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# On the move in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*: Change, mobility, and narrative in mid-twentieth century America

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On the Move in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*:  
Change, Mobility, and Narrative in mid-Twentieth Century America

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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by William Woolford Prior

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of English, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Text

It is easy to forget, but the most advanced circulation system on the planet binds the United States of America. That system consists of networks, millions of them. Auto lanes and power lines score the surface of the country. The vapor trails of jets crisscross in the sky. Deep within the earth run systems of subways and sewage. The focus of this study is the greatest of these circulation systems—the automobile highway—and how two American authors narrated the cultural shifts prompted by its construction and expansion during the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. John Steinbeck (1902-1968) defined movement along America's roads in his Depression-era classic, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) redefined those roads in his postwar narrative, *On the Road* (1959).

American drivers share a vision of open spaces exclusive to this corner of the globe. They are not simply measuring by feet; they are interpreting movement, space, and time in a unique way. Critic Phil Patton lays the foundation for this study by exploring this national peculiarity in a seminal work on automobile culture, *The Open Road*. Americans interact with their road as a “permanent system offering one set of promises after another, with the easy recession and happy forgetfulness of a moving perspective” (13). He references history:

The automobile and its highways froze the values of the frontier by making movement a permanent state of mind, turning migration into circulation. The wave of migration, having carried to the West Coast, rebounded with the closing of the frontier, the completion of the expansion, into an echoing succession of movements. (13)

This ‘rebound’ was first identified at the World's Colombian Exposition in 1893 by scholar Frederick Jackson Turner. He argued the dominant role of the frontier in American

culture, yet pointed to a recent U.S. Census announcing the settlement of that “frontier”. The land to the West was, for all purposes, settled to its extent. It was closed. “For nearly three centuries the dominant fact in American life has been expansion” (219), he observed, and the quintessential American man “knew not where he was going, but he was on his way, cheerful, optimistic, busy and buoyant” (290). Despite its definitive closing, long into the twentieth century Turner’s quintessential man held onto his faith in the promise of the frontier. While its borders did not grow, U.S. population doubled between 1890 and 1930 (Haines 153). So increased a means of mobility; by 1926, 89 percent of tenant farmers in Iowa owned at least one automobile (Flink 132). When Americans took to the roads in the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s in vain search of the Turner’s ‘closed’ frontier, Steinbeck and Kerouac narrated this search in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. Their roads play many of the same roles, yet they also have a number of irreconcilable differences. This particular dichotomy is important to understand that, though the myth of the frontier lingered, the road profoundly changed American culture between 1930 and 1950.

Character development is the clearest way to see the transformative power of the road. In each novel, road travel is a roller-coaster of emotions that induces what Sal Paradise refers to as “sweet nauseas of all kinds” (Kerouac 112). One moment, characters are euphoric with visions of America and Mankind bound under the same abiding spirit. The next moment, they crash into a dark land of helplessness and existential angst. In both novels, this emotional instability induces a numbing of emotion and, eventually, a descent into madness that overshadows the final chapters. This reality explains a number of fundamental shifts in character that emerge in the novels. Over time, the ragged life on the road warps the instinct, expression, and principle of characters within *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. Precise changes are unique to each

novel—Steinbeck’s migrant farmworkers are chronologically and demographically distinct from Kerouac’s Beatniks—but, taken together, these changes suggest a larger transformation of American culture from 1930 to 1950 that comes as a consequence of the road.

Road travel is an intense and transformative personal experience, but, like any form of travel, it is also an interaction between the individual and his natural surroundings. These surroundings often confront the characters as a physical barrier to movement in the novels. Each day exposes them to severe weather. Each week brings them closer to winter. They are always vulnerable, and they live in constant fear. To express this loss of stability, they cherish the land’s indigenous heritage and mourn its loss. Disconnected from the reality of America’s native peoples, their perception reveals a relationship between 1930’s and 50’s culture and Native Americans that is, at best, superficial. In these ways, the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* maintain a tenuous and fundamentally exploitative relationship with the surroundings through which they drive.

The “road novels” of Steinbeck and Kerouac are the first of their kind. They explored what was still a relatively recent addition to U.S. infrastructure and what had not yet been narrated in fiction. For this reason, both authors use a specific relationship between ‘prophets’ who present rhetorical visions and ‘disciples’ who evaluate them and attempt to incorporate them into the larger culture. They succeeded, and the immense and enduring popularity of the novels allows the contemporary to regard them as historical artifacts of popular culture. As such, they can help the contemporary reader understand the root of America’s automobile obsession, the ways in which America continues to express that obsession, and how, even today, that expression is a part of national narrative.

In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise says “we were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*” (Kerouac 121). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the narrator states that “movement [becomes] their medium of expression” (Steinbeck 165). The road was change for America during the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s, and Steinbeck and Kerouac were there to tell the story.

...

The act of driving dominates the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. For this reason, it is worthwhile to examine what goes on within the cab as the characters travel on American roads. Whether operating the vehicle or traveling as a passenger, road travel is an intense personal experience in the novels during which occurs significant character development. The following chapter explain this development in detail, for it occurs in complex and contradictory ways.

On one hand, the highway is a place of epiphany. In *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*, the characters achieve a series of revelations as they drive into the horizon. These revelations with a sense of nationalism, leads to humanitarianism, and, eventually, culminates in spirituality. This sense of nationalism is felt almost immediately in the journey. As they venture from their homes, they become increasingly conscious of a larger, national reality. They become intimate with their nation. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the narrator observes that “The Western Land [is] nervous under the beginning change” and that “the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times” (Steinbeck 151). Steinbeck’s characters do not know this in the beginning, but they do at the end. The narrator in *On the Road* makes a similar observation. “All that land that



rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going” (Kerouac 281) he notes, and, on the road, the “millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream-grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying” (97). Sal cannot detect such national energy from his college dorm. Only on the road can he and the Joads become more aware of their own geopolitical domain.

This awareness demands a participation, however, which grows beyond the loyalty of nationalism in the novels and takes the shape of humanitarianism. For example, the road leads Ma Joad into a roadside camp where a group of hungry children surrounds her boiling pot of stew. “I dunno what to do?” says Ma Joad before sharing the meal with the children. “What’m I gonna do with these [children] here?” (256). It is not because they are American that Ma Joad sacrifices her supper. It is an act of humanitarianism. Kerouac’s characters are more complicated in this regard: “We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side,” says Dean to Sal. “I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do” (109). Sal’s highway humanitarianism still contains the same marrow as that of Ma Joad, though tainted with immaturity and possibly drugs.

Dawning humanitarianism primes the characters for spiritual epiphany in the novels. By the conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom has come to realize that “a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one” (419). A more heady revelation occurs in *On the Road* as Sal reaches “the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows” (156). Soon after, on a road trip to Mexico in Part 5, he discovers a cosmic community:

“[We were] driving across the world and into the places where we could finally learn ourselves among . . . the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world from Malaya (the long fingernail of China) to India the great subcontinent to Arabia to Morocco to the selfsame deserts and jungles of Mexico and over the waves to Polynesia to mystic Siam of the Yellow Robe and on around, on around, so that you hear the same mournful wail by the rotted walls of Cadiz, Spain, that you hear 12,000 miles around in the depths of Benares the Capital of the World. (254)

Sal’s vision, like Tom’s, is both geopolitical and humanitarian—it recognizes national boundaries yet underlines their transparency—but, more decisively, it is a statement of spirituality. In this way, the far-reaching network of American highways seems to lead the characters into a spirituality calling from beyond one’s nationality and humanity.

On the other hand, epiphany is short-lived on the road. The characters must descend from their brief highs to deal with the physical and emotional rigors of sustained speed on the highway. These include exhaustion, feelings of helplessness, and low self-esteem, which soon result in numb emotions and ultimately madness. The first of these is exhaustion. The children in *The Grapes of Wrath* become silent and “tired from seeing too much movement, too many faces...” (99), while the adults despair: “‘What’s to keep ever’thing from stoppin’, all the folks from jus’ gettin’ tired an’ layin’ down?’” (423). Sal expresses his own exhaustion in *On the Road* in rather dramatic language: “I wandered out like a haggard ghost” (53), he says after crossing the continent. The next time he crosses, “All I could see of the morning was a whiteness like the whiteness of the tomb. I was starving to death” (96).

In this state of prolonged exhaustion, characters on the road begin to recognize childlike helplessness. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, a stranded traveler voices such feelings at the hood of a broken automobile: “Makes a fella kinda feel-like a little kid, when he can’t fix nothin’ (148).” As a poor migrant on the road, he lacks all the basics of adult life—tools, money, or friends to lend them—and thus feels childish when stranded along the U.S. highway system. In contrast, Sal plunges into the same immense system “for kicks.” He takes pleasure in the helpless delirium of road-rambling. “What was I doing? Where was I going? I’d soon find out” (125), he asks excitedly. Circumstances aside, movement on the road causes the characters in both novels to succumb to its immensity and experience feelings of childlike helplessness.

“Kicks” aside, more serious symptoms develop. A life of homelessness and poverty on the highway means a loss of existential confidence and spiritual security. The characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* speak plainly of this: “We was farm people till the debt,” Ma says, ““And then—them people. They done somepin to us. Ever’ time they come seemed like they was a-whippin’ me—all of us” (307). The road seems to “whip” Sal in *On the Road*, as well. His encounter with the third-world inhabitants of Mexico reveals fear and pessimism:

They had come down from the back mountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer, and they never dreamed the sadness and the poor broken delusion of it. They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way. (273)

Sal’s own “sadness” and “poor delusion” provides a stark contrast to his former glee. An extreme life on the road causes his anxiety and, in Mexico, existential collapse.

As they face these challenges—exhaustion, child-like helplessness, and shaky existential confidence—the characters in the novels grow. They become stronger, smarter, and keener to road realities, but the road eventually breaks them. In *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*, the characters become numb to their surroundings and eventually insane. The numbing first comes in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the degree to which the ‘Okies’ move. For Ma Joad, it takes a sudden stop to recognize the numbing-effect of movement: “‘Funny, ain't it. All the time we was a-movin' an' shovin', I never thought none...I was all full up of the road, and bumpin' and movin', an' it wasn't so bad ...Them things was part of all, an' now they come a-flockin' back’” (322). Sal operates in a similar way in *On the Road*. He speeds happily from destination to destination but always experiences a breakdown. On three separate occasions, he reiterates that “everything” is “collapsing” (50, 66, 83). Each time, he copes by fleeing back to the road. Like any unhealthy addiction, driving is paradoxical: it causes pain for the individual yet provides the only escape, however temporary. In this way, it conceals the symptoms of road travel and allows the condition to worsen.

As the reader progresses towards the final chapters of the novels, these emotionally-numb characters veer farther and farther away from the goal they shared at the outset of the novels. Instead, they find chaos and madness. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the family disintegrates. Granma and Grampa die, Noah walks down the river, Connie runs away, Casey is killed, Tom goes into hiding, and the rest of the family scurries in the rain for shelter as the floodwaters rise. In *On the Road*, the road trips follow a similar descent into oblivion. The man behind the wheel, Dean, embodies this chaos. By the middle of the book “he had become absolutely mad in his movements” (102), says Sal, who accompanies him on three increasingly-chaotic trips. The first is a tame cross-country drive with lengthy visits to landmark cities; the last is an aimless

“pornographic hasheesh daydream” (265) that ends in a fever-induced unconsciousness deep in Mexico. Dean’s condition progresses towards madness throughout the novel; by the end, Sal reveals that “couldn’t talk anymore. He hopped and laughed, he stuttered and fluttered his hands” (278). As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the road eventually leads to chaos and madness.

...

Driving transforms the characters behind the wheel in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. They undergo a transformation in regard to instinct, means of expression, and underlying principle. These changes are common to both novels but naturally reflect the eras in which they were written. Comparison reveals continuity and suggests a larger transformation in American instinct, expression, and principle from 1930 to 1950.

Instinct is the most visible of these transformations in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. Protagonists show an inclination at the outset of their journey, either towards stagnant farm life or floosy college literature, but they that undergo a profound transformation along the way.

Steinbeck addresses instinct before the journey begins in *The Grapes of Wrath*, when, suddenly, Grandpa refuses to leave the farm: “I ain’t a-goin’” (112), he repeats. That would mean death, reminds his son: “How’d you live?” asks Pa, “You can’t stay here. Why, with nobody to take care of you, you’d starve.” No rationale is enough to budge Grampa from his land; his instinct is too rooted, too strong. “I b’long here,” says Grampa. “This country ain’t no good, but it’s my country” (112). Grampa’s protest resonates with the rest of the family, who were, “afraid, now that the time had come—afraid in the same way Grampa was afraid” (114). Regardless, they eventually pull onto the road. Mile by mile, the characters inhabit a new disposition for

rootlessness: “Two days the families were in flight, but on the third the land was too huge for them and... Little by little they settled into the new life. Ruthie and Winfield first, then Al, then Connie and Rose of Sharon, and, last, the older ones” (165). Changing instinct is abundant in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

One finds the same change in Kerouac’s novel. In its opening lines, Sal Paradise indicates the end of one life and the beginning of another. “With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (3) and an end to his habit of “always vaguely planning and never taking off.” When he does “take off,” his desires are goal- and destination-oriented, “of going West to see the country” (3). Less than halfway through the novel, Sal has shaken off these instincts. When Carlo Mark utters the question, “Whither goest thou? (108), Sal is speechless. “We sat and didn’t know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go” (108), he concludes. Such are the words of a roaming vagabond, not the ambitious student that left New York.

The transformations of instinct that occur in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* are fundamentally different. For example, the Joads become a restless people but the core of their character never changes; they retain a primal instinct to recover a sense of lost physical stability. They adapt successfully to life on the road, but the Joads still long for home. Perhaps this explains their refusal to abandon their temporary boxcar home when floodwaters rise in the final chapter and, instead of flight, Pa Joad’s instinct is to fight to preserve what he regards as a home (436). Could one venture that his children, Ruthie and Winfield, never develop such an instinct? Could they share the childhood of Sal’s chauffer, Dean, who was “born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles” (3)? The continuity suggests that Sal and Dean’s rootlessness in *On the Road* is a legacy of the

historical circumstances narrated in *The Grapes of Wrath*. They were ‘born on the road,’ as it were. When their rootless instinct undergoes its own transformation in *On the Road*, it becomes scattered and aimless. If Kerouac’s ‘road experience’ picks up where Steinbeck’s left off, then the empty-headed vagrancy of the 40’s and 50’s is the epilogue of a rootless conclusion in the 1930’s.

The characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* also change their means of self-expression. They adopt the use of speech, music, and movement itself in order to express the hopes and fears of the road experience.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the ‘Okies’ rely on speech to express the anxieties of life on the road. “‘You jest ast the same thing over,’” he observes of one migrant. “‘I seen fellas like you before. You ain’t askin’ nothin’; you’re jus’ singin’ a kinda song. ‘What we comin’ to?’ You don’t wanta know’” (129). They sing, as it were, to cope with fear. “‘They were weary and frightened because they had gone against a system they did not understand and it had beaten them’” (99). Perhaps this sentiment is what draws “‘everyone in the camp’” to the sound of a lone after-hours guitarist (200). It also may explain the series of pages that Steinbeck devotes to each instrument heard in the migrant camp. “‘Playing a reel and tapping out the tune, and the big deep strings of the guitar beating like a heart,’” he writes, “‘and the harmonica’s sharp chords and the skirl and squeal of the fiddle. People have to move close. They can’t help it’” (328).

The narrator states it plainly: the act of movement is expression, for “‘the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression’” (165). After all, the journey itself is a flight, an act of fear:

And on the road the panic overcame some of the families, so that they drove night and day, stopped to sleep in the cars, and drove on to the West, flying from the road, flying from movement. And these lusted so greatly to be settled that they set their faces into the West and drove toward it, forcing the clashing engines over the roads. (197)

Only by driving can the Joads find peace. Under these unusual circumstances, the act of movement becomes a form of expression.

Two decades later, Kerouac's characters continue to rely on speech, music, and movement to express the road experience. In terms of spoken language, Sal, Dean, and their fellow Beats use the same rhetorical questioning featured in *The Grapes of Wrath* to express the excitement of life on the road: "Where would it all lead?" Sal reiterates on several different occasions (116, 125, 192). The Beats communicate in exuberant verse:

'What's your road, man?-holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It's an anywhere road for anybody anyhow. Where body how?" We nodded in the rain. "Sheeit, and you've got to look out for your boy. He ain't a man 'less he's a jumpin man-do what the doctor say. I'll tell you. Sal, straight, no matter where I live, my trunk's always sticking out from under the bed, I'm ready to leave or get thrown out.' (229)

Sal expresses the road experience by running lively rhetorical circles and rambling in free-flowing verse.

Such a style explains Sal's obsession with jazz music in *On the Road*. One night in New York City, Sal and Dean watch the jazz pianist George Shearing roll out chords "in great rich showers . . . like the sea" (116) and, as Shearing exits the stage, Dean "pointed to the empty piano seat. 'God's empty chair,' he said". Still reeling from the night before, Sal and Dean



embark on their next road trip and “We all jumped to the music and agreed. The purity of the road” (121).

Like Al in Steinbeck’s novel, Sal and Dean are at one with their automobile. Sal is convinced that Dean’s very soul “is wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road” (209), and Dean would probably agree. Zooming towards yet another destination towards the novel’s end, Dean himself exclaims, ““Whoo! I want to get on and on—this road drives *me!*!””(254). In this regard, movement is expression.

Each novel reveals that word, music, and the act of movement are common means of expressing the road experience; however, each of these varies in the novels. For example, Tom in the *Grapes of Wrath* is unaccustomed to and irritated by the rhetorical circles in 1930’s migrant conversation, yet blathering is the norm for Kerouac’s characters in the 1950’s. Regarding music, the ‘Okies’ in the migrant camps harmonize in traditional folk while Kerouac’s Beats seek ecstasy in the formless, scattered notes of modern jazz. While the ‘Okies’ drive out of necessity to find work, the Beats drive for melancholic adventure. Taken together, these popular novels reveal shifting forms of expression from 1930 to 1950 in the context of life on an increasingly popular road system.

As the road experience brings about a transformation of instinct and the adoption of new forms of self-expression, so it begets more profound changes. The flight of the Joads begins with death of principle. “The house was dead, and the fields were dead,” the narrator states, “but [their] truck was the active thing, the living principle” (101). Movement is a principle in itself for the migrant family; however, it gives way to a dynamic sympathy. In spite of herself, Ma Joad widens her loyalties from the family truck to a larger human community. What begins with a

horde of hungry children that begs her for food (256) develops into a new state of mind: “Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. (444). Tom Joad's sympathies also widen as his role transforms from frustrated youth into political revolutionary. ““Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there”” (419) says Joad. Along the road, his role in a larger human community guides Joad.

Sal also experiences sudden ‘death’ of principle in the first pages of *On the Road*. After a failed attempt to hitchhike straight to California, he finds himself sprawled out on a motel bed, “and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel . . . and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost” (19). Only after indulging in such lows can Sal realize that he “can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it's the same in every corner” and “give and take and go in the incredible complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” (109). His vision is heady, but the closest thing Sal has to a guiding principle is movement for its own sake. He states it outright: “We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*”(121).

Sal's idea of nobility compares poorly to Ma as she makes countless sacrifices for family and humanity, or to Tom as he joins a bloody fight for social justice. Because they insist on dignity, Ma and Tom's life on the road is essentially painful. They set off for a better life, for job opportunities, for land on which to raise the children. Instead, they find themselves in an animal search for shelter, food, and milk for Rose of Sharon's unborn child. Even as “the movement changed them; the highways, the camps along the road, the fear of hunger and the hunger itself, changed them” (282), their road experience is a struggle for what is ‘good’. As they transform, Ma and Tom retain their dignity. No such struggle occurs on the meandering path of Sal Paradise

in *On the Road*, for Sal speeds off in search of Steinbeck's 'thunder storm'. He thrives on the emotional thrill of being "halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future" (19), and engaging in a reckless pursuit of the "west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming" (9). The road experience is an emotional game on a symbolic landscape for Sal and the Beats. The stakes are low; Sal relishes in the misery of losing almost as much as the ecstasy of winning. The outcome is a wonderful mystery. Given the popularity of their works, Steinbeck and Kerouac's characters speak to cultural history. Their contrasting 'road experiences' suggest that covering great distances along America's highways was a new idea that became a fixed feature of the culture with the construction of the U.S. highway system.

...

The road is also a stage upon which develop the plots of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. The American road novel is not simply an exploration of symbolic landscape. It is the reenactment of a historical interaction between pioneering Anglo-Americans, the rugged lands of North American, and that land's Native American heritage. This interaction is confused in the journeys narrated by Steinbeck and Kerouac.

Signs of this unhealthy relationship first appear in the ways that Steinbeck and Kerouac's Anglo-American characters struggle within the North American landscape. Climactic patterns impinge upon or simply halt along America's highways in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*. The characters in novels succumb to foul weather, no matter how fast they speed. In both novels, foul weather comes in the form of heavy rain and cold temperatures, often at the same time. For example, few find shelter when rain falls upon the Joad's truck in *The Grapes of*

*Wrath*. Most of the family is left soaked and freezing, hanging onto its exterior as it barrels down the highway. “Funny thing how it is,” Pa Joad says later on, “If he [a man] owns property ... he can walk on it and handle it and be sad when it isn’t doing well and feel fine when the rains falls on it” (40). Such is not true when travelling in a new country.

Travelers must face the threat of larger, seasonal weather cycles, as well. Back in Oklahoma, the Joads knew their land well enough to predict the near date of the first frost; on the road, they are exposed and unable to predict the coming of frost (402). These threats, daily downpours and the coming of winter, collide in the final episode of the novel as the family flees an early-winter flood. As they drive, “Rain pounded on the cab of the truck so loudly that it could be heard over the pounding of the old worn motor” (429). The pregnant Rose of Sharon begins to shiver, and, rather than stopping to warm her, Ma looks to the road. ““Go faster, Al”” (429) she commands. No one, not even Ma, can save Rose of Sharon and her unborn child from the cold and rain. On the open road, Steinbeck’s characters are hopelessly at the mercy of the climactic cycles of America’s landscape.

Rain and winter also produce a minor apocalypse in *On the Road*, for Sal is naïvely fascinated with them. He delights in the rain on his first road trip: “It was a rainy night. It was the myth of the rainy night” (116). After several of these inconvenient rain storms, Sal loses his infatuation with foul weather. While temporarily living with Remi into the autumn, “the September rains came, and with them harangues” and “meanwhile everything began to collapse” (66). As the rains pour, his relationships deteriorate and funds run dry: “Not a cent left in the house. Rain drummed on the roof” (67), he states. For Sal, “things grew to worse proportions [as] the rain roared” (68). Sal escapes from rainy coastal San Francisco weather for the more pleasant climes of Southern California where he picks cotton, but the autumn rains follow him.

Eventually, Sal is “huddled in the cold, rainy wind and watch[ing] everything across the sad vineyards of October in the valley,” and, as usual, “Everything was collapsing” (89).

Travelers struggle against the North American landscape yet, in both novels, eventually allow it to alter or end their journeys. There is a fundamental difference between Steinbeck and Kerouac’s road experience. While the cold and rain spell tragedy for the Joads, Sal Paradise has the luxury of escape. Sal’s aunt wires him money to buy a one-way ticket back to New York. For Sal, the end is perfect: “The first cold winds rattled the windowpane, and I had made it just in time” (96). Sal is out-of-touch with the realities of the natural world; advanced technology allows him to experience the American landscape on a symbolic and recreational plane. Likewise, technology allows the Joads to remove themselves from an oppressive natural world; they are free to embark on a road-trip to California in search of a better life.

In this regard, the U.S. highway system allows humans to ignore the natural world. Rather than battle the landscape as did the first pioneers, travelers must speed through it with little outside concern. On the road, they can take a break from the Puritan work ethic to search for happiness elsewhere. In this way, the road gave Americans the opportunity to search for a better life in the 1930’s and to experience the nation on a symbolic plane in the 1950’s. But when technology fails, travelers find themselves vulnerable and unprepared to cope with nature. Despite such a threat, the U.S. highway lulls the traveler into a false sense of ‘oneness’ with the natural world. For the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road*, their relationship with natural world is one of fundamental confusion.

This false sense of ‘oneness’ is accompanied by a comparable ‘intimacy’ with the indigenous populations of North America. Because the characters are poverty-stricken migrants

in *The Grapes of Wrath* and fugitives of the American capitalist system in *On the Road*, the nature of this intimacy is elusive for the characters. In truth, they assume versions of Native American culture that conveniently insert themselves into their travel narratives.

Stories of Native Americans oftentimes take the place of more popular icons such as covered wagons, cowboys, or crops. For example, in *The Grapes of Wrath* an old soldier recounts the day he and his regiment were ordered to open fire on an Indian brave sitting on the ridge. “An; we jus’ laid there” (326), he says, but ultimately decided to shoot and kill the brave. Afterwards, the storyteller says he was “never so sad in my life” with the realization that “you [had] spoiled somepin better’n yaself, an’ you can’t never fix it up”. In this passage, Steinbeck makes it clear that Native Americans play a nostalgic role in the ‘Okies’ narrative. The same nostalgia explains Sal’s idealization of America’s original inhabitants, here referred to as ‘Mexicans’. He follows a group of Mexican farmworkers because what “the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night” (163). Here, Sal can at last become “a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be” (88) and experience the ragged emotional highs of a fugitive’s life. Critic Lars Erik Larson asserts that Sal seeks to “assume the emotional status he projects onto nonwhites” and find “a freedom from ‘white ambitions’” (45). Likewise, the poverty-stricken characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* use “the Indian served as a reproach to civilization [that] could be sentimentalized as the purest expression of loss” (92). To cope with the ‘Otherness’ that plagues their road experience, characters adapt more accessible versions of Native American culture to comfort them as they travel across America.

The exploitative nature of this intimacy is obscured by the false ‘oneness’ with the natural world that is typical of the American road experience. In this way, the road opens up

opportunities for confusing one's spatial and cultural relationships with the North American landscape. In this way, the 'road novels' of Steinbeck and Kerouac suggest that the U.S. highway system only deepened this confusion.

...

These road novels are the first of their kind. They tell the story of a relatively recent addition to U.S. infrastructure that afforded Americans with bright new opportunities on the road. The road experience in *The Grapes of Wrath* narrated "A half-million people moving over the country; a million more restive, ready to move, ten million more feeling the first nervousness" (153) in the 1930's. Likewise, the road experience of Kerouac narrated "a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters" that were "beautiful in an ugly graceful new way" (*Esquire*, 24) in the 1950's.

Both authors use a specific, iconic character to reveal what critic Omar Swartz refers to as "rhetorical visions", which are "large meta-narratives (reality-defining discourses), encapsulated ideologies, prophetic inquiries that suggest alternative possibilities for growth and change" (4). In both novels, this character is a single white male with neither home nor family who's road experience is inspired by a relatively recent 'awakening and who, ultimately, becomes victim of his own rhetorical vision. This study will henceforth refer to these characters, Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*, as the 'prophets' of the novels. As Steinbeck and Kerouac use these rhetorical prophets to ask questions and pose alternatives, so that they pair them with rhetorical 'disciples' to provide answers and evaluate alternatives. Naturally, these disciples are the narrators through which Steinbeck and Kerouac illuminate their prophets. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck presents Jim Casy's rhetorical

vision through the eyes of Tom Joad; in *On the Road*, Kerouac presents that of Dean Moriarty through Sal Paradise.

The rhetorical visions of Casy and Dean explore mobility in Twentieth Century America and, more specifically, a modern condition personified by life on the road. While the prophets of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* enjoy the exploration of new forms of spirituality afforded by greater spatial freedom, they are confronted with existential questions without answers.

Casy and Dean are essentially spiritual beings, lured by the ecstasy of revelation. Before entering the novel, Casy regularly engages in sexual intercourse with young girls for this reason; every Sunday he would “just get ‘em frothin’ with the Holy Sperit, an’ then ... take ‘em out and screm ‘em’” (25). Such a relationship between sex and spirituality aligns perfectly with the creed of Dean in *On the Road*, who believes that “sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life” (4). Why, then, is sexuality largely absent in either novel? The reality of the road quickly eclipses Casy and Dean’s relations with women. The former assumes the latter’s role in the prophet’s search for spiritual heights; instead of in sex, Dean and Casy seek epiphany on ever-widening rungs of circulation. Mobility, not women, becomes their means of transcendence.

Newfound awareness of this mobility opens the eyes of Casy and Dean to their rhetorical visions; for this to occur, it takes a period of physical confinement. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Casy says that “it's in the jail house I really got her’”, referring to his revelation in California jail. “Great big ol' cell, an' she's full all a time. New guys come in, and guys go out. An' 'course I talked to all of 'em’” (381), he says. This imprisonment marks Casy’s fundamental transformation from an inconsequential poet to Steinbeck’s political activist. It is the zenith of



his rhetorical vision. Dean Moriarty's jail-time also informs his role in *On the Road*, "Prison is where you promise yourself the right to live," Sal says of Dean, so "only a guy who's spent five years in jail can go to such maniacal helpless extremes" (119). The birth of Steinbeck's prophet begins long before his entrance in *On the Road*; according to Sal, it dates back to the physical confinement of his youth. The rhetorical visions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* are a response to a period of physical confinement that explains the vision that leads Casy and Dean on to the road.

Casy and Dean's rhetorical visions are feverish, fast moving, and ever evolving. Their words ramble and roam as their automobiles move about the country. "Never heard you talk so much" (281), says Tom to Casy. "'Wasn't never so much reason'" (281), he responds. He needs to talk, in other words, in order to develop his rhetorical vision. Casy is concerned. He is searching for answers. Because life on the road precludes the development of any thoughtful answer, Casy must continue to talk. "Always on the way. Always goin' and goin,'" he says, "'They's movement now. People moving'" (128). Does the talking never stop, then? Casy dies and Steinbeck leaves this question unanswered; however, times continue to change. The people keep moving. In *On the Road*, Dean and his friends chatter away through an entire night, feigning helplessness and finally directing themselves to rest: "'Now, when I raise my hand...we'll both understand purely and without any hassle that we are simply stopping talking, and we'll just sleep'" (45), says Dean. Revolving around the topic of "IT!" (251), his speech abounds in expression yet lacks progress. The American road experience confronts the rhetorical visions of Casy and Dean with questions they cannot answer, yet, while Casy's dialogue seeks real answers, Dean expresses the questions themselves.

Both authors address the jarring lack of answers on the road. The third-person, omniscient voice of Steinbeck openly attacks “the paradoxes of industry” and “ridiculousness of the industrial life” (152); the novel’s tragic end suggests a lack of answers to the questions posed by Steinbeck’s rhetorical vision. The same paradoxes plague Sal Paradise in *On the Road* and render all of his friends “in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons” (9). For this reason, Sal takes to the road with Dean, who, instead, “just raced in society, eager for bread and love” (10). Throughout the novel, Sal feigns surrender to “that mad Ahab at the wheel” because “there was no escaping it. I resigned myself to all” (213); he plays apprentice to Dean’s rhetorical vision. Sal soon recognizes that Dean’s rhetorical vision is just another ‘nightmare’: “I just don’t know what you’re both driving at or trying to get at. I know it’s too much for anybody” (45), he interrupts during Dean’s nightlong conversation. For Sal, Dean’s rhetorical vision simply ignores “the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road” (254). The ‘disciple’ in *On the Road* weighs the road experience inspired by Dean’s rhetorical vision and finds it wanting. For this reason, Sal chooses a definite end: to settle down with “the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long” (278) and a life among more stable friends (280).

In contrast, Tom Joad advocates Jim Casy’s rhetorical vision in *The Grapes of Wrath*. No, it does not provide firm answers to the modern condition; if history is right, Tom’s agrarian cause is doomed to failure and the culprit, the bank, is elusive: “The monster isn’t men, but it can make men do what it wants” (36). While they lack answers, Steinbeck’s characters nevertheless take a stand against the modern condition. On the road, Tom continues to derive meaning from foundational conceptions of hard work, community, and good and evil. Here, Steinbeck and

Kerouac's novels take their own distinct stances. *The Grapes of Wrath* ends in tragedy, but Tom Joad is clear to identify a villain, take a position, and draw a conclusion. As an artifact of popular culture, it suggests that the road experience of the 1930's troubled Steinbeck but did not sway his hope in the triumph of good over evil. *On the Road* contrasts. Kerouac's villain is himself, his stances are weak, and his conclusion is vague. The Beatniks inherited Steinbeck's conclusion, but notions of hard work, community, and good-versus-evil are irrelevant in the drama of 1950's self-exploration and expression.

In this way, the road narratives of Steinbeck and Kerouac redefined the U.S. highway system at two transformative stages in the American experience, the 1930's and 1950's. These periods are of unique importance within the context of the nation's frontier story. Shortly after Turner elaborated on the significance of the frontier's closing in 1893, it was made accessible like never before. Automobiles proliferated. Highways expanded. When the Dust Bowl hit and Wall Street crashed in 1929, the 'Okies' became the first generation of Americans to find the frontier 'closed' and economic opportunity nonexistent. For Steinbeck, the road experience was the symptom of a national sickness; Tom Joad claims in *The Grapes of Wrath* that credit banking and corporate food production go against human interests. Without the frontier, this is true, for an 'Okie' has no place to go when the bank takes his land. The Joads have no fertile valleys to seek as Grampa once did. Without the frontier, they have no place in the national narrative. This dysfunction, brought to light by the flight of the 'Okies', prompted Steinbeck' to reconfigure the American narrative. In this respect, the Joads' road experience is political, for it demands the structuring of an American capitalist system sourced by frontier exploitation. More importantly, Steinbeck's roads are cultural, for they reveal a transforming American character in the 1930's and a prevailing misunderstanding of the natural world.

Twenty years later, Kerouac redefines these roads. America is a different nation in the 1950's, and Sal Paradise enjoys what anthropologist Pierre Anctil called "the post-war spectacle of a triumphant, arrogant, and self-satisfied America comfortable installed in the contemplation of its material wealth" (qtd. In Swartz 25). Kerouac's roads are frivolous, for movement is effortless. They are heady and symbolic, for there are time and resources to partake in the luxury of games. Most importantly, Kerouac's road experience is cultural, for it also shows a transforming American character in the 1950's. In this regard, both authors write about the same road, the same face of a changing culture.

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