In fact, all of us are in a bug-eyed rage to get away from those rotting heads and those terrible shadows and eyes, eyes and shadows" (152). Through this simple repetition the reader gets to understand that this is an image which is haunting the narrator. In the story "Caye" a foreign lady who had previously moved to the island, Fran, is introduced. The short paragraph begins with "Fran has a gas stove, a bed, some shelves, a battery-run tape player" (109). At the end of the paragraph that is just over six lines long, the reader is told that Fran's "bed is narrow, and the batteries in the tape player are getting weak" (110). The repetition of these elements of her little shack, with the added information, emphasizes how simple her life is on the island.

In the short story "Green Hell" the terms "team" and "community" are repeated a few times. This repetition serves to emphasize the irony when the characters do not in fact act as a team but rather act selfishly in order to survive. So, this repetition serves as a humorous element. The same is true in the story "We are Norsemen". The repetition of the name "Thorkell", emphasizing the fact that most of them have almost the same name, adds a comic element to the story: "There were thirteen of us: Thorkell Son of Thorkell the Misaligned, Thorkell the Short, Thorkell Thorkellson, Thorkell Cat, Thorkell Flat-Nose, Thorkell-neb, Thorkell Ale-Lover, Thorkell the Old, Thorkell the Deep-minded, Ofeig, Skeggi, Grim and me" (27). When it comes to a vote about the name of the newly-found land, "Thorkell-land" wins nine to four (see 28). Later in the story, the narrator mentions his "sweetheart Thorkella" (34). Word repetition also serves as a comic element in "Bloodfall": "We were deeply concerned, hungry, bored. "I'm bored," said Amy. "I'm hungry," whined Scott" (57).

Despite the shortness of text in the genre of short stories, T. C. Boyle, as has been shown, uses the stylistic feature of repetition of words often in his collection *Descent of Man*. Boyle uses the repetition of words to emphasize certain elements or to achieve a humorous effect.

4.4 Unusual Words

Contemporary works sometimes achieve intensity of effect by mixing unknown and foreign elements among otherwise inconspicuous language (see Brosch 61). Boyle achieves this effect by the use of unusual words. When reading the works of T. C. Boyle, even well-educated readers sometimes have to look into a dictionary to understand all the words used. When, in an interview, Bill Legget asked T. C. Boyle about his love of words and how he developed a “menagerie of fitting and unusual words”, Boyle replied: “The love of words - and sentences and the rhythm and beauty of them - is integral to reading and loving literature. I collect odd words, I suppose, in a way that anyone does, but my profession allows me to rub your collective noses in them.”

That is why the reader of “Bloodfall” will read about “fetid breath” (50), “rubicund dimness” (55), “tepid plasma” (56), “celestial phlebotomy” (58), “fibronogenification” (58) and the thundering of the “feculent bloodfall” (59). In the story “The Big Garage” one of the “majorettes” working there “blows a puff of detritus from her nail file” (121), and B. is blowing “his nose lugubriously” (123). The other stories of *Descent of Man* also feature words that are otherwise rarely used. In “Descent of Man” the narrator does not recognize the “flaccid edges” to be the sides of a monkey skull (see 11), in “The Champ” Angelo D. is shown images of “masticating teeth” that are “titillating” (21), the narrator of “We are Norsemen” is hardly able to count the Thorkells, due to “the furious womanizing, gormandizing and sodomizing of the crew” (34), and the hair of Timmy in “Heart of a Champion” is “fastidiously mussed” (40). In “The Second Swimming” the reader is shown a crowd that is “genuflecting” (72), in “Dada”, on the cover of a magazine, the “gold epaulettes” nearly hide the “dark pinguid features” of the image of Idi Amin Dada (see 78) and the I-narrator of “A Women’s Restaurant” imagines the women in the restaurant “glowing with muliebrity” (87). The Anglican priest in “The Extinction Tales” imagines himself a “paraclete” (104) and the narrator of “Caye” notes that the events surrounding Orlando’s uncle’s death “have adumbrated change” (114). The mime in “Green Hell” is afraid of them being decapitated, their “blood quaffed, bones gnawed by autochthonous cannibals” (151), in “Earth, Moon”

the “shrubs burgeon” on the outside of the astronaut’s wife’s house (see 159) and the narrator of “Quetzalcóatl Lite” finds himself in a “soporific little town” (171). The inventor in “De Rerum Natura” creates a cat without the “demands of micturition or defecation” (187), in the paper printed in the basement of the baptist church, the narrator of “John Barleycorn Lives” is called “crampulous anarchist” as well as “a lackey of the immoral and illicit business enterprises which prey on the emotionally feeble for the purpose of fiduciary gain” (206), and the obese young man in “Drowning” is described as a “solipsist” (216).

These examples taken from every short story in *Descent of Man* show that T. C. Boyle consistently uses complicated and unusual words in his stories. This stylistic feature adds greatly to making his style so unique. By the use of rare words, Boyle is able to add a level of interest. His love of language can be appreciated by the reader and can be quite contagious.

4.5 *Insignificant Details*

The reader of a literary text is aware of the fact that there is a writer behind the words that consciously thought about what he put down onto the paper and is therefore intentionally searching for meaning in what he or she is reading (see Abbott 95). It is the reader’s “assumption that narratives are “whole” in the sense that everything in a narrative somehow *belongs* and contributes to its meaning” (Abbott 93). Barthes addresses the seeming uselessness of certain passages in literary texts as well and comes to the conclusion that in a text every detail is significant (see Barthes 261): “Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness” (Barthes 261). Small details in the story, even if irrelevant to the plot, “can exert considerable rhetorical leverage on the way we read” (Abbott 48). In his story collection *Descent of Man* Boyle gives his readers many little details that seem unnecessary.

In “Quetzalcóatl Lite” the following passage is presented to the reader: ““I can lead you right to it,” Skipper insisted, a rice kernel clinging to the side of his nose. [...] “I’ll do it for a hundred,” Skipper said finally, the rice kernel slipping down the wing of his nose and coming to rest on his upper lip. He speared it with his tongue” (173). The mention of the small detail of the rice kernel counteracts Skipper being taken seriously by the reader and portrays a slowing down of time in the suspenseful moment of learning about the desired beer can’s existence and the negotiation of the price to get taken to where it can be found. So even though the detail seems unnecessary, it serves a purpose in the narrative. Later in the story the narrator is furious about his friend having gone to look for the beer can without him. In-between his conversation with the guide, the reader gets the information about the other people in the group laughing for some undefined reason (see 176). Though this detail is unconnected and seems like useless information, it helps to set a contrast to the narrator’s fury. In “Bloodfall” the first-person narrator mentions where in the house the pictures of people from the slums, which one of his roommates took, are located: “One of them hangs in the corner over Alice’s Reclino Love-Chair with the dyed rabbit-fur cover; another hangs in the dining room over my 125-gallon aquarium. The rabbit fur is dyed black” (49). Besides the details about where the photos are placed, which already seem unnecessarily explicit, the reader gets the additional information about the color of the rabbit fur. Again, Boyle uses these details to create a contrast between what the pictures depict and the uncaring ignorance of the inhabitants of the communal house about other people’s plight. In “The Second Swimming” T. C. Boyle describes explicitly what Chairman Mao is having for his birthday breakfast, “wieners with Grey Poupon mustard” (62). Shortly thereafter one reads: “There is a smear of mustard on Mao’s nose when the barber clicks through the bead curtain” (62). Boyle uses the mention of these little details to connect the story.

As has been shown, Boyle frequently includes seemingly insignificant details in his stories. Even if they do not add to the plot, the reader is aware that Boyle consciously put them into the story, and the reader is compelled to try to interpret them in some meaningful way.

4.6 Boyle's Highly Stylized Writing

Looking at all the examples above, it is easy to see that Boyle uses various stylistic features in his short stories. Gleason mentions that "[e]ver since the publication of *Descent of Man* in 1979, critics have remarked on the energy, verve, and highly stylized quality of his prose" (Gleason 9). The uniqueness of Boyle's style is especially noticeable when looking at how the different stylistic features are used together.

"A Women's Restaurant" serves as a good example to show how stylized T. C. Boyle's stories are. The narrator, standing at the fence of the restaurant, describes: "The house was a bank of shadows, dark in a negligee of moonlit mist. Fascinating, enigmatic, compelling as a white whale" (88). In this short passage, made up of only two sentences, Boyle makes use of the stylistic features of metaphor, simile and alliteration. The second sentence is incomplete and features a listing of characteristics. The words Boyle uses sound poetic and some are rather uncommon. The narrator of the story later contemplates about the difference between men and women and concludes that there is only one real difference, "a hole": "A hole as dark and strange, as fascinating and forbidding, as that interdicted entrance to Grace & Rubie's. Birth and motherhood, I thought. The maw of mystery" (93). Again the reader finds metaphor, simile, alliteration, an incomplete sentence and the rarely used word "maw". In this passage the feature of metonymy is also used. When the main character is finally able to enter the forbidden restaurant, the following description is offered: "There they were - women - chewing, drinking, digesting, chatting, giggling, crossing and uncrossing their legs. Shoes off, feet up. Smoking cigarettes, flashing silverware, tapping time to the music. Women among women. I bathed in their soft chatter, birdsong, the laughter like falling coils of hair" (95). In this description many of the stylistic features occur together. The staccato sounding rhythm created by the lists and incomplete short sentences in this passage is combined with alliteration, metaphor, simile, opposites and the repetition of the word "women".

These dense combinations of the different stylistic features are by no means limited to "A Women's Restaurant", but can be found to some extent in all of T. C. Boyle's short

stories. When the main character in “The Big Garage” tries to hitch-hike, the scene is described as follows: “He is dancing with cold, clonic, shoulder, arm, wrist and extended thumb jerking like the checkered flag at the finish of the Grand Prix” (136). In “Green Hell” the reader gets a picture of the moment after the plane crash: “There are no flames. There is blood. Thick clots of it, puddles, ponds, lakes” (140). Even short expressions such as the “bone-blistering shriek” in “Quetzalcóatl Lite” (178) or the “prosaic progenitor” in “The Second Swimming” (70) show how masterfully Boyle combines the different stylistic features.

The way T. Coraghessan Boyle impregnates common language with a dense combination of stylistic features in *Descent of Man* is very iconic of his writing style. When reading Boyle’s works the reader can expect very stylized, and therein very distinctive pieces of fiction.

5. Conclusion

The short stories in Boyle's first story collection, *Descent of Man*, display a variety of features that can be described as typical for this book. Concluding my thesis I want to summarize these features and show what is characteristic of the short stories by the author T. Coraghessan Boyle and what effect the different features used have on the readers.

Humor is one of the most important elements of Boyle's stories and manifests itself in various ways. As I have shown in this thesis, Boyle creates humor in the way he uses language, in particular by using contrasting ideas, through his frequent use of irony and parody and by creating exaggerated images in the reader's mind. Many of his plots and characters are also humorous in their absurdity. Humor is used in all of the short stories in *Descent of Man*. The fact that his stories are so humorous makes them highly entertaining for his readers and it is one of the main reasons his narratives are so popular.

Another characteristic feature of the short stories discussed is Boyle's ability to surprise his readers. He keeps his stories unpredictable by not following any familiar schemata. Boyle creates absurd plots, which makes it hard for the reader to predict where the story will lead and he regularly gives his plots unexpected twists that add to the feature of surprise. The surprising elements keep his stories interesting. The reader has to readjust his or her expectations in the course of the story.

Boyle expects his readers to take part in constructing the story. He regularly leaves gaps for the reader to fill in. Boyle also generally uses either unreliable first-person narrators or, when using third-person narration, unreliable focal characters; the reader cannot trust the account given, but has to conjure up his or her own interpretation of the situation. Moreover, Boyle uses many references to the real world; he employs referential characters, references historical events or alludes to other literary works. Thereby Boyle relies on his readers to be able to supply the necessary knowledge of events and people of social or political interest to be able to interpret the meaning of

the story. He also draws on the reader's prior knowledge when giving spatial descriptions and often uses references to real-life places to effectively conjure up a picture in the reader's mind without having to describe the setting in detail.

Referencing elements outside the fictional world causes readers to connect the themes of the stories to the real world. The reader can expect to be constantly challenged by the recurring topics of environmental issues and the purpose of man's existence. Boyle's bleak outlook for the future as well as his belief in the randomness of human existence are fundamental elements of his stories. His frequent Biblical references encourage the readers to think about their belief system and the topic of the guru leader challenges the readers to question authority. Boyle's preferred use of open endings is also instrumental and effective in inviting the reader to keep thinking beyond the limits of the short story.

Boyle is able to create suspense by the way he structures his stories, especially when using foreshadowing. By withholding important details in the beginning of most of the stories, Boyle adds an element of suspense to his narrative by which the reader's curiosity is sparked.

The reader of *Descent of Man* has to be prepared to experience disorientation caused by Boyle's preference of medias in res beginnings which offer the reader no or little exposition that would help find the way into the story. The fictional world Boyle creates in some of his stories borders on the absurd or plainly is absurd and operates on different rules, which makes it difficult for the readers to orientate themselves. The unreliability of the narration as well as the surprising twists can also cause the readers to feel disoriented.

Boyle generally uses flat characters in his stories which can be categorized as hero-victims, as they are mostly unsuccessful in their endeavors. The characters are described in accordance with the recurring theme of Boyle's Darwinistic view of man being an animal. The readers can expect the characters to act according to primal instincts rather than being led by a moral code.

Boyle has a highly stylized way of writing and frequently applies poetic features in his stories. He often conjures up pictures in his readers' minds by employing metaphor, simile and metonymy. He gives his stories a staccato-sounding rhythm by using short, incomplete sentences and lists. His repeated use of alliteration, the use of opposites and word repetition all contribute to giving his stories their unique-sounding rhythm and add beauty to the language. Boyle often focuses on little, seemingly insignificant details in his stories. His frequent use of rarely used words is also very characteristic for his style.

Boyle's skillful combination of the above mentioned features is what makes his short stories in *Descent of Man* so unique. His characteristic style makes him stand out from more conventional writers. With his fiction, T. C. Boyle has captured the attention of a sizeable audience and has been a highly successful writer for the past forty years.

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7. Abstract

After taking a look at T. C. Boyle's life, influences and literary achievements in the introduction, I pose my research questions as to the characteristic features in T. C. Boyle's short story collection *Descent of Man*: What makes his writing so unique? And: What effect do these features have on the readers? In the first chapter, I introduce the elements of narrative technique which define Boyle's work, by laying the theoretical groundwork, as well as by giving examples from his stories. I further analyze what effects these features have on readers. In the second chapter I identify the recurring themes in the story collection by providing numerous examples. The third chapter focuses on stylistic features. After defining the stylistic features, I describe how Boyle uses these features in his stories and point out which ones are typical for his writings. Furthermore, I show what effects they achieve. In the conclusion I answer my research questions by summarizing and interpreting the results from the different chapters.

Zusammenfassung

Nachdem ich in der Einleitung T. C. Boyles Leben, Einflüsse und literarische Erfolge betrachte, stelle ich folgende Forschungsfragen bezüglich der charakteristischen Merkmale in T. C. Boyles Kurzgeschichtensammlung *Descent of Man*: Was macht seine Geschichten so einzigartig? Und: Was bewirken diese Merkmale bei seinen Lesern und Leserinnen? Im ersten Kapitel stelle ich die verschiedenen Merkmale der Erzähltechnik vor die Boyles Werk definieren, indem ich einerseits eine theoretische Grundlage schaffe und andererseits Beispiele aus seinen Geschichten bringe. Weiters analysiere ich, welche Wirkungen die Merkmale auf Leser/innen haben. Im zweiten Kapitel identifiziere ich die wiederkehrenden Themen der Kurzgeschichtensammlung, indem ich zahlreiche Beispiele präsentiere. Der Fokus des dritten Kapitels liegt auf den stilistischen Merkmalen. Nachdem ich die verschiedenen Stilmittel definiert habe, beschreibe ich, wie Boyle diese in seinen Kurzgeschichten verwendet und welche für ihn typisch sind. Darüber hinaus zeige ich, welche Wirksamkeit sie haben. Zum Schluss beantworte ich meine Forschungsfragen durch die Zusammenfassung und Interpretation meiner Resultate aus den einzelnen Kapiteln.