THE GRAPES OF WRATH: JOHN STEINBECK'S
COGNITIVE LANDSCAPES AS COMMENTARY
ON 1930S INDUSTRIALIZATION

Richard D. Marshall, B.A, M.A.

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Saint Louis University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

John Steinbeck was a writer who created memorable stories and deeply cared about people, particularly the dispossessed and the persecuted. These people were the subject of his greatest novels. Steinbeck’s critics in the 1930s viewed him as an anti-capitalist and anti-industrialist because of his desire to document the horrid living conditions in the agricultural fields of California’s Central Valley, but, in reality, Steinbeck’s beliefs and attitudes were ambivalent when writing about the complex relationships that drove the social and economic life in the 1930s. Steinbeck created landscapes in *The Grapes of Wrath* to illustrate the effects of rapid industrialization within the American society of the 1930s, supporting a complex economic system that provided both benefits and liabilities to those living in this period of change.

Cultural landscapes derive meaning through the hard work and effort of those who modify their physical surroundings. In much the same way, Steinbeck mentally crafted landscapes full of meaning as the setting for the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath* to act upon. This study has termed the landscape, crafted in the author’s mind and used as the background setting for the novel, the “cognitive landscape.” This cognitive landscape created for *The Grapes of Wrath* served as Steinbeck’s unwitting autobiography, documenting his tastes, values, aspirations, and fears, all in a visible form.

This study analyzes Steinbeck’s three most prevalent cognitive landscapes; the highway, automobile, and migrant camp. Steinbeck created the highway landscape to illustrate the struggle between opportunity and oppression. He crafted the automobile landscape to describe the tension between the need to be mobile and the need to remain focused on the values that exist at home. He formed the migrant camp landscape to
symbolize the tension of living between the worlds centered on both dislocation and community.

This dissertation analyzes John Steinbeck’s cognitive landscapes to argue that although he cared deeply for the story of the migrant workers, he wasn’t an anti-capitalist or anti-industrialist, but he offered a complex and ambivalent viewpoint in this story and documented those feelings through the cognitive landscapes he created for *The Grapes of Wrath*. 
COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Assistant Professor Cindy Ott,
   Chairperson and Advisor

Professor Shirley Loui

Professor Matthew Mancini
Dedication

To Marilyn, Matthew, and Bethany. I thank God for each of you every day. Your support provided the fuel to get me through this project and I love each of you. You deserve all the credit. God bless each of you.
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I want to acknowledge the mentorship provided by three outstanding professors, academicians, and friends: Dr. Cindy Ott, Dr. Matthew Mancini, and Dr. Shirley Loui of the Saint Louis University American Studies Department. I appreciate all the help you provided me while serving on my dissertation committee. You have inspired me and watched over me. This project would never have been a reality if not for your leadership. Thank you sincerely.

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Most of all, I want to thank Marilyn, Matthew, and Bethany for all their support while putting up with a father and husband who was constantly distracted while trying to balance too many events in his life. I love you and thank you and know that God has blessed me by giving me an incredible family.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Problem

John Steinbeck created the landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath* as his tool to illustrate the effects of rapid industrialization in American society. He demonstrated how the technological advances of the 1930s fostered a complex economic system that provided both benefits and liabilities to the lives of those living in this period of rapid change. The increase in technology drove the introduction of mechanization and modern agricultural business practices to the Plains, dramatically increasing crop yields but also requiring deep sacrifices by the individual farmers as they transitioned to a new way of life. Steinbeck’s vehicle for illustrating the sacrifices and benefits associated with industrialized society was the landscape the Joad family encountered throughout the novel.

Many critics in the 1930s viewed Steinbeck as an anti-capitalist and anti-industrialist\(^1\) because of his desire to document the living conditions in California’s Central Valley. In reality, Steinbeck’s beliefs and attitudes were ambivalent when writing about the complex relationships that drove the social and economic life in the 1930s. Steinbeck understood the economic forces that affected people’s lives; he comprehended them from the need to make the United States economically strong but also from the personal side while people suffered as the victims of industrialization. *The Grapes of Wrath* flowed

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\(^1\) Jeffery Schultz and Luchen Li in *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, wrote that many readers associated Steinbeck with the radical left after *The Grapes of Wrath* was published. Steinbeck, though, was not a socialist or a Marxist and even suffered in his later years as the radical left attacked him for abandoning communistic ideals, ideals which he had never actually held. Jeffery Schultz and Luchen Li, *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, (New York: Checkmark Books, 2005), 90.
out of Steinbeck’s attempt to explore the polarization created by industrialization, making sense of both the benefits to society and the individual hardships endured by those struggling or left behind. Steinbeck incorporated this ambivalence into the landscapes he created as the setting for the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this study I will analyze Steinbeck’s ambivalence toward increasing industrialization through three major landscapes he created.

First, I will analyze Steinbeck’s highway landscape. The highway was the most ubiquitous landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck used it to illustrate the struggle between opportunity and oppression. The highway was a product of modern engineering and manufacturing principles and was made possible through the centralized coordination and detailed regional planning that only a strong federal government could provide. Steinbeck used the highway landscape to illustrate the stresses inflicted on people living in a rapidly industrializing society and the choices individuals make to serve the common good. The highway was one of the most visual and enduring creations of the economic machine of the 1930s, the same economic machine that forced the tenant farmers off the land they had worked for generations. But,

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2 Christopher W. Wells, in “The Changing Nature of Country Roads,” stated that “by the early twentieth century, rural dwellers had begun to believe that roads were technological rather than natural phenomena and that their maintenance and use mandated political cooperation among the local, state, and even national levels.” This belief was a result of the new levels of federal cooperation required between the states to create and maintain large federal projects for the benefit of all. Interstate highways required in-depth planning on a regional and national level and would require resources not available in the rural communities and municipal governments. The transition to federally planned and maintained highway projects signified a sophisticated level of government that previously wasn’t available. Christopher W. Wells, “The Changing Nature of Country Roads: Farmers, Reformers, and the Shifting Uses of Rural Space, 1880–1905,” *Agricultural History*, Volume 80, Issue 2, (2006): 144.

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the highway also provided new opportunities for those same farmers, many of whom followed the highway west as they continued their strong desire to remain tied to the land. Steinbeck used the highway landscape to illustrate the constant tension between opportunity and oppression in the lives of those living in the 1930s.

The next landscape I will analyze is Steinbeck’s landscape surrounding the automobile, which illustrated the struggle between the themes of mobility and domesticity. Steinbeck capitalized on the “in-betweenness” that signified the world the migrant families were living in. When Steinbeck introduced the automobile to the story the Joad family was preparing to leave the farm. The farm house and its permanence had been the primary focus of the family, but now as migrants their lives would depend on mobility, and the primary tool enabling mobility would become the automobile. The automobile wasn’t a permanent fixture, as the farmhouse was. It represented a tool to be used to access the road to a better future for the migrants. The landscape of the automobile also represented the changing economics of home, serving as Steinbeck’s instrument to highlight the migrant families’ feelings of “in-betweenness.” The migrants were caught in a difficult transition from the stability provided by the family home and self sustainment to one of mobility and reliance on others.

The feelings of “in-betweenness” were not isolated to the migrant families; those who were lucky enough to remain firmly planted on the farm also experienced drastically changed lives with the increasing reliance on the automobile. By the late 1930s the small

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3 Frank Eugene Cruz addressed the idea that The Grapes of Wrath became a lasting work of literary art because of Steinbeck’s treatment of “in-betweenness,” as manifested in the novel’s representations of home and the unhomely. Steinbeck capitalized on the drift from domesticity to mobility and the associated changes in the perception of “home” in the 1930s and how that affected those who migrated west. Frank Eugene Cruz, “In Between a Past and Future Town: Home, The Unhomely, and The Grapes of Wrath,” The Steinbeck Review, Volume 4, Number 2, (Fall 2007): 54.
town landscape had become dotted with used car sales lots, new car dealerships, and service stations. A mobile lifestyle replaced the seclusion of living on the family farm. Steinbeck designed the landscape of the automobile to represent the tension between the benefits that came with mobility in an industrializing society and the desire to remain focused on the values of home and family. Mobility became more important as the automobile provided families the option to move off the farm in search of employment, but also provided those who chose to stay behind to be less reliant on the farm economy and its associated economic ebbs and flows. The farm families staying behind were living on the farm, trying desperately to cling to their rural values and families, while functioning in a society increasingly dominated by mobility and technology. The change to a reliance on increased mobility was common to both those leaving for a new life as migrants and those staying anchored to the farm.

The final landscape I will analyze is the landscape Steinbeck created for the setting of the migrant camps in order to reveal the tension between the themes of community and dislocation. In many ways the migrant camp was the end result of how the landscapes of the highway and the automobile affected the migrant families. When the Joad family arrived in California’s Central Valley they encountered a new way of life. The community of migrant families they found in the camp setting was constantly maintained in a state of transition and dislocation. The cultural and physical fabric of the camp would change on a daily basis. But, as much as the camp was in a state of constant flux,

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4 With respect to the building of communities on a nightly basis in the migrant work camps, Patrick K. Dooley in A Community of Inquiry: Conversations Between Classical American Philosophy and American Literature, argued that, “Beginning by addressing basic needs- fuel, food, water, and shelter- nightly communities soon responded to higher, more specifically human needs. Defensiveness and isolation were shattered; humanity and community were fostered.” Patrick K. Dooley, A Community of Inquiry: Conversation Between Classical American Philosophy and American Literature, (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2008), 217.
Steinbeck depicted the migrant camp landscape as one where community and relationships were paramount. Neighbors worked side by side to accomplish tasks, and none were left behind. In some respects, Steinbeck’s migrant camps appeared to be a blemish on the highway landscape, but they also represented his notion of the ideal society where there are no individuals; where all acted together in the interest of the group, and a sense of community was built among the lives of those who shared the common experience.

In this dissertation I will analyze Steinbeck’s use of the highway, automobile, and migrant camp landscapes to illustrate that meaningful life is lived among the tension and complex dual natures of oppression and opportunity; mobility and domesticity; and dislocation and community. In many of his stories Steinbeck explored this tension of opposites as an opportunity to find a balance between the antithetical truths he found in life. In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck offered that the benefits that society received from increasing industrialization would be lived among the costs paid by individuals through sacrifice. In this dissertation my purpose is to challenge those views held by some that Steinbeck was either an anti-industrialist or an anti-capitalist by showing that he created landscapes that illustrated his ambivalent beliefs regarding the effects of increasing technology on the society of the 1930s. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck created landscapes that supported his worldview; his sense of place, his respect for people, and his outlook for the future. In the next section I will explain the process I will use to explore his created landscapes.

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The Process

In this study I will use the landscapes John Steinbeck described in the text of *The Grapes of Wrath* as his "unwitting autobiography." I will search beyond his outward appearance and into his inner beliefs in order to understand his thoughts and values regarding the rapid rise of industrialization in the 1930s. I will analyze the text of Steinbeck’s created landscapes including the artifacts Steinbeck placed there.

The term "landscape" can mean something different to each person, so, before I begin to analyze Steinbeck’s created landscapes I will define how I will use the term "landscape" throughout this study.

What Is Landscape?

What does the word "landscape" mean? We use this word in so many different ways that it can be difficult to define. The word "landscape" changes meanings depending upon our situation. I use the word differently if I am viewing landscape as artwork at a gallery or if I am altering the look of my backyard’s landscape. The meaning of the word landscape is deeply tied to our identification with and definition of place. It is important to understand our definition of the word “place” so that we can understand how that affects our definition of landscape.

The word “place” is packed with cultural meaning. Just reading the word here on the page can inspire one to form a uniquely personal definition of the word. To think about the word “place” begins a mental process that results in a different location and concept for each individual. To some the word “place” conjures up their unique ideal of home, as

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6 This relationship between Steinbeck’s created landscape and his “unwitting autobiography” will be described in more detail later in Chapter 1. The concept of landscape as an “unwitting autobiography” was postulated by Pierce F. Lewis in "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.
when we use the phrase, “This is my place!” To others it identifies a status symbol, as in, “You live in a really nice place.” While to others it is a form of identification, as used in “my place in life.” One’s sense of place is to a deep extent influenced by both the physical and cultural environments. Dolores Hayden in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* wrote,

'Place' is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid. It carries the resonance of homestead, location, and open space in the city as well as a position in a social hierarchy. The authors of books on architecture, photography, cultural geography, poetry, and travel rely on 'sense of place' as an aesthetic concept but often settle for the 'personality of location' as a way of defining it.

Hayden’s observation that “place” can be defined as the personality of a location explains why there is no universal definition of “place.” The definition is personal. Just as no two humans can share a personality, so also no two locations have the same sense of place. Each place is unique and separate. Humans become psychologically attached to a location providing sociological and ideological ties that transfer us from the sterility and loneliness of location to the community and warmth of place.

Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, offered another view of place. He argued that the experience of place engages all five senses in seeing, smelling, feeling, hearing, and tasting the essence of place. In the same way that two individuals observing the same car accident from different angles can have entirely different experiences, so too do places differ because of both physical and cultural variations. Places also differ significantly as “a milieu in which people live - influenced by and influencing the physical environment, but neither determined by nor determining it. Places differ, in very large part, because people make them do so.”

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7 R. J. Johnson, in “A Place For Everything And Everything In Its Place,” argued that places differ because of both physical and cultural variations. Places also differ significantly as “a milieu in which people live - influenced by and influencing the physical environment, but neither determined by nor determining it. Places differ, in very large part, because people make them do so.” R. J. Johnson, “A Place For Everything And Everything In Its Place,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1991), 133.


different perspectives of the same event, so also two individuals living in the same location experience a different sense of place. An American traveling in Asia most likely would describe his or her own personal view of the urban environment of downtown Seoul, Korea, differently than a native Korean who grew up there and feels at home there. The essence of place results from a collage of experiences that are superimposed on a specific location. Place is a powerful concept that helps us define our surroundings, our region, and our home. People become familiar with their surroundings and filter their experiences through the lens of their perception of place. “Place” directly affects one’s worldview and the ability to see one’s surroundings. “Place” is what provides us with our unique lens to look at the world around us, or the landscape.

What is meant by the term “landscape?” Just as the word “place” is difficult to define because of its unique, personal meaning, so for the same reason, the word “landscape” is a difficult term to define. In Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, Denis Cosgrove stated, “Landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience. . . Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world.” D.W. Meinig, in The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays, offered his viewpoint of landscape when he stated, “life must be lived amidst that which was made before.

10 D. W. Meinig makes this argument in “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene,” when he states that “even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not- we cannot- see the same landscape. We may certainly agree that we will see many of the same elements- houses, roads, trees, hills- in terms of such denotations as number, form, dimension, and color, but such facts take on a meaning only through association; they must be fitted together according to some coherent body of ideas. Thus we confront the central problem: any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads.” D.W. Meinig, “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene,” The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays, ed. D.W. Meinig, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 34.

Every landscape is an accumulation. The past endures. Michael Conzen provided a third view of what constitutes one’s landscape. He stated in *The Making of the American Landscape* that,

Landscape as a generic term can be understood to encompass all the visible world. A particular landscape is that characteristic portion of the world visible by an observer from a specific position. Implicit in these notions is the dual nature of landscape: as object and subject. These three authors had similar views of what constituted “Landscape.” The definition of landscape used in this study builds on these. For the purposes of this study the definition of landscape will be: The observable, visible world including all that can be seen, heard, or touched by an observer. Each person’s, or observer’s, personal landscape will be different than that of others because they observe the landscape with their own unique viewpoint and accumulated past. Each person’s view of landscape can be as simple as everything that is observable and visual, but as complicated as that person’s cultural worldview acting as a lens that impacts how one looks upon the world around the observer.

Geographers typically distinguish landscapes as either natural or cultural. When most people think of landscape they think of the natural landscape and believe it looks the way it does due to physical forces acting on the land. But, the separation of landscape into natural and cultural landscapes is a human-induced separation. The distinction is useful for historical purposes, but as one begins to conduct even a rudimentary analysis of landscape it becomes apparent that all landscapes contain some degree of human

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12 D.W. Meinig argued that “the past puts its imprint on survey lines, land parcels, political jurisdictions, roadways, and other landscape artifacts that form boundaries which deeply affect the landscape of today. The landscapes we observe today are a rich library of data documenting the peoples and societies that have gone on before us.” D. W. Meinig, “The Beholding Eye,” 44.


14 Meinig, in the Introduction to *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, 2; Pierce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” 12.
modification. Even the most ancient of landscapes contain indelible human marks. In reality, all that we see when we observe the world around us is a cultural landscape. Conzen again wrote,

This is not to say that nature has lost its power in shaping the visible pattern of the landscape, even in the modern age; rather, that the human imprint is by this stage so deep that even natural elements, such as forests and rivers, have not remained untouched in their extent and composition by human occupancy. So, in many areas, even in the United States, there are few localities that can legitimately be considered still natural or wild, and this elevates the emphasis on human factors in their transformation. The cultural landscape is, in truth then, a composite of the historical interaction between nature and human action.

One would think that in the rural areas, even within the United States, it would be easy to locate untouched, natural landscapes, but it is not. In reality, it is difficult to find a pristine, untouched landscape. The forests of the Rocky Mountains and the grasslands of the Great Plains all have experienced human alteration. Meinig described the relationship between the natural physical landscape and the cultural landscape in the following way,

Nature is fundamental only in a simple literal sense: nature provides a stage. The earth is a platform, but all thereon is furnished with man's effects so extensively that you cannot find a scrap of pristine nature. The soils, trees, and streams are not "nature" as distinct from man, they are profoundly human creations.

The point to be made here is that all landscapes, past or present, are modified by humans. Each cultural landscape required human effort and energy to alter the natural

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15 David Lowenthal in “Age and Artifact” stated, “The past, like the present, is always in a state of flux. When we identify, preserve, enhance, or commemorate surviving artifacts and landscapes, we affect the very nature of the past, altering its meaning and significance for every generation in every place. Paradoxically, growing interest in the past threatens its visible remains and tends to vitiate their significance, especially where attention is concentrated on a few sacred places.” David Lowenthal, “Age and Artifact,” The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays, ed, D.W. Meinig, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 124.

16 Conzen, The Making of the American Landscape, 2.

landscape so that it exists in its present form. This transformation happens whether the landscape is an actual physical landscape, or, as in the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, one that is mentally created in an author’s mind. Pierce F. Lewis, in “Axioms for Reading The Landscape,” stated,

> Our human (cultural) landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form. We rarely think of landscape that way, and so the cultural record we have ‘written’ in the landscape is liable to be more truthful than most autobiographies because we are less self-conscious about how we describe ourselves.\(^\text{18}\)

John Steinbeck used many landscape representations throughout the novel that can be viewed as more than simply a benign setting or backdrop. Steinbeck created several ideologically charged landscapes for the setting of *The Grapes of Wrath*. I will survey Steinbeck’s created landscapes, analyze them, and incorporate context into them.

**John Steinbeck’s Use of the Cognitive Landscape**

How does a landscape created for a novel apply to the values held by a culture? Pierce F. Lewis stated that “The fact remains that nearly every square millimeter of the United States has been altered by humankind somehow, at some time. ‘Natural Landscapes’ are as rare as unclimbed mountains, and for similar reasons.”\(^\text{19}\) The same analogy applies to created landscapes in an author’s fictional work. Every landscape in a novel is packed full of the author’s worldview. Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is a fictional work, and although the landscapes represented in this work are not necessarily real, they are created by the author for specific purposes. As in the creation of real-world cultural landscapes, the creation of a landscape in the mind of an author such as

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\(^{18}\) Lewis, “Axioms for Reading The Landscape,” 12.

\(^{19}\) Lewis, “Axioms for Reading The Landscape,” 12.
Steinbeck resulted from expended effort. The created landscape in Steinbeck's head didn't simply appear to him, but was also a result of the author's hard work. An agricultural worker may spend months digging an irrigation ditch that alters the physical landscape in an appreciable way. In a similar way, Steinbeck crafted and prepared the landscapes that served as the background for his novel. Steinbeck may have shaped these landscapes from places he was familiar with, and they may have evolved through accumulated experience with the actual landscapes Steinbeck lived within. The fact is that they are all created and are not factual representations of any actual cultural landscape. They were mentally crafted landscapes resulting from the amalgamation of the author's experiences. This study has given a name to these emotionally charged, author created landscapes; they are called "cognitive landscapes."

Throughout the novel John Steinbeck created cognitive landscapes, emphasizing what he believed to be important elements to illustrate his themes. Just as a background serves as a setting for a painting or a photograph, so also the cognitive landscape within a novel serves as the background and provides the foundational setting for the author's story. The background in a painting or a photograph is used to highlight traits that might otherwise be overlooked without it and the artist uses the background to bring new emphasis to whatever the author intends to highlight. In the novel, the story is interwoven with the setting, the characters act upon the cognitive landscape, and are acted upon by the landscape in order to highlight those traits the author deems important. In this aspect the landscape is a construct of the author's sense of place. So, in effect, within fictional literature we not only have a created landscape that is cultural, one that is modified by humans, but it is also a landscape that is crafted mentally in the mind of the
author. The cognitive landscape then is a mentally created landscape that the author uses as the setting for his or her novel.

In the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck extensively used the cognitive landscape to convey and drive plot development. In most novels the landscape simply supports or creates a backdrop for the plot. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, Steinbeck fashioned the landscape to drive the plot forward, using a great level of care and detail to describe the landscape in the novel. Steinbeck even went so far as to organize *The Grapes of Wrath* by dividing it into “interchapters,” supporting landscape development and “narrative” chapters supporting character interaction.\(^{20}\) The novel contains thirty total chapters, sixteen interchapters and fourteen narrative chapters. The interchapters are much shorter than the narrative chapters, normally two to five pages. But, the result is that nearly twenty percent of the novel’s text is dedicated purely to landscape development in these interchapters.\(^{21}\) The interchapters contain no reference to any of the major characters of the novel; Steinbeck dedicated them solely to describing the setting of the novel. Steinbeck produced these interchapters to develop his cognitive landscape


in great detail. Steinbeck also contrasted different styles of language in the interchapters and the narrative chapters. The language in the interchapters is very formal, detailed, and precise, while the language in the narrative chapters is informal and full of vernacular color. For example, Steinbeck used the following language in an interchapter to describe memories found in the barn of a family farm,

That plow, that harrow, remember in the war we planted mustard? Remember a fella wanted us to put in that rubber bush they call guayule? Get rich, he said. Bring out those tools- get a few dollars for them. Eighteen dollars for that plow, plus freight- Sears and Roebuck. While in another section, Steinbeck described a similar scene in a narrative chapter the following way,

"What I'm tellin' you. Took three trips with your Uncle John's wagon. Took the stove an’ the pump an’ the beds. You should a seen them beds go out with all them kids an’ your granma an’ grampa settin’ up against the headboard, an’ your brother Noah settin’ there smokin’ a cigareet, an’ spittin’ la-de-da over the side of the wagon." (GOW, 49)

Cynthia Burkhead, in the Student Companion to John Steinbeck, wrote about the difference in the language Steinbeck used in the interchapters and narrative chapters and noted, "Using the interchapters, Steinbeck hoped to provide musical overtones to the novel. The final effect is symphonic, with the interchapters providing the effect of the

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22 In the Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck developed his cognitive landscape using heavy description in the following interchapters to highlight their respective subjects. The chapter titles in The Grapes of Wrath only include the chapter number. The subject of the chapter is my summary and isn’t part of the formal chapter title. Chapter 1: The Oklahoma landscape and the dust storm. Chapter 3: The turtle. Chapter 5: The tractors. Chapter 7: Used car lots in the rural towns. Chapter 9: Selling off the family farms. Chapter 11: The abandoned farms. Chapter 12: Highway 66. Chapter 14: The economics of the tractor. Chapter 15: Migrating versus traveling. Chapter 17: Migrant road camps. Chapter 19: California’s landscape of consumption. Chapter 21: Migrant workers. Chapter 23: Irrigated society. Chapter 25: The agricultural empire. Chapter 27: Cotton Pickers Wanted. Chapter 29: The Rain. Each of these chapters were written with little or no participation from the story’s main characters. These chapters were written solely to develop the cognitive landscape and use it to drive plot development.

23 John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 88. As the primary source for this study, all further quotes from The Grapes of Wrath will be from the same source and only annotated with GOW and page number. The example here is (GOW, 88).
full orchestra and those chapters focusing on the Joad family providing the solos.”

Burkhead summed up the ability Steinbeck had to create interchapters full of descriptive visual detail and, although they are set apart from the narrative chapters both topically and linguistically, have them seamlessly support and direct the narrative chapters.

Steinbeck created his cognitive landscapes to drive the plot forward, but he also used them to enlist the reader’s help in creating the story. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a fictional novel and as such it gives each reader creative license to develop his or her own mental pictures of the landscape as they read and become absorbed in the story. Steinbeck didn’t provide the reader with the complete details of the cognitive landscape in the novel, which engaged the reader into playing along with its narrative. In so doing, he ensured the reader’s participatory ownership stake in the story. In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck provided the reader with the opportunity to co-create the story’s landscape with him. At the end of the novel we even ask ourselves, “What became of the Joads?”

Warren French, in *A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath* stated that, “Steinbeck is not telling readers what became of the Joads; rather, he is asking what is going to become of them.” The legacy of the Joads and the entire group of migrants doesn’t lie with Steinbeck, it lies with the reader.

The fictional landscape is particularly helpful in understanding the internal thoughts of the author and society as a whole. In *The Lie of the Land*, Donald Mitchell stated that,

First, to the degree anything is made (including landscape, however defined), it is a process of labor, or work. Second, in human society if there is work, there is social organization. Finally, the organization of work is (has been, will be) fraught with relations of power and conflict;

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the cooperative effort to make anything—much less anything as complex as a landscape—is not at all natural but is socially constructed.\textsuperscript{26}

When we look at the landscape surrounding us we tend to view it as a finished process. If we think of the landscape as a static, finished process it is easy to overlook the amount of work it takes to alter the landscape, and it is more difficult to understand the many simultaneous processes that constantly change the landscape. It is part of human nature to interact with the physical environment and change it to a created cultural environment reflecting our values and ideals, but as Mitchell observed, it also requires motivation, action, and energy to accomplish this change. Our landscape is constantly under modification, and the process is never complete.

Mitchell’s observations bring to light again Pierce F. Lewis’ statement that the landscape serves as our unwitting autobiography. Our human, or cultural, landscape reflects our tastes and values because it requires our labor and direction to construct. The cultural landscape is the backdrop for our lives. Our lives are lived out on the landscape we create, and in so doing our lives create new landscapes through our labor and values. Authors of fiction, such as John Steinbeck, have taken this concept and adopted it within the cognitive landscapes of their fiction. They mentally craft landscapes which are then used to challenge us to think creatively in order to participate in the display of societal constructs. Crafting a cognitive landscape is not so different from how we modify the physical landscape. In much the same way an author may unwittingly create a landscape based on their societal bias. An author understands that landscape is a societal construct.

\textsuperscript{26} Don Mitchell, \textit{The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.
and fashions his or her cognitive landscape accordingly with intent; not wasting time with
details that aren’t important, but placing artifacts in the landscape to tell the story. The
author’s own personal worldview plays a significant role in how the author assembles the
cognitive landscape for the story.

Steinbeck was in a precarious situation while creating the cognitive landscapes as the
setting for this story. In the movie “Man of the Year” Robin Williams’ character Tom
Dobbs makes a statement that is on target in a landscape analysis of The Grapes of
Wrath. Dobbs states, “The difference between fiction and reality is that fiction has to be
credible.” This statement has to be paramount in an author’s mind when creating the
cognitive landscape.

Steinbeck, on one hand, wanted to create a landscape that moved the story line of the
novel forward toward the vision he had of the final scene of the novel. Every story line
and every landscape created by Steinbeck in the novel must move the plot to this
conclusion. He had an outcome in sight while creating the scenes for The Grapes of
Wrath.

On the other hand, Steinbeck was handcuffed into creating landscapes that were
fictional, but believable. They could be fictional landscapes, but they needed to be a
close enough representation of reality that the reader would find them credible. If not,
then the reader would not feel ownership in the story line of the novel and would not be
affected by the story in a way that results in action. If the landscape, and its associated
story line are believable, then a fictional novel can have a compelling effect on the
reader; if not, then it merely becomes fantasy.
Steinbeck created a landscape that supported his vision for the novel while at the same time creating a landscape that was believable by the reader. His cognitive landscape was believable enough to pull the reader into the novel and help the reader empathize with the perils of the Joad family.

Now that we have a common understanding of how I will use the term “landscape” in this study, I will provide a review of the literature I have used to frame my analysis of Steinbeck’s cognitive landscape. There is an abundance of literature that helped me form my theoretical framework of landscape, several similar studies that have analyzed created landscapes, and a wealth of literary criticism on Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath*. These will be discussed in the next section.

**Review of Related Literature**

The literature used in this project falls primarily into three categories. First, is theoretical literature. Theoretical literature creates the foundational base leading to a deeper understanding of the framework behind the research. The next category is source material to be used in a content analysis. The source material for this project is the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The final category of literature used is the abundance of critical literary analyses focused on Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath*. I will review literature found in each area separately.

*Theoretical Literature*

In this study theoretical literature primarily includes concept development and definitions using studies on the subject of place and landscape analysis. The theoretical concepts used in this analysis are primarily found in the following works.
The first foundational work, and the one most important to this study, is *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D.W. Meinig. Meinig assembled nine essays from geographical experts on cultural landscape analysis. This text contains techniques for reading and analyzing the cultural landscape including essays such as: “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” “The Biography of Landscape, Age and Artifact,” “The Order of Landscape,” “Symbolic Landscapes,” and “Reading the Landscape.” These essays serve to introduce the reader to the art of landscape analysis and provide sufficient techniques to allow the beginner to understand how humans alter our landscape to make it appear more like home. Meinig’s work is central to the study of cultural landscapes and it serves as the cornerstone for works that have since followed and continue to build upon Meinig’s principles.

The second important body of work is John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* and *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. Meinig’s work mentioned above is a noteworthy contribution to theoretical knowledge, but Jackson’s work puts that knowledge to practical use in analyzing several landscapes. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* is important to this study because within it Jackson analyzed several different landscapes to show how slight landscape alterations that appear almost imperceptible in everyday life are actually culturally significant. Jackson dedicated chapters to his analysis of unique landscapes he had found, such as “The Origin of Parks,” or “The Moveable Dwelling and How It Came to America.” His work illustrates how significant changes in the cultural landscape that surrounds us are often overlooked and taken for granted. They are present in our everyday landscape if we only look for them.

In the preface for *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* Jackson stated,
Over and over again I have said that the commonplace aspects of the contemporary landscape, the streets and houses and fields and places of work, could teach us a great deal not only about American history and American society, but about ourselves and how we relate to the world. It is a matter of learning how to see.27

Jackson explained that although the sites that we revere as having historical importance are just that, they constitute a small percentage of the landscape that surrounds us. The everyday landscape we are surrounded with and live our lives within contains meaningful artifacts and history. This concept of Jackson's is what urged me to ask the following question resulting in this study: if every day landscapes contain meaningful artifacts and history then what was the intent of the artifact’s creator in placing it in the landscape and could an author use the same type of intent in a fictional work?"

In *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* Jackson analyzed several unique landscapes including the landscapes of the Southwest, Environments, and Towns, Cars, and Roads. Jackson understood the powerful messages found in the everyday landscape and was able to communicate them well. Jackson showed how many individuals incorporate the landscape into an effort to create a sense of community. In *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* Jackson stated that the study of landscape history contributes,

by reminding us, among other things, that since the beginning of history humanity has modified and scarred the environment to convey some message, and that for our own peace of mind we should learn to differentiate among these wounds inflicted by greed and destructive fury, those which serve to keep us alive, and those which are inspired by a love of order and beauty, in obedience to some divine law.28

Jackson acted as a landscape analysis evangelist throughout *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, using his persuasive techniques to inspire the reader to look beyond the common understanding of the world around us and dig deeper into the meaning behind the landscape alterations that we take for granted.

The third important work used in this project is John Fraser Hart’s *The Rural Landscape*. Hart is one of today’s premier practitioners in the field of cultural landscape analysis. Hart goes deeper into the theory of landscape analysis than Meinig and Jackson and has introduced many new concepts. As the title of his work implied, Hart specialized in interpreting the rural landscape, and this book included five sections where he analyzed the artifacts found in the landscape. The five sections were dedicated to: Rocks, Plants, Land Division, Farm Structures, and Small Towns and the Urban Edge. The opening sentences in *The Rural Landscape* summed up Hart’s mission regarding the analysis of the landscape. He wrote,

> The only proper way to learn about and understand the landscape is to live in it, look at it, think about it, explore it, ask questions about it, contemplate it, and speculate it. Merely reading about it is a sorry substitute indeed, but this book provides some initial clues about the kinds of things to look for and to ponder.  

Hart discussed his viewpoint on the creation of the cultural landscape when he stated,

> The beliefs and values of different culture groups have molded and modified the landscape. The ‘cultural baggage’ of a group may influence the form and appearance of its structures, because its members may have their own distinctive ideas about how particular types of building should look. It may also show up in their predilection for a particular crop or a particular breed of livestock. Some beliefs and values are held more tenaciously than others, and some have a greater effect on the landscape than others.  

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Hart developed the concept of *prior potior*, which means, “the earlier is the more powerful,” or “the first one influences all that follow.” This concept is at the forefront of cultural landscape analysis today. He stressed that we should attempt to dig back into historical landscapes in order to understand why the current landscape appears as it does. Hart believes that a landscape’s historic structures heavily influence what comes after them.

The next body of work important to this study is that of William Cronon. Cronon is an environmental historian and his work *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great North West* included many of his original concepts, including the belief that there is no credibility to an *a priori* landscape. Contrary to Hart, Cronon believes that we must interpret and act upon each landscape uniquely. The past is not built upon, but incorporated into the new landscape. His research on the economic flow of goods and services between urban Chicago and the rural hinterland and the resultant effects on the rural/urban landscape is very applicable to this study. Cronon believes the urban and rural landscapes do not exist individually, but are defined through their relationship with each other. The urban landscape could not exist except in relation to the rural landscape and the rural landscape cannot exist if not in relation to the urban landscape. They are interdependent. Cronon’s research is central to understanding the landscape of Steinbeck’s northern California. The rural area only survives through the services it

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32 William Cronin makes this argument in *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great North West*. He wrote that the distinction between “first nature” and “second nature” has its uses, but it too slips into ambiguity when we recognize that the nature we inhabit is never just first or second nature, but rather a complex mingling of the two.” William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great North West*, (New York: Norton and Company, 1991), xix.
provides the urban area and the urban area thrives on those services provided by the hinterland, which in turn push the rural area to produce.

This study centers on the landscapes of the Dust Bowl and its effect on the mass migration from the Great Plains to California's Central Valley. Another environmental historian whose work is pertinent to this study is Donald Worster. Worster's expertise is focused on society's effort to control nature through technology. In *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains In the 1930s* Worster showed how large scale economic and environmental policies affected the family farm operator. He argued the economic disaster of the Dust Bowl was even more long-lasting than the environmental problems created by years of poor agricultural policy. According to Worster, capitalism deeply affected the decisions which supported the economic and environmental policies responsible for exacerbating the problems of the Dust Bowl.

Worster, in *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West*, helped us understand how the interaction of humans with the physical environment has forever changed the way the American landscape looks. Worster associated the cultural landscape of the American West with the sense of freedom Americans have enjoyed for over two centuries and attributed significant changes in the landscape with the movement of Dust Bowlers into California's Central Valley while pursuing that freedom. Worster presented his analysis of those landscapes of the American West in this book. In the first chapter Worster discussed the landscape of the west through the legacy of one of its greatest explorers and advocates, John Wesley Powell. Powell exhibited the spirit of the West through his successful attempt to explore the reaches of the Colorado River. The other chapter that directly affects this study is Worster's chapter on water as a tool of
empire. In this chapter Worster brought to the surface the issue that America’s desire to control the aridity in the west was deeply rooted in European imperial thinking,\(^3\) and with disappointing environmental results. The points Worster made in this work provided a foundation for this study through the understanding that large water reclamation and irrigation projects benefited the large landowners at the expense of the small farm operator. Large irrigation projects were designed to help the transition to monocropping and were impractical and too costly for the small farm operator to participate in. The agricultural economics favoring the factory farm fields were already in place long before the Okies arrived in the central valley.

Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* described the transition in the federal government that was necessary for the development of an irrigated society. Worster documented how these changes have manifested themselves in the American cultural landscape of the West. He argued the transition resulted in the federal government’s treatment of the landscape as a commodity to be used as a resource. Worster’s study is key to understanding the modification of the California cultural landscape in the 1930s and relates directly to Steinbeck’s creation of the highway landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The same mature federal government that administered large regional and national irrigation and water reclamation projects was responsible for the detailed planning for the national highway system.

A final theoretical work used to deepen my understanding of Steinbeck’s thoughts was Patrick K. Dooley’s *A Community of Inquiry: Conversations Between Classical American Philosophy and American Literature*. This collection of Dooley’s essays

contained a section focused on Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and Norman MacLean titled, “Temperament, Memory, Community, and Work.” Within this section there are two essays on Steinbeck’s themes. The first is, “Creating Community: Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Royce’s Philosophy of Loyalty.” The second essay is, “Human Dignity, Work, and the Need for Community, and ‘the Duty of the Writer to Lift Up:’ Steinbeck’s Philosophy of Work.”

These two essays are important to this study because they offer a basic foundation of the idea of building a sense of community in the 1930s. They outline the sacrifices, benefits, and dangers in establishing a sense of community with those who have common experiences. The “Creating Community” essay begins with an excerpt from *The Grapes of Wrath* that sets the tone for the essay. The excerpt is from Reverend Casy and described the mission of the Joad family. It stated,

“You sharin’ with us, Muley Graves?” Casy asked.
“If a fella’s got somepin to eat an’ another fella’s hungry- Why, the first fella ain’t got no choice.” (*GOW*, 51)

Casy was illustrating that Muley didn’t have a choice, just as the Joad family didn’t have a choice when it came to interacting with others less fortunate than themselves. Community is built on sharing and looking out after each other. The Joad family’s mission was to ensure that they took care of those around them. They might have to sacrifice a little bit within the family, but they would find a way to survive and help others out along the way. This concept of community is what fueled Dooley’s analysis of Steinbeck’s characterization of the daily setting up and tearing down of the migrant travel camps and how they related to the building of community as a migrant. Twenty families would bond together as one and camp as a unit with new friendships built each evening.
and then dismantled the following morning. Dooley was very insightful in his observations.

This study relies on the theoretical literature cited above as the foundation to incorporate the disciplines of landscape analysis, environmental history, and literary criticism into a unique analysis of Steinbeck’s created landscapes within *The Grapes of Wrath*. This analysis offers a new viewpoint on *The Grapes of Wrath* as it blends these disciplines to provide a commentary on 1930s industrialization through Steinbeck’s landscapes.

**Source Material**

John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is the sole source of primary material for this study. Since its initial publication in 1938 it has been a very controversial novel. Among critics and scholars Steinbeck’s reputation has been low, while with the general public he has become more popular over time and more important historically. It appears to be inconsistent that literary scholars hold him in such low regard, while at the same time he was awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. One area of common ground between the critics and populace is that most agree that Steinbeck did a remarkable job documenting the plight of migrants in the 1930s.

The 1930s was a difficult time in the history of the West. The nation was in the midst of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl affected the lives of countless Americans. Many were forced to make the decision to abandon the family farm and migrate west, while at the same time America began some of the world’s largest federally planned, subsidized, and administered work projects in an attempt to modernize parts of the

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nation’s transportation and communication infrastructure. America was a country in transition.

The Dust Bowl years forced many Plains farmers to move off their land and head west to California where the land was more productive and jobs appeared to be more available. What they found astounded them. The agricultural system of California’s Central Valley was one of the most intensively farmed areas on earth; as if the Central Valley was an agricultural factory. The same traditional agricultural practices that were no longer productive back home on the Plains were also desperately out of touch with the new mechanized agriculture among the factory-like fields and orchards of California. Thousands of homeless American families arrived in California with nothing to offer except a willingness to work hard. The dreams of the gold rush prospectors from 80 years earlier were being relived in the minds of the Dust Bowl migrants. The handbills circulated among those pondering the move west announced plentiful work opportunities which solidified their belief that if they could only reach California they would be ok. Just as in the gold rush, California was more than a destination, it was a dream. And, just as in the Gold Rush, those who came to California and lost everything far outnumbered those that claimed their fortune. The time period of the 1930s contained an abundance of fictional works that documented the struggle our society was facing. *The Grapes of Wrath* may possibly be one of the most important novels to come out of this decade. John Steinbeck brought the treatment of the Okies to the national headlines both in newspapers (his articles for *The San Francisco News* will be discussed later in this chapter) and through his novel.
The novel *The Grapes of Wrath* will serve as the primary text for this landscape analysis. Steinbeck may have translated several characteristics from real life landscapes into the novel, but most elements were constructed fictionally to form a background landscape for the author to tell his story. These fictional sources portray the changing values of our society through the modification of the many landscapes.

**Critical Literary Analyses of Steinbeck and The Grapes of Wrath**

In this study I have relied upon several literary analyses of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tetsumaro Hayashi, a Steinbeck scholar from Ball State University, is one of the foremost Steinbeck authorities. He has published extensively on Steinbeck and has also produced numerous edited collections of critical essays. Some of the collections of critical essays Hayashi has edited include: *A New Guide to Steinbeck's Major Works with Critical Explications*; *Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath: Essays in Criticism*; and *A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to His Major Works*. These essays will be used to establish commonality between the findings of this study and those that have preceded it. They each offer insight into Steinbeck's work.

In *A New Study Guide to Steinbeck's Major Works, With Critical Explications* Hayashi included an essay by Louis Owens titled, “Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).” This essay provided background information on John Steinbeck’s life and highlights his experiences leading up to the writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Owens also made contributions to the analysis of the organization of the novel as he recounted the several works that divide *The Grapes of Wrath* into three clear parts: the Joads’ time in Oklahoma, the journey to California, and the family’s experiences once they have arrived
in California. He also outlined the subdivision of these parts into the interchapters and the narrative chapters. Owens made the observation that “in the interchapters the novel’s focus moves back to examine the Dust Bowl tragedy from epic distance, while in the narrative chapters the point of view is very close to the Joads.”

Hayashi’s Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath: Essays in Criticism included an essay by Richard Allan Davison titled, “Charles G. Norris and John Steinbeck: Two More Tributes to The Grapes of Wrath.” In this essay Davison explored what he believed was a relationship between Charles G. Norris and John Steinbeck. Norris, like Steinbeck, was interested in exploring the migrant worker/farm owner struggle, and also like Steinbeck, Norris consciously tried to keep a balanced viewpoint. Davison’s comparison of Norris and Steinbeck validates the analysis of this study that Steinbeck created landscapes that illustrated his ambivalent feelings toward industrialization in the 1930s.

In his third collection of critical essays focused on Steinbeck, called A Study Guide to Steinbeck: A Handbook to His Major Works, Hayashi included an essay by Warren French, another well-known Steinbeck scholar, called “Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath (1939).” As with Louis Owens, French provided background information on John Steinbeck’s life and highlighted his experiences leading up to the writing of The Grapes of Wrath. French continued on to explain the complex relationships between the

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36 Ibid.

characters in the novel and the artifacts in the landscape.\(^{38}\) French then discussed Steinbeck’s letter to his editor, Pascal Covici, where he stated “that there are ‘five layers’ to the novel and that a reader will find as many as he can and won’t find more than he has himself.”\(^{39}\) In effect French is baiting the reader to dig deeply into Steinbeck’s text to find the “five layers.” French was trying to tell us that aside from being an entertaining novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* has deeper meaning. I believe the landscapes Steinbeck created for this novel also contain deeper meaning, meaning that goes beyond a gloomy backdrop for the novel. As Steinbeck did with his ‘five layers,’ he created complex landscapes that provide context to the characters’ actions in the novel.

Warren French also provided several literary criticisms to John Steinbeck’s works. French’s *A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath* is central to this study and explains in great detail the background of what the Dust Bowl was, who the Okies were, what John Steinbeck knew about the plight of the westward migrants, and how the book was received at home and abroad. French explains Steinbeck’s life and subjects and provides a superb background to the events surrounding the novel.

Robert DeMott edited two superb works directly impacting this study. Both of these works were derived from Steinbeck’s own personal letters and journals. The first was titled *John Steinbeck: Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941,* which provided numerous details about Steinbeck’s personal life and documented his thoughts in his own words using his daily journal. We are able to know the daily activities of the author, how he was influenced by the news and events of the day, and

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 35.
what his motivations and deepest thoughts were while he worked on the novel. It is of particular note that Steinbeck would critique his days work in regard to the amount of progress (pages) he wrote per day and his analysis of the quality of work produced each day. DeMott brings the personal and professional life of John Steinbeck into focus in a way that we can understand what drove him to create this novel. Steinbeck’s worldview contributed to his landscape development, so understanding what drove him is of great importance to this study.

DeMott’s second work was called *Steinbeck’s Typewriter*. In this book DeMott used Steinbeck’s own words again, but this time about his writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Steinbeck’s Typewriter* chronicled a majority of his writing projects. DeMott’s chapter on *The Grapes of Wrath* commentary is called “This Book Is My Life’: Creating the Grapes of Wrath.” In many ways *Steinbeck’s Typewriter* is similar to *Working Days*. Many of the words are provided by Steinbeck, through his journals and letters. But DeMott accompanies Steinbeck’s words with his own analysis and commentary.

Another critical analysis was written by Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li. It is titled *Critical Companion To John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Schultz and Li stated that,

> When Steinbeck accepted the Nobel Prize in 1962, he declared that the writer’s duty was “to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit.” He believed literature could unite people and help them overcome their most enduring fears and troubles. Through the courage and dignity of his characters, his panoramic depictions of his nation, and his reports on the world, John Steinbeck delivered a message of hope for humanity.⁴⁰

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Schultz and Li, along with DeMott and French above, provided this study with the context of the significance of events in John Steinbeck’s life that contributed to his landscape creation.

Another critical analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* is David Wyatt’s *New Essays of the Grapes of Wrath*. Wyatt is perceptive in the link between the novel and Marxian and feminist theory in the text, and propaganda contained within the movie version of Steinbeck’s novel. Wyatt’s article provides another viewpoint to Steinbeck’s motivation for writing the novel. As stated earlier, many believed Steinbeck to be a Communist, something he denied. But, his writings were very controversial in the 1930s and became a rallying point for liberal leaning propaganda. Wyatt capitalizes on these points in his essay.

The final critical analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* used extensively in this study is *The Critical Response to John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath*, edited by Barbara A. Heavilin. Heavilin included several significant analyses that have helped with this study. The first analysis is a literature review of *The Grapes of Wrath* by Charles Lee titled, “*The Grapes of Wrath*: The Tragedy of the American Sharecropper.” Lee argued that Steinbeck was “eloquently angry” over the fate of the sharecroppers. A second essay that influenced this study was George F. Whicher’s “Proletarian Leanings.” In this essay Whicher advocates that Steinbeck produced the most effective proletarian stories.

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although he was by no means a Communist. The result is that his writings have not
found particular favor with either the far left-wing liberal or the ultraconservative readers.
His work has found favor with those of more moderate political tendencies.45

Within Heavilin’s The Critical Response to John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath
the essay that has had the most impact on this study is George Henderson’s “John
Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination in The Grapes of Wrath.” In this essay Henderson made
several key observations. First he stated that,

Small details were charted with representing and bearing out larger
processes... But it should not be forgotten that it was the modernization of
agricultural production and its attendant forms of consciousness that,
Steinbeck argued, brought about this state of affairs; in particular that
aspect of modernization whereby technological change loosens
boundaries, brings into contact formerly discrete things and persons and
allows for a seemingly small event to be nested inside something more
significant.46

In other words, the system (increasing technology) was responsible for the problems
the tenant farmers were experiencing. It couldn’t be blamed on other people or the
practices of the tenant farmers; it was the result of progress. The entire system had
changed, not the individuals. Henderson’s essay provided validation for this study’s
claim that Steinbeck was ambivalent in his view of 1930s industrialization.

A second observation Henderson made was in the analysis of landscape. Henderson
wrote that, “The Grapes of Wrath cannot be understood fully unless the characters are
seen to develop in relationship to the places through which they moved- places that they
also reconstituted, if only momentarily.”47 He then went on to use Tom Joad as his

45 George F. Whicher’s “Proletarian Leanings, “The Critical Response to John Steinbeck’s The Grapes
of Wrath, 67.
46 George Henderson, “John Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination in The Grapes of Wrath,” The Critical
Response to John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, 102.
primary example of a character interacting with the landscape around him. He stated that,

the literary ‘map’ charted in *The Grapes of Wrath* was finally not just a geographic product, but was laden with social meaning. It is important, then, to move the line of questioning away from how the Joads got from one place to the next, and by which routes, toward how meaning is produced, controlled, and disseminated with regard to social and workaday space.48

Henderson’s viewpoint of “the social and workaday space” is very similar to this study’s viewpoint on the landscape.

The literature used in this study provides a firm foundation for the analysis of Steinbeck’s created landscapes and provides context for the events surrounding Steinbeck’s life that contributed to his worldview. His worldview then drove the creation of unique landscapes as the background for the important story told in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Several of the selected works of literature and critical analyses used for this study show that John Steinbeck was uniquely qualified to create the cognitive landscapes he formed in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He had a long history of working with migrant farm workers and understood their plight in a very real way. In the next section I will highlight what it was that made John Steinbeck so uniquely qualified to write *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Steinbeck’s Personal Path to Authoring The Grapes of Wrath**

America has had a long heritage of political fiction writers, but in the 1930s the stage was set for the genre to come of age. The societal instability surrounding the crash of the stock market, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl all contributed to an economy that accentuated a sharp division between those who had jobs, money, and food, and those

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who did not. Of these factors the Great Depression played the most significant role in a shift toward the increasing use of political fiction. Magazines such as the *New Masses* and *New Republic* encouraged authors to enlist in the cause and become field correspondents.\footnote{Jay Parini, *John Steinbeck: A Biography*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 162.}

A well-publicized organization of the day was the John Reed Club, which took as its slogan “Art Is a Class Weapon.”\footnote{Ibid., 163.} The club’s purpose was to push artists into activism by using their work, primarily paintings, novels, and poems, to influence people, educate them in the struggles of the working class, and develop solidarity among workers. Radicalism peaked during the mid-1930s, the period when Steinbeck was most productive in writing his novels *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck published several works prior to the release of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but it was this novel that fully established his reputation as a “proletarian” writer, a reputation which haunted him personally and professionally in his later years. The radical left took on Steinbeck’s work as a call to unification after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but in later years he suffered undue criticism from the liberal left for his supposed abandonment of communist ideology as his attention shifted away from the plight of the impoverished and oppressed. It was unfortunate for Steinbeck, because he never intended to represent the Left. He only wanted to report a balanced account of the treatment of the migrants. Steinbeck hated to be labeled or categorized, and most of all, feared to be called a social-political writer.\footnote{Schultz and Li document this in the *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck*, 90.}
Steinbeck's talent as a writer grew as his list of published works increased. DeMott noted that,

Between 1936 and 1938 Steinbeck's commitment to his material evolved through at least four major stages of writing: (1) a seven-part series of newspaper articles, *The Harvest Gypsies*; (2) an unfinished novel, "The Oklahomans;" (3) a completed, but destroyed satire, "L’Affaire Lettuceberg;" and (4) a final fictional version, *The Grapes of Wrath.*

In many ways these works all overlapped and culminated in the completion of *The Grapes of Wrath.* The subject of each project was very similar, but as Steinbeck learned his craft as an author he dug deeper into the social issues that caused the inequality in the agricultural production system. In each work he used the fixed core of entrenched power, incredible wealth, and tyranny of the rich landowners and their agricultural associations that ran the agricultural factory of California and their battle with the migrant workers that produced human rights violations and loss of dignity for the workers, and forced them into a form of involuntary slavery. The landowners and the agricultural associations accomplished this through the use of threats, reprisals, and violence that produced feelings of powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and fear within the migrant farm worker community.

One of the events that profoundly affected Steinbeck's desire to become more socially active was the Salinas Valley Lettuce Worker's Strike between 1934 and 1936. Steinbeck grew up in Salinas and lived there through the duration of the strike, becoming an active part of the outcry for justice.

The struggle in the lettuce fields of Salinas had been picking up momentum for many years and came to a peak in 1934. The strike started when lettuce field workers and packing shed workers struck the economically powerful Salinas Valley grower-shippers.

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An agreement was reached on a Saturday night and the workers were sent back to work immediately with negotiations to follow on Monday. The packing shed workers returned to work on Sunday morning, but for the lettuce field workers Sunday was not normally a work day, so they chose not to return to work until Monday morning. While the packing shed union was negotiating a contract, organized vigilante gangs hired by the grower-shippers burned down lettuce worker labor camps, driving the workers and organizers from the valley, and bringing in substitute workers to break the field strike. Packing shed union leaders did not honor their mutual agreement with the lettuce field workers, and allowed field and shed workers to be divided.

Two years later, in 1936 when the contract was to expire, the packing shed organizers remembered the attempt to split the field and shed workers and refused to re-sign the contract. The grower-shippers hired another vigilante army and used police and sheriffs to arrest and beat workers while escorting scabs into the sheds. Steinbeck observed first-hand the treatment the laborers were receiving from the organized owners. The lettuce packing strike affected him and inspired him to become more involved and explore the societal forces that triggered this event.

Willard Stevens, whose father was a strike leader in the 1934 California lettuce packing strike said, “I remember the strike. John Steinbeck met with my father and the others...He knew a senator in Washington and he said he was going to get the federal authorities involved. The way the police were acting made him mad.”

Images of Steinbeck’s first-hand experience with the strike stayed with him. He not only wrote about the inequality, but he experienced it first-hand. His knowledge of the working class went far deeper than simply writing about their struggle. His work with

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53 Parini, John Steinbeck: A Biography, 164.
the striking lettuce workers led directly to his creating the novel *In Dubious Battle* in 1936, a novel he had referred to in a letter to Mavis McIntosh as his "communist idea." In referring to *In Dubious Battle* he stated in another letter that he "used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man’s eternal, bitter warfare with himself." After the strike he spent a significant amount of time living alongside the subjects of his work. This would become a calling of his; to try to alleviate the horrible treatment of the migrant farm worker.

In August of 1936 Steinbeck, as an up and coming prospect, was recruited to write for the *San Francisco News*. This led to a significant work on the subject of how the owners treated the migrant farm workers. It was a *San Francisco News* multi-part article called "The Harvest Gypsies," which after the appearance in the *San Francisco News* was later published as a short non-fiction work called *The Harvest Gypsies*. He accepted a commission to write seven linked articles about the worsening situation of migrant farmers in California. This opportunity gave Steinbeck the funding and backing he needed to dig deeper into the problems encountered by the migrant farm workers and also gave him a voice to air his concerns.

Steinbeck accepted the offer to write the articles from the *San Francisco News* in the summer of 1936 and immediately began touring California’s agricultural areas in an old bakery truck (Steinbeck called it the "Pie Wagon") he fitted with a bed and a small kitchen. He was stricken with what he saw,

Whole families lived in cardboard boxes or in large disused pipes; indeed, shelters were constructed from anything that came to hand: an old rug, some straw mats, pieces of driftwood. Food was scarce and expensive,

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55 Ibid., 98.
and people in some areas were reduced to eating rats and dogs. Babies were dying from lack of adequate nutrition or proper medical services.\footnote{Parini, \textit{John Steinbeck: A Biography}, 174.}

In the Federal Resettlement Administration’s Weedpatch Labor Camp located near Arvin, California, Steinbeck met the camp manager Tom Collins, and they quickly became close friends and bonded together through the same calling—improving the treatment of the migrant workers. Collins provided Steinbeck with the in-depth knowledge of migrant relations and the official government reports Steinbeck needed to begin researching his articles on the labor camps. The friendship with Collins lasted through the completion of \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, which starts with the dedication, “To Carol, who willed it. To Tom, who lived it.” \textit{(GOW, 3)} Tom Collins was the real life inspiration for Steinbeck’s fictional migrant work camp manager Jim Rawley in \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}. Steinbeck and Collins traveled in the Pie Wagon to visit nearby farms, migrant work camps, and road-side settlements, logging thousands of miles together in California’s Salinas, Central, and Imperial Valleys. Jay Parini wrote of Steinbeck’s first trip to Weedpatch that, “Steinbeck left Weedpatch in his bakery truck with a briefcase stuffed full of reports given to him by Collins.”\footnote{Ibid., 179.} These reports were Collins’ status reports that were sent to Washington twice a month, and included his observations about camp life, including statistics, personal histories and health records of camp residents, and other information that would prove to be useful to Steinbeck in compiling his articles for \textit{The San Francisco News}, and later, in authoring \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}.

Steinbeck’s \textit{The Harvest Gypsies} was published in the \textit{San Francisco News} on October 5-12, 1936. Much of what Steinbeck published in \textit{The Harvest Gypsies} was used throughout \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} either through the text, or through the research required.
for Steinbeck to craft his story of migrant worker treatment. In *The Harvest Gypsies* Steinbeck introduced the reader to the problems the migrants faced in California’s agricultural factory, discussed the economics behind the system that enslaved them, and offered several solutions to help alleviate their suffering while maintaining their usefulness to the economy. In his closing remarks in *The Harvest Gypsies* Steinbeck began a theme that he continued on through *The Grapes of Wrath*. He described the plight of the new migrants by arguing that, unlike earlier immigrants, they were in California to stay. Their outcome depended on how the citizens of California treated them. He wrote that, “They can be citizens of the highest type, or they can be an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need. Their future treatment will depend which course they will be forced to take.”

Steinbeck and Collins took several more trips in the Pie Wagon through the California agricultural areas. On one trip they started from Gridley, where Collins was managing a new migrant work camp, and then traveled south to Stockton and then on to Needles. They stopped wherever migrants worked or gathered to live. Steinbeck was working on his latest novel, *The Oklahomans*, while they traveled. He had some difficulties with the novel and later in the year reported that he was “still a long way from finished.” He wrote to journalist Louis Walther his belief that “The Californian doesn’t know what he does want. The Oklahoman knows just exactly what he wants. He wants a piece of land. And he goes after it and gets it.” He leveraged this belief through the conflict between the two cultures in the story told through *The Grapes of Wrath*. The

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60 Ibid.
central valley Farmers' Association felt threatened because they knew if the Okies could unite and speak with one voice they could wrestle control of the valley’s economics away from the association.

In January of 1938 Steinbeck abandoned work on *The Oklahomans* and although he mentioned it many times in notes to friends and publishers, no evidence of the manuscript has ever surfaced. DeMott believed that it was doubtful that Steinbeck had ever actually written a great deal on it. He abandoned the novel around the same time that he and Tom Collins visited migrant work camps in Visalia and Nipomo where thousands of families were marooned by floods. The treatment of the migrant workers and the living conditions they were forced to endure angered Steinbeck greatly and the sights he saw on this trip most likely gave Steinbeck the vision for the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*. After Steinbeck visited the migrant camps in Visalia and Nipomo he remained dedicated to documenting the plight of the American migrant farm family.

Steinbeck continued to visit migrant work camps in central and northern California and was appalled at what he saw. The living conditions were so bad that people were not just hungry, but starving to death. In *John Steinbeck: Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941*, he discussed his drive to visit the interior valleys. He had heard there were about five thousand families starving to death there and he offered to help them. He understood the government was trying to feed them and get them medical attention, but the local citizens were placing obstacles in the way. It made him very upset to the point where he wrote, “I’ve tied into the thing from the first and I must get down there and see it and see if I can’t do something to help knock these murderers

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on the heads.” The migrants weren’t wanted by the local communities, but Steinbeck understood the situation and wrote that, “The states and counties will give them nothing because they are outsiders. But the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders.”

This may very well have been the episode that inspired him to produce such a strong attack on the farmers’ associations. The Federal government was trying to help the families, but the farmers’ associations and the local authorities were intimidated by the large numbers of Okies and placed stumbling blocks in the path of the Federal help. Steinbeck visited many migrant farm worker camps and became engrossed in the plight of the families trapped in the oppressive system. He began to visit more camps, work with government authorities to draw attention to the horrid living conditions, and publicized the migrant farm workers’ plight through the series of newspaper articles and novels.

Steinbeck was still upset after witnessing the migrants’ starvation in the early winter of 1938 and began work on another novel to clear his head. He set this novel in the middle of the Salinas Valley Lettuce Workers Strike and named it *L’Affaire Lettuceberg*. Steinbeck was so upset with the treatment of the migrant workers that as he wrote his anger was present in every page. In his journal Steinbeck wrote, “There are riots in Salinas and killings in the streets of that dear little town where I was born.” The owners used terror attacks to intimidate the workers and it sickened Steinbeck. He began working on *L’Affaire Lettuceberg* in February 1938, but the project was so politically

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63 Ibid., xxxvii.
64 Ibid., xxxviii.
charged and filled with anger that in May 1938 in a letter to Annie Laurie Williams he confessed that,

I’ll have the first draft of this book done in about two weeks. It is only a little over seventy thousand words. And it is a vicious book, a mean book. I don’t know whether it will be any good at all. It might well be very lousy but it has a lot of poison in it that I have to get out of my system and this is a good way to do it. Then if it is no good we can destroy it.65

Working on the novel helped Steinbeck regain his composure and before he finished it he quickly destroyed the novel, never to be published or seen again, and proceeded to give life to The Grapes of Wrath. Writing the destroyed novel provided Steinbeck with an outlet for his anger; he felt rejuvenated and was now able to concentrate on creating the new novel that would take his message to the masses.66

Steinbeck was instrumental in illustrating the societal effects resulting from the changes in agricultural economics as the agricultural base of the country was driven from small family farms to large agribusiness corporate farms. But, another change was happening that also altered the agricultural landscape. Before the turn of the century and shortly into the new one the migrant labor niche had been filled primarily through the use of foreign immigrants. Since the mid 1800s immigrants had been used extensively in the West to build the Transcontinental Railroad because they were a good source of cheap labor. In The Harvest Gypsies Steinbeck discussed the treatment of the foreign immigrants when he wrote that they were often imported as cheap labor. As foreigners “they were ostracized and segregated and herded about...And if they attempted to organize they were deported or arrested.”67

65 DeMott, John Steinbeck: Working Days, xxxix.
66 Ibid., xli.
67 Steinbeck, The Harvest Gypsies, 21.
The new reservoir of cheap labor came from domestic sources. California's agricultural economy had been surviving on the hard work of foreign immigrants and was about to undergo a big change. As the small family farm was being pushed out of existence, particularly on the plains, many factors combined to hasten the transition. The crash of the Stock Market was followed by the Great Depression resulting in jobs that were difficult to find and disposable income that was scarce. The effects of the Great Depression were magnified by the occurrence of the Dust Bowl.

As early as 1930 the southern Plains began to experience drought conditions. Over the summer months the rainfall shortage was 60,000 tons for each 100-acre farm, or 700 tons a day.\(^{68}\) As early as 1932 small, isolated dust storms were being reported across the southern plains. During November of 1933, the southern plains experienced a large dust storm that carried topsoil as far away as Georgia and New York.\(^{69}\)

The blowing dust continued through much of the decade of the 1930s and into the early 1940s. The dry conditions coupled with poor farming practices led to this environmental disaster. Many farm families in the southern plains, a great deal of them tenant sharecroppers, were unable to keep their farms and had become landless and in many cases homeless. It wasn't only the environmental conditions that pushed them off the farms. Those who were tenants, typically renting their land for a portion of the yearly profits, survived on a very slim profit margin. The environmental conditions in the early 1930s made it almost impossible for them to turn a profit. With the introduction of monocropping and mechanization, the land owners were able to make a larger profit by planting larger plots of land and hiring people to work the tractors and combines, instead

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 13.
of having several families divide up the land in smaller, relatively unproductive, plots. The land owners were looking for opportunities to terminate the tenancy of the farm families and conglomerate their farms to produce more crops. The dust storms and the economic conditions teamed up to create a difficult life for the tenant farm families. Many had no choice but to leave their farms and possessions behind and look for work.

The families moved west looking for better conditions and the hope of owning land. Steinbeck documented this in *The Harvest Gypsies* when he wrote, “The drought in the middle west has driven the agricultural populations of Oklahoma, Nebraska and parts of Kansas and Texas westward.” And he continued, “this is a new thing in migrant labor, for the foreign Workers were usually imported without their children and everything that remains of their old life with them.”

These American migrants were commonly known as “Okies.” It didn’t matter whether or not they were from Oklahoma, they were known as Okies. The influx of large numbers of Okies changed the look and feel of California’s agricultural factory system. The foreign immigrants were treated poorly, had no family or possessions with them when they arrived, sent any leftover money back home to help feed and educate their families, and were thought of as temporary residents. This all added up to the biggest problem for the immigrants, they had no voice. If the immigrant complained too loudly about working conditions they were deported and, as far as the landowner was concerned, the problem was solved. The foreign immigrants were treated horribly and there was no recourse for them to pursue for social justice. When the owners felt the slightest bit threatened an immigrant was reported to be a union organizer and deported, many times without receiving their pay.

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The Okie story was far different from the immigrant farm worker. They arrived in California’s agricultural areas with all of their possessions, they brought their entire family with them, and they had no plans of leaving; they were permanent, not temporary visitors. Steinbeck wrote about their character in *The Harvest Gypsies*, and then they have made the crossing and have seen often the death of their children on the way. Their cars have been broken down and been repaired with the ingenuity of the land man. Often they patched the worn-out tires every few miles. They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong.71

They not only wanted to work the fields, but to own land in the valleys. Their desire was to stay permanently in the agricultural areas of California; not just to work in the fields as temporary laborers, but to own their own land and farm it themselves. The idea of permanence is what made the Okie a much more difficult problem for the land owners to work with. Steinbeck summarized his ideas of the way the Okies handled the transition in the following way,

They are strangely anachronistic in one way: having been brought up in the prairies, where industrialization never penetrated, they have jumped with no transition from the old agrarian, self-containing farm where nearly everything used was raised or manufactured, to a system of agriculture so industrialized that the man who plants a crop does not often see, let alone harvest, the fruit of his planting, where the migrant has no contact with the growth cycle.

And there is another difference between their old life and the new. They have come from the little farm districts where democracy was not only possible but inevitable, where popular government, whether practiced in the Grange, in church organization or in local government, was the responsibility of every man. And they have come into the country where, because of the movement necessary to make a living, they are not allowed any vote whatever, but are rather considered a properly unprivileged class.72

They had one destination primarily in their sights; California. It was the most popular choice by far. California was a place where they could leave their old life on the plains behind and start over again in the land of Eden. California served as their final destination not just because of the hope for work, but also because of the concept of leaving all that they knew behind and beginning a new life in a new location. They didn’t just want to survive, they wanted to thrive and be a part of the agricultural system in the west. California was far enough away from the plains that the process of leaving all behind and moving half-way across a continent gave the Okies the glimmer of hope for a new life ahead and the excitement of an adventure. Many of them didn’t consider the consequences of starting over in an economic system that was foreign to them. Steinbeck wrote of the ever present handbills and articles announcing jobs available for any who could make it to California. (GOW, 189) California had a highly visible agricultural industry, perfect growing weather, and the migrants believed,

Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land-in California, where the fruit grows. We’ll start over. (GOW, 89)

This was the mantra that kept the migrant families moving west.

We see the same attitude in the Joad family as Ma Joad said,

But I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An’ fruit ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder-that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work-maybe we can get one of them little white houses. An’ the little fellas go out an’ pick oranges right off the tree. They ain’t gonna be able to stand it, they’ll get to yellin’ so. (GOW, 93)

For many years the California agricultural factory had been encouraging migrant farm workers to move out west. Those who were lured out west by the promise of work and a
better life soon found out that the economics of the central valley would not allow them to climb up the ladder of social mobility.

Highway 66 was the most high profile route west. It was called The Mother Road, as a tribute to it being the first major interstate highway and as a symbol of the increasing technological capabilities of a maturing nation. The migrants took Highway 66 west as they searched for a better life in California, but at the same time the economic and political system and the technology responsible for the creation of the highway west was also responsible for creating a system that would exploit the Okies when they arrived in California. As more farm workers were absorbed into the central valley economy, the increasing competition for the limited number of jobs allowed the farm managers to lower the wages to a level that only sustained living in complete poverty. The Okies had to compete with the Mexican, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese workers already located in the central valley. Living conditions rapidly deteriorated as more American migrants came west, wanting to compete for the few jobs available.

Supply and demand dictated the treatment the Okies received. During harvest season the landowners had ripe crops that needed to be picked and they would lose money if the crops weren’t harvested. The Okies provided the land owners the surge capability to harvest their crops cheaply and quickly. But when the crops were harvested, and the work supply had dried up at the end of the harvest season, the Okies were no longer in demand and seen as a burden to the local communities. They were discarded at the end of the harvest season as if they were an old farm implement. In The Harvest Gypsies Steinbeck explained how unlike the immigrant farm workers, they could not be shipped back home when their services weren’t needed any longer. Steinbeck interviewed a small
boy in a squatter’s camp who summed it up well when he said, “When they need us they call us migrants, and when we’ve picked their crop, we’re bums and we got to get out.”

The Okies were merely tolerated by the local community when they were busy, but when the harvest was over and their services were no longer needed, their cries for help were ignored.

The surplus of migrant labor created dangerous living conditions in the California migrant work camps. Crime increased dramatically as people did whatever it took for their family to survive. The camps became overcrowded and unbelievably dirty. And, above all the families were all hungry; hungry for both food and work. The migrants resented the local people because they were living the life they wanted and the locals resented the migrants because they believed them to be,

Ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can, simply by refusing to work, wipe out the season’s crops.

Both sides were guilty of over-generalizing the qualities of the other. Relationships deteriorated and trouble resulted. Steinbeck’s journeys through California’s Central Valley in 1936 were an eye opening experience that gave him the insight, desire, and capability to elevate the problem to a national audience. Steinbeck was seen at many of the migrant worker camps interviewing the Okies, trying to understand how the migrant system worked, and discussing the problems with the local community leaders during his employment by the San Francisco News.

Steinbeck had almost unrestricted access to the information resources he needed to complete The Grapes of Wrath—the migrants. Parini described Steinbeck’s organization

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73 Steinbeck, The Harvest Gypsies, 23.
74 Parini, John Steinbeck: A Biography, 177.
and intent for *The Harvest Gypsies* as he included different aspects of the crisis: the origin of the problem, the contrast between California’s older breed of migrant workers and the Dust Bowl migrants, the living conditions as he found them in squatter’s camps, and so forth. Parini also described Steinbeck’s approach as, “Judicious and balanced, although a polemical tone underlies it.”

Steinbeck was passionate about his research among the migrants. He talked with many of them, working side-by-side with them. He used the official government reports given to him by Collins to substantiate his findings. But, he didn’t use individual characters he found in the migrant camps as characters in his novels; he used composite characters. Steinbeck created characters to represent the composite traits he found in those he met in the migrant camps. In the same way, his landscapes weren’t actual landscapes, but ones he created as composites that are drawn from his many experiences, not just from the factual landscape. He took his experiences and integrated them into a generic cognitive landscape that exists nowhere specifically, but everywhere generally. We all encounter Steinbeck’s landscapes in our own lives. The reader must be wary of linking specific characters in Steinbeck’s works to any one individual in real life, in the same way the reader must also be weary of linking the several landscapes Steinbeck created in *The Grapes of Wrath* to any one particular landscape.

Steinbeck’s history of working with migrant families brought him to the point in his life where he understood what they were experiencing in a unique way. The novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was the palette he used to create landscapes that illustrated the complex

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76 Ibid., 181.
struggle the migrants faced. He did this through his selected cognitive landscapes he created specifically for this novel.

Steinbeck created a literary work of art that endures today. Just as an artist forms the lines and textures on a canvas that support a story told through a painting, so Steinbeck formed the landscape as a backdrop designed to support the story he painted using his words.

**The Organization For This Study**

Steinbeck organized *The Grapes of Wrath* around several cognitive landscapes: the landscape of the highway; automobile; and migrant camp. I will organize this study in the same way. Chapter 1 of this study is an introductory chapter and was used to define basic landscape analysis concepts and to state the problem this study will address and the process it will use. Also in Chapter 1 I have presented background information on Steinbeck's life and activism and explained how his activism and fieldwork related to the writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. I then highlighted how Steinbeck's career changed drastically during the mid-1930s in a way that prepared him to write this masterpiece.

Each subsequent chapter is devoted to the analysis of the associated landscape. In Chapter 2 I will analyze Steinbeck's use of the highway landscape as a metaphor that represented the opportunity and oppression prevalent in the 1930s. In Chapter 3 I will analyze the landscape of the automobile and how it symbolized the conflicting desires for mobility and domesticity. In Chapter 4 I will analyze the landscape of the migrant work and travel camps, both along Route 66 and in California, and Steinbeck's use of them to illustrate the tension between the competing themes of dislocation and community.
Finally, I will finish with a conclusion (Chapter 5) that will summarize the lessons learned in the analysis of the three distinct landscapes.

In this dissertation my purpose is to challenge views held by some that Steinbeck was either an anti-industrialist or an anti-capitalist by showing that he created landscapes that illustrated his ambivalent beliefs regarding the effects of increasing technology on the society of the 1930s. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck created landscapes that supported his worldview; his sense of place, his respect for people, and his outlook for the future.
CHAPTER 2

HIGHWAY

Introduction

The portrait that Steinbeck painted in the novel is a very complicated one, and his created highway landscape is no exception. Steinbeck used his highway landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath* to illustrate the competing forces of opportunity and oppression Americans faced living in an increasingly technological world. The problems of the 1930s, including the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, rapid industrialization, and disenfranchised families, all made it a challenging decade.

Steinbeck used the landscape of the highway to illustrate how on the one hand families were oppressed economically and socially as they were forced off the land they had farmed for generations, while the Great Depression exacerbated the gap between the upper and lower classes. On the other hand technological advancements were responsible for new opportunities that helped families cope with the oppression around them which had not been available before the technological innovations of the 1930s. Steinbeck doesn’t resolve this dilemma, but represents it in the ambivalent highway landscape he created for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

I will demonstrate through an analysis of Steinbeck’s highway landscape that he envisioned the difficulties of the migrants moving west, and the complexity of the life they were living. It was a life full of constant tension, lived in the midst of the technology that oppressed them and at the same time provided them freedoms not experienced by previous generations.
One of the innovations that changed the face of the American landscape was the creation of the national highway system. Prior to the 1920s America was linked together by a loose connection of roads.1 Intercity roads connected the small towns and enabled merchants to extend their influence outside their local community. Kris Lackey, in *Road Frames: The American Highway Narrative*, made some pertinent observations on early transcontinental automobile journeys including the first such documented journey that was undertaken in 1903, just thirty-three years after the death of the last surviving member of the Lewis and Clark expedition.2 This first journey was taken by Horatio Nelson Jackson and Sewall Crocker who drove a Winton two-seater from San Francisco to New York. The trip took sixty-three days.3

The pace of technological change was increasing very rapidly. It is easier to put the pace of change into perspective as we compare the first transcontinental automobile trip with other items of historical significance. For instance, the first crossing in 1903 occurred just twenty-seven years after Custer died in the battle of Little Bighorn. Sitting Bull was killed a little over twelve years earlier.4 The introduction of the automobile changed the way people traveled, discovered new places, and perceived the distance between our coastlines.

Many of our current roads and highways are vestiges of historic intercity roads. The creation of the national highway system took many of the existing roads and linked them together into a true national road network. The national highway system is responsible

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4 Lackey, *Road Frames*, 1.
for creating and enforcing the standards for building and maintaining highways. In the St Louis Metro East; Scott Troy Road connects Scott Air Force Base with the town of Troy, Illinois. Scott Troy Road became Illinois Highway 158, which today is an intrastate highway. US Highway 50, on the other hand runs from San Francisco, California to Ocean City, Maryland and links together each of the communities in between. Steinbeck used another interstate Highway, Highway 66 in *The Grapes of Wrath*, as his main transportation route between the dispossessed tenant farmers in the American plains and the prospect of jobs in California. US Highway 66 is the “Mother Road” of the national highway system. It was the first highway designated as a US Highway and connected Chicago, Illinois to the Pacific Ocean near Santa Monica, California. Steinbeck used Highway 66 throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* and created the landscape around the highway to emphasize both the oppression and the opportunity it brought to the lives of all it touched.

According to DeMott, Steinbeck never made the trip from Oklahoma to California with the migrants. He had no first hand knowledge of the road, the terrain, or the hardship the families experienced along the way. This fact makes Steinbeck’s highway landscape all the more remarkable, because we can understand that it was totally fabricated in Steinbeck’s mind, not experienced in his life. His highway landscape that permeated *The Grapes of Wrath* was created primarily for illustrative purposes. This is significant to our analysis in that it helps emphasize the point that his highway landscape was his representation of reality, not actual reality. I will analyze the created highway

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5 DeMott in *Working Days* argued that Steinbeck never actually made the journey to California with a migrant family. DeMott, *Working Days*, xxvii. Peter Lisca, in *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, (New York: Gordian Press, 1981), 143-144, made a comment that Steinbeck had made the trip west in the fall of 1937 with a group of migrant workers living in Hoovervilles along the way, but seems to conflict with other Steinbeck timelines. I believe DeMott is correct in his statement.
landscape using Steinbeck’s own words and reveal how he used the landscape to provide a setting of oppression and opportunity as he told his epic story of the 1930s migrants and their struggle with increasing technology.

Steinbeck placed artifacts\(^6\) in the highway landscape to stress that the highway was the product of the economic machine that fed increasing industrialization. These artifacts can be analyzed to determine the symbolism Steinbeck infused into the description of the cultural landscape he created around the highway. Similar to Leo Marx’s views on the dual nature of the pastoral ideal,\(^7\) and William Cronon’s views on the duality of the city and the hinterland only being defined as they stand in relation to each other,\(^8\) Steinbeck created his highway landscape to illustrate the tension between the conflicting natures of an industrializing society. In the midst of the technological advances experienced in the 1930s the highway exacerbated the hopelessness of those caught in a society without the skills or capital to succeed in an industrializing world. Steinbeck demonstrated the dual nature of the highway when he used it to symbolize the costs of an increasingly industrialized society that oppressed the tenant farmers and eventually forced them off the land, but he also demonstrated the benefits of the highway when he used it to provide the great path of escape west for the Okies who were hoping for a better future after they

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\(^6\) Lewis, in “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” wrote that any human created landscape, “has cultural meaning, no matter how ordinary that landscape may be.” Items found in the landscape, just as in archaeology, can be studied as artifacts to determine what had value when the artifact was created. Lewis, in “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” 12.

\(^7\) Leo Marx argued that when the pastoral calm is broken by an introduction of technology, such as a train whistle, the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict and anxiety. At its depth it is narrowed down simply to noise clashing through harmony. Both the pastoral ideal and increasing technology co-exist and rely on each other. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 16.

\(^8\) William Cronon suggested that the concept of city and hinterland are interdependent on each other and cannot be defined separate from each other. We can think of the city or the hinterland as separate entities, but in reality they are tied to each other and cannot be understood apart from each other. William Cronon, “A Place for Stories.” *Journal of American History*, Vol 78:4, (March 1992), 8.
had been "tractored"\(^9\) off the farm. This is an important characteristic of Steinbeck’s commentary on the agricultural economics of the 1930s. He was not just another political writer observing society from a liberal perspective. Steinbeck provided a balanced look at the complex issues affecting the lives of many Americans. Many have characterized Steinbeck as being devoutly anti-industrialization, but as we will see in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he created an industrialized landscape that provided benefits as well as liabilities for the characters in his story.

In this chapter I will analyze the dual nature of Steinbeck’s created highway landscape; both as a symbol of “the monster,”\(^10\) as Steinbeck described the economic system of his time, and as the path to freedom for the displaced farm families. Steinbeck’s highway landscape was created as the result of the enormous investment of capital and resources “the monster” required to sustain itself. “The monster” took resources, modified them, and produced commodities to feed itself and make it stronger, but it also produced benefits that empowered those it served to live better lives.

This same symbiotic relationship exists between the highway and the landscape surrounding it. Karl Raitz, in his article “American Roads, Roadside America,” commented on the construction of the American highway landscape. He argued that “the roadside is always created after the road itself, and the manner of travel along the road

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\(^9\) Steinbeck used the phrase “tractored out” to describe the migrant families being forced off the farm by the large landowners when they would remove the farm houses to force the tenants off the land in order to reserve more acreage for crops. The first time the phrase “tractored out” was used in *The Grapes of Wrath* was when the truck driver who was giving Tom Joad a ride home from prison asked Tom, “A forty-acre sharecropper and he ain’t been dusted out and he ain’t been tractored out?” (*GOW*, 12)

\(^10\) Steinbeck described the economic consortium of the banks, farm credit bureaus, landowners, Farm Resettlement Administration, etc as “the monster.” (*GOW*, 34).
influences the pattern the roadside will follow.”

This pattern shows how the geographical, social, and political processes that contributed to the making of the roads and roadsides are interrelated, they are inseparable, just as in Cronon’s concept of the duality of the city and the hinterland.

Regarding the highway landscape and the cultural values it represents, Raitz also stated, “The road and the countryside linked to it by direct or visual access constitute a cultural landscape that is never value free.” The landscape can be used to display very deeply seated political and social relationships. Raitz understood the context of the cultural landscape. Humans spend their lives modifying the physical environment they live in, adding value and meaning to it and creating a more inviting place to live. Their values are imprinted in the landscapes they create. The relationship between the highway landscape and the highway is inseparable. Each depends on the other for its definition. Steinbeck’s highway landscape was his unwitting autobiography underlying his beliefs on the character of America. Just as in Raitz’s article Steinbeck’s highway landscape captures and mediates social and political relationships of the human world.

Steinbeck’s experiences living and working with migrant farm workers and organized labor gave him the reputation as an activist interested in helping displaced workers. His feelings of anger toward the economic machine that oppressed the sharecroppers and

11 Raitz stated, “The roadside is always created after the road itself, and the manner of travel along the road influences the pattern the roadside will follow. The roadside, how-ever, reciprocally enables travel along the road-as wayside inns and taverns accommodated nineteenth-century travelers, for example. Therefore, we must recognize that the geographical, social, and political processes that underwrite the making and use of both roads and roadsides are interrelated. One provides context for the other, so neither can be defined, described, or understood in isolation. Karl Raitz, “American Roads, Roadside America,” Geographical Review, Vol. 88, No 3, (July 1998), 364.

12 Raitz continued to state, “Both in the selection of its character-direction, destination, capacity, and visual qualities, among many others—and in the manner in which people choose to represent it, the landscape of the road captures and mediates social and political relationships of the human world.” Raitz, “American Roads, Roadside America,” 364.

13 In his biography of John Steinbeck, Parini discussed Steinbeck living among the farm workers in Weedpatch. Parini, John Steinbeck: A Biography, 179.
migrant farm workers is seen throughout the novel, as noted, but as one reads *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck it shows his understanding of this complex issue, an issue that included deep social and economic components.

Steinbeck, in his desire to describe the complex life of the migrants, contrasted the benefits of moving west across the continent with the loss experienced by the farm families when they left the dead farms in the plains. The decision to leave was a difficult one, and the emotional despair associated with the decision was illustrated in the landscape of the left behind farms.

Steinbeck devoted an entire interchapter (Chapter 11, *GOW*, 117-118) to the topic of leaving home. He used the landscape to illustrate the rapid deterioration of the familiar surroundings after the humans, who loved the land and lived their lives on it, left.

Steinbeck described the scene thusly,

>The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this. Only the tractor sheds of corrugated iron, silver and gleaming, were alive; and they were alive with metal and gasoline and oil, the disks of the plows shining. The tractors had lights shining, for there is no day and night for a tractor and the disks turn the earth in the darkness and they glitter in the daylight. And when a horse stops work and goes into the barn there is a life and a vitality left, there is breathing and warmth, and the feet shift on the straw, and the jaws champ on the hay, and the ears and the eyes are of life. But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from. The heat goes out of it like the living heat that leaves a corpse. Then the corrugated iron doors are closed and the tractor man drives home to town, perhaps twenty miles away, and he need not come back for weeks or months, for the tractor is dead. And this is easy and efficient. So easy that the wonder goes out of work, so efficient that the wonder goes out of land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and the relationship. (*GOW*, 117)

Steinbeck captured the farm family’s thoughts regarding the abandonment of the land and the departure of the caretakers. It seemed as though when the farm families left Oklahoma the heart of the land was ripped out. Steinbeck illustrated that the farm was
more than just the sum of its individual parts; it was a complex system of humans and nature living together in harmony. He showed this when he stated,

For nitrates are not the land, nor phosphates and the length of fiber in the cotton is not the land. Carbon is not a man, nor salt nor water nor calcium. He is all these, but he is much more, much more; and the land is so much more than its analysis. That man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land. (GOW, 117)

What a powerful commentary on the difference between people working the land and making a home on the land. Mechanization is a tool to increase production, not the answer to every problem. In the push to mechanize and form agricultural conglomerations in the 1930s it is refreshing to read commentary about the value that human and animal habitation brings to the land.

Examining Steinbeck’s description of the vacant land the reader can see the effect leaving the farm had on both the family and the land. The excitement of heading off to California was offset by the devastation of leaving Oklahoma. Life on the farm stopped when the caretakers left. When the tenant farmers left Oklahoma, Steinbeck wrote,

The doors of the empty houses swung open, and drifted back and forth in the wind. Bands of little boys came out from the towns to break the windows and to pick over the debris, looking for treasures. (GOW, 117)

Steinbeck’s vivid description of the abandoned farm left behind where boys break the windows and pick over the debris, the farm cats no longer had anyone to care for them and became wild, living off of gophers and field mice, bats no longer stopped at the door by the kitchen light, but now fly through the house, and mice store weed seeds in corners
and the backs of drawers, captured the feeling of abandonment well. Weeds sprang up from places they were not permitted to grow before and the houses quickly fell apart from lack of care. This was Steinbeck’s created landscape of Oklahoma after the farm families left: a fierce, colorful, unforgiving place where only the fittest survive, and the weaker are eliminated. It reminds the reader of the Oklahoma landscape of Chapter 1.

The Joad’s life on the family farm was over and a new adventure awaited them on the road. The anchor of the family farm had been replaced by the need to be mobile and they believed a new adventure awaited them in California. The highway provided the path to get them there, but the trip would be a rough one. The transition from a life on the farm to a life on the highway was a complex move that Steinbeck illustrated through many different themes running through his highway landscape, but the most pervasive one is his use of the highway landscape as a symbol representing the complex relationships that are found living in a technologically advanced society.

The Highway As a Symbol of a Technologically Advanced Society

Driving down the highway today as we cross the continent in the comfort of our own cars we can easily take for granted the hard work and enormous amount of resources required to build our interstate highway system. The interstate system is one of the most prominent symbols of modern technology. With the help of modern technology we construct towering bridges over vast expanses, cross mountain chains, such as the Adirondacks or the Rockies, and build causeways that skim across large expanses of water to connect the islands of the Florida Keys and New York to the mainland. The highway is designed to make our life and commute easier, faster, safer, and more enjoyable. They are symbols of our desire to recreate the environment we live in to suit
our needs and to master it. The birth of today's modern highway system is a testament to
the engineering accomplishments in the 1930s.

When we examine our modern interstate highway system even the name of the
system defines the enormity of the cooperation and bureaucracy inherent in the system.
The word "Interstate" today not only defines the capability of our highway system to
direct people and cargo across the continent, but also describes the level of cooperation
and coordination needed to build such a system. Susan Croce Kelly wrote that the
miracle of the early twentieth century wasn't the automobile, but the construction of the
"vast network of highways that gave automobiles someplace to go."\textsuperscript{14} The interstate
highway system linked the continent together, but it also required the cooperative effort
of those regions it linked together to share resources, assets, and costs for the system to
work seamlessly. The interstate system allows travelers to move uninterrupted across the
continent and not notice appreciable differences in the quality of design, materials,
craftsmanship, and structure of the highway. Crossing over the Hudson River in New
York one would expect the interstate bridge to be constructed of the same high quality
engineering, craftsmanship, materials, and supervision as crossing over the San Francisco
Bay on the Golden Gate Bridge in California. The interstate highway system is a
modern technological success story resulting from the cooperation inherent in the strong
federal system of government within which we live. The cooperation required to plan,
maintain, and sustain the interstate highway system could not be accomplished with a
weak system of government.

\textsuperscript{14} Susan Croce Kelly argued this point in \textit{Route 66: The Highway and Its People}. She wrote that the
automobile was an important invention, but the development of the highway system is what facilitated the
rapid switch from other sources of transportation to the automobile. Susan Croce Kelly, \textit{Route 66: The
The early network of roads opened up transportation throughout the country. Many of the routes followed, or were laid on top of historic trails and pathways used for centuries. The pathways explored by Native Americans and early trappers and explorers eventually evolved into our first network of roads crisscrossing the United States.

In Steinbeck’s time the current interstate system did not exist, but its predecessor did. The United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Public Roads, laid out the highway system in 1924 using intercity roads. During the Great Depression the Federal and state governments put men to work improving and extending the national network of roads. This initial system of national highways has been transformed over time into today’s U.S. Interstate Highway system. It represents a federal government that understood the large bureaucracy and cooperation required to build large regional projects that benefit all.

Donald Worster in *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, argued that the west is a hydraulic society, which at its foundation includes a social order based on the intensive, large-scale manipulation of water and its products in an arid setting. Worster described the hydraulic society as a highly evolved form of government derived from the necessity to coordinate, fund, and operate large, multi-state water reclamation projects at a national or regional level, not solely a state level. The amount of capital required to build and fund these large programs is more than any one

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15 Lackey stated that, many of today’s interstate highways follow, “bison traces and trails etched by Native American travois. They paralleled the rails that had recently preceded them, revived stage roads abandoned for the railroad, and hugged rivers not long before plied by sternwheelers, many of which were themselves displaced by trains.” Lackey, *Road Frames*, 2.


private entity, or even a single state can provide, so a consortium of materials, funds, and oversight is needed from the state and federal government to administer these programs.

Worster’s key elements of the hydraulic society include all the same elements found in a society with a comprehensive national transportation infrastructure. The level of coordination and effort required between the federally administered water reclamation programs is the same level of effort required by the interstate highway system. The interstate highway system exists as a result of the cooperation and oversight provided by this same strong federal system of government. Interstate highway projects, just as with irrigation projects, can only be successful with detailed planning, funding, and oversight being provided from a national perspective.

Raitz echoed Worster’s thoughts when he wrote about the difficulty of coordinating large highway projects. He made some pertinent observations regarding the evolution of the highway landscape alongside the road that supported those with access to the highway. Raitz wrote, “roads are as much social as physical constructions. Road building requires the will of a polity and the collaboration of laborers; the scale of the project is beyond any individual undertaking.”  

He also wrote that, “road engineers did not create the roadside that encroaches along the road's margin, teasing and tugging at the right-of-way.” His answer was that, “Twentieth-century landowners, tempted by access to the roadway, created the roadside as a place of vernacular invention that, too, was eventually subjected to the disciplines of organized business and state or federal

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18 Raitz, “American Roads, Roadside America,” 364.
19 Ibid.
Steinbeck was a frequent traveler and his created highway landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath* presented a picture of his appreciation for the highway to facilitate the rapid movement of people and cargo around the nation and unite the country through ease of access. But even more, he created the landscape around the highway as a system to foster the diffusion of ideas and technology across the country. The highway system was seen as a tool to help smooth out the regional cultural differences found in our large nation. Newton Fuessle, an apologist for the Lincoln Highway, commented on the ability of the American highway to homogenize the country when he stated that the highway would, “sew up the remaining ragged edges of sectionalism” and help the country to become “one highly organized, proficient unit of dynamic, result-getting force electric with zeal.”

John Jakle, in “Landscapes Redesigned for the Automobile,” added that “direct access to highway margins encourages social contact between locals and strangers and rural lifeways can be observed close up.” The highway truly was a vehicle for speeding the diffusion of new ideas between the rural and urban areas of the country.

After the highways were created proximities were redefined. It became easier for citizens to use resources and interact with others that were previously beyond their sphere of contact. It also became easier for goods and services to spread across the continent. Jakle made the point that Americans became ardent supporters of the highways “for the

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20 Raitz wrote, “Although early American roads were vernacular fabrications by local people, they evolved into technically engineered structures funded by state and federal tax programs and subject to the discipline of political regulation and law enforcement.” These roads became part of the vernacular landscape. Raitz, “American Roads, Roadside America,” 364.


excitement and promise of the open road and the economic implications of increased mobility and ease of connections.”

Steinbeck took the position that the technological advances used to create the American highway represented a dual nature, including both the pros and cons of increasing industrialization within the United States. He demonstrated the dual nature of the highway, as a picture of the consumption of modern technology, but also as a tool that helped the people at the bottom of the societal and technological ladder fight that same “monster.” Steinbeck used the cognitive landscape he fashioned around the highway to illustrate this dual nature of the highway, and he reinforced this created dual nature throughout the novel. I will next analyze his desire to illustrate the highway as a symbol of the economic machine, then I will examine his description of the highway as the symbol of American freedom.

The Highway As a Symbol of the Economic Machine

Hilaire Belloc, in *The Road*, provided a short summary of the effect the highway has on all who use it and are affected by it. Belloc observed,

> In its most humble function it is a necessary guide without which progress from place to place would be a ceaseless experiment; it is a sustenance without which organized society would be impossible; thus... the Road moves and controls all history.  

In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck used the road, or in this case the highway, as the foundation from which all else flowed. The road and life lived along side it guided the Joad family through their journey west and defined their lives once they arrived in California. In the case of *The Grapes of Wrath* Hilaire Belloc was correct, the road was

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the most pervasive artifact created by the economic machine and it moved and controlled
the story.

Steinbeck wasted no time in introducing the reader to his view of the highway as a
symbol of the economic machine. He did this through a description of the Oklahoma
landscape in the novel’s first interchapter, Chapter 1. He began his introduction to the
highway landscape by describing the fierceness of the Oklahoma countryside, a
landscape the highway would attempt to tame. Any family able to live in the Oklahoma
landscape must be tried and tested. Any system that can dominate the Oklahoma
landscape must be strong and decisive. Modification to the landscape that enabled
humans to survive in this difficult land was welcomed.

Steinbeck highlighted the difficult Oklahoma landscape by opening the novel with a
chapter that didn't include any human actors. The first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*
simply began with an explanation of what Oklahoma looked like. Steinbeck used
numerous mental pictures to describe his cognitive landscape of Oklahoma. The picture
created in the first paragraph of Chapter 1 included a colorful description using the
words, "red country," "gray country," "scarred earth," "dark red country," "green cover,"
"pale," "a line of brown," "green bayonet," "darker green," "earth crusted," and "pink in
the red country and white in the gray country." (*GOW, 5*)

This description of Oklahoma provided a clear mental picture of a colorful (red, gray,
dark red, green, etc.) yet difficult (scarred, earth crusted) place; one where it was difficult
to survive, a place where the environment (the land and the weather) dominated
everything. Steinbeck started his story with something bigger than the Joad family,
something that drove the plot development in the story. Forces beyond human control
foreordained the destiny of this family, and from Steinbeck’s tone in the description of the landscape it was clear that the outcome would not be pleasant.

Following his initial description of the Oklahoma landscape, Steinbeck provided a detailed commentary of a high plains dust storm, and another colorful illustration of how a dust storm affected the Oklahoma landscape. Steinbeck described the dust storm using the following picture,

Now the wind grew strong and hard and it worked at the rain crust in the corn fields. Little by little the sky was darkened by the mixing dust, and the wind felt over the earth, loosened the dust, and carried it away...The rain crust broke and the dust lifted up out of the fields and drove gray plumes into the air like sluggish smoke...The finest dust did not settle back to earth now, but disappeared into the darkening sky. (GOW, 6)

Another day came, but the results were no different,

The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle that gave a little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness. (GOW, 6)

The effects these dust storms had on the people were devastating. Steinbeck used this storm and its effects on the landscape to signal the difficult economic story told in The Grapes of Wrath. Later in Chapter 1 Steinbeck wrote about the path of human destruction left behind after the storm had subsided.

Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust...After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. (GOW, 7)

Steinbeck was not exaggerating his description of the Plains dust storm. There are stories of a seven-year-old Khile Salmon wandering from his home near Hays, Kansas, and suffocating from the dust before he could be found.25 Description of the Oklahoma landscape was central to Steinbeck’s story. The effects of the weather were devastating,

25 French, Companion to The Grapes of Wrath, 4.
serving to foreshadow the harsh treatment the rural sharecroppers would receive at the hands of the bureaucracy and their fellow citizens, and when coupled with the bleak economic outlook it was what eventually forced them off the land and onward to California. The description also showed the reader the difficult environment that the highway attempted to tame. The texture of America was rapidly changing from that of a small agricultural-based society to one of an economic powerhouse destined for world dominance. All parts of society encountered the sacrifice required by this move, including the change from a rural culture based on small, family farms (agriculture) to a culture based on business principles and emerging technology (agribusiness). The Grapes of Wrath detailed the pain involved when the American ideal transitions to a new paradigm.

Steinbeck was careful from the very beginning to present a visual description of a fierce, physical Oklahoma landscape dominated by an endless struggle between humans and the natural world. The highway was the human creation that Steinbeck used as a metaphor to illustrate the domestication of the landscape. His picture of the dust storm was symbolic of the struggle between the disadvantaged sharecropper and the economic monster. As the sky became darker and the dust was unable to resist the wind that carried the soil away, the economic monster was the surging storm and controlled the destiny of all concerned. The only hope to survive was through participating collectively within the system, not trying to battle it individually. The only opportunity the farm family had to influence the fierce Oklahoma environment was also through collective participation. The highway was the ultimate example of collective participation. It was what brought hope to the Oklahoma farm families. The highway was the great equalizer which
allowed the common person to enjoy some level of domination over the harsh environment they lived in. The highway was the tool that led them through a path of escape from the oppression they were experiencing at home, to a new future in the west.

How did Steinbeck’s description of the Oklahoma landscape in Chapter 1 fit into his view of the dual nature of the highway landscape? In Chapter 1 Steinbeck showed how difficult an environment the Oklahoma landscape was. His use of colorful words to describe the land and the weather left the reader feeling that life in Oklahoma was more than difficult: it limited what an individual could do. But a cooperative effort by a group of individuals, a county, state, or federal government could overcome the harshness of the physical environment by creating tools for use in the daily struggle against the elements. In this instance, a road or highway would empower the individual to overcome the difficult surroundings. A road or highway would equip the individual to move commodities to market, drive to town in search of groceries and entertainment, or even work outside of the family farm where a steady income might be more easily ensured. The road or highway facilitated the conquering of the harsh Oklahoma environment and removed some of the isolation experienced in the rural setting.

At the beginning of Chapter 2 Steinbeck further brought the landscape surrounding the highway into the story. He introduced the reader to Tom Joad, who entered Steinbeck’s Oklahoma landscape at a diner on the highway while hitchhiking home after a four year stay in prison. Steinbeck described a landscape dominated by the highway from the very first scene. All the reader could see, smell, touch, taste, and hear in the landscape were byproducts of the highway. Everything that appeared in this scene of the novel was connected to the presence of the highway. The road Tom was hitchhiking on
was the most obvious artifact in the highway landscape, but Steinbeck also placed a diner with a big truck in the parking lot, the sounds of customers chatting inside the diner, the smoke and haze of idling diesel engines, and Tom searching for a ride home all as artifacts in the landscape. All that we find in the scene, except for Tom, is a result of human beings creating tools to help them conquer the environment they lived in. But as Steinbeck inserted Tom into the highway landscape, he also illustrated the inability of the individual to control his or her own destiny in this harsh land and economic system. Tom was stranded and needed to resort to hitchhiking to continue his journey home. The highway represented his path, but as an individual he could not navigate the road by himself. Tom needed to use all the tools Steinbeck placed in the landscape to help him overcome his obstacles.

Steinbeck introduced an artifact at the diner that totally dominated the highway landscape, the big red truck. The truck was an icon that represented the increasing technology of the 1930s and the assembly line production methods that were partly responsible for America’s fast economic growth. Adopting these production techniques in the field of agriculture were greatly responsible for the displacement of tenant farmers as the economic environment changed. But, at the same time, the truck also represented a new opportunity for Tom Joad, an opportunity for Tom to use the truck as a tool to help him elevate himself above the harsh Oklahoma landscape. It was Tom’s free ride home.

Steinbeck described the truck as Tom first saw it,

A huge red transport truck stood in front of the little roadside restaurant. The vertical exhaust pipe muttered softly, and an almost invisible haze of steel-blue smoke hovered over its end. It was a new truck, shining red, and in twelve-inch letters on its sides- OKLAHOMA CITY TRANSPORT COMPANY. Its double tires were new, and a brass padlock stood straight out from the hasp on the big back doors. (GOW, 9)
Steinbeck provided the reader the first glimpse into his views on the encompassing highway landscape. The transport truck was, of course, red. The color red contrasted with the blue-gray diesel smoke haze and dusty conditions of the diner’s parking lot and singles the truck out as a colorful icon on the landscape. It was also a symbol of power and domination, which Steinbeck used in his description of the truck as a powerful tool for the transport truck to totally dominate its surroundings. It stood out in front of the diner looking shiny, huge, and new, and belching a layer of exhaust into the air. The red truck was an icon of consumption, and it was affecting all that surrounded it. Even if the reader couldn’t see the truck, you would know it was there because of the smell it produced and the sound it made as it idled. The owners of the truck placed their sign on the side in twelve-inch letters, giving everyone notice that this truck was the property of the Oklahoma City Transport Company. Their big, shiny, new truck stood out as a symbol of the economic profits to be made even in the midst of bad times. The boldness of the sign broadcasted to all that although the country was in the midst of the Great Depression, the Oklahoma City Transport Company was making out well in a difficult time. The tires on the truck were new and the back end had a big shiny brass padlock on it to keep all others out. Steinbeck seemed to warn us through the description of the truck that it would triumph over the environment. The truck created its own dominant landscape of power and was a tool produced out of the factories run by the economic “monster.” Although the picture was one of total consumption and complete power, and Tom was a powerless individual passing through this landscape, he found a way to harness the power of the truck and the highway to help him be successful in his journey home. As an individual navigating his way through the highway landscape he
was powerless, but when he began to use the tools placed at his disposal, tools created by
the economic machine, he was able to attain his goal. The truck provided him a tool to
gain power over his surroundings.

From the very beginning of the novel the reader understands from the artifacts
Steinbeck placed in the landscape that this will be a story about those who have the
ability to influence their surroundings and those who don’t. It will be difficult for those
who don’t have resources to gain a foothold.

The Highway As a Symbol of American Freedom

The dual nature of the highway landscape is best understood when we look at the
competing symbols of the highway as one of the economic machine contrasted with the
highway landscape as a reflection of the American value of freedom. The highway was
produced by the economic system that required cooperation, collaboration, compromise,
sacrifice, and resources from a regional perspective. All individuals who were a part of
the regional economy were in some way or another contributing as a group to the creation
of the highway, whether through the levying of taxes, tolls, eminent domain, or
governmental mandates. At the same time the highway brought to America the sense that
freedom was only a gas tank away. One could head down the highway searching to
restore pieces of individual freedom to replace what we had given up for the good of the
economic machine.

The American story is also filled with examples of the highway as a symbol of
freedom. As Kris Lackey in Road Frames wrote, the highway, “seemed to provide quick
access to the countryside and escape from the strictures associated with both industry and
mass transportation.” Jakle seemed to capture those same thoughts when he wrote about the American love affair with the automobile resulting from the “drive for individual fulfillment through freedom of mobility,” and “the embracing of privatism fueled by competitive rather than communal impulses.”

The highway provided the sense of escape the migrants were looking for in the 1930s. The road led westward beyond the horizon and represented a new beginning somewhere beyond the line of sight, and far away from the problems faced in daily life on the Plains. But, the highway, as the symbol of the economic machine could not fulfill the promises of freedom. The road was the creation of the economic machine and remained tied to the processes that created it. The road was nothing but the ribbon of asphalt that led to somewhere else. The created landscape surrounding the road is what led to any solace the migrants received. The investment of time and energy by those creating the artifacts found in the cultural landscape of the highway (the diners, gas stations, hotels, migrant camps, etc) is what gave hope to the migrants. It assured them that others had ventured west on the highway ahead of them and that life for them too could have meaning and substance.

Walt Whitman captured the freedom found in the open road in the poem “Song of the Open Road.”

From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute,
Listening to others, and considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.  

26 Lackey, Road Frames, 4.
27 Jakle, “Landscapes Redesigned For The Automobile,” 293.
The American desire for freedom started with the first wave of immigrants coming from England who arrived here as they pursued their desire for sovereignty. The American quest for freedom has been the inspiration for the gradual moving across the continent in all directions in an attempt to tame a wild country. Henry Nash Smith, in *Virgin Land*, stated that this desire to move west had its roots in our collective need to push “westward to fabulous Asia,” as opposed to focusing on our oppressive past history with Europe.

Looking back into American history, Thomas Jefferson was one of the early American advocates for expanding the American Empire. His view was that if we could expand across the continent, then we could control the continental landmass and the seas on both sides of the continent. His belief would allow us to strengthen our existing maritime ties with Europe and establish new ties with Asia. Smith outlined this position on Jefferson in *Virgin Land*, 12.

Beginning with the migrants using the Overland Trails in the mid 19th Century, to the Transcontinental Railroad completion in 1869, and continuing on to the completion of the interstate highway system, the goal has been to unite and populate the country and eventually the continent by establishing a transportation network that was easy to access. Smith argued that Jefferson gave tangible substance to what had merely been an idea, and established the image of a highway across the continent. Smith, *Virgin Land*, 17.
cities and states along our coasts, to a more homogeneous look and feel. Domesticating
the expanse of the North American continent was accomplished with the aid of a
transcontinental highway system that eased the flow of goods and people from one coast
to the other. The United States was a bi-coastal nation which required a state of the art
transportation network to connect both coasts seamlessly. Smith believed that the
American drive for Manifest Destiny stemmed from our desire to, “connect the nations of
the earth with a single network.”

As the nation focused on filling in the continent the need for a transcontinental
transportation system became a hot topic. The highway satisfied the desire to travel
wherever and whenever needed and gave the freedom of choice to those who needed to
move throughout the continent. Kris Lackey, in Road Frames, summed up the freedom
of the open road when he wrote,

> Here the new and celebrated freedom of individual mechanical travel
> almost caught up with the frontier. Early motorists drew close to the
> forces that for good or ill had forged their land, and if they considered it at
> all they felt they were traveling outside the giant corporate rail and
> commodity network that exploited the West’s natural resources...Yet from
> the start they were spectators, insulated and relatively safe, symbolically
> reenacting the discovery and conquest of their nation.

The highway system was one of the major factors in the battle of overcoming
environmental obstacles to transportation. It provided those wishing to “conquer” the
continent options that weren’t available to generations before.

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32 Frederick L. Paxson stated that the three major changes in transportation technology are the Overland Trails, the Transcontinental Railroad, and the Interstate Highways. This progress in technology is primarily responsible for a common American landscape. Frederick L. Paxson, “The Highway Movement: 1916-1932,” The American Historical Review, Col. 51, No. 2. (January 1946), 236.
33 Smith, Virgin Land, 47.
34 Lackey, Road Frames, 3.
Steinbeck's description of the dual nature of the highway included the costs and benefits the highway provided to displaced farm families, such as the Joads. The families had been forced from their way of life and were searching for their new identity, and they looked west to improve their conditions. From the perspective of the migrants, the solutions to the problems facing the farm families could be found just beyond the western horizon. The highway west seemed to provide them easy access to the solutions, but the cost was also high. Steinbeck illustrated this through the interchapter in which he described the characteristics of Highway 66 (Chapter 12, GOW 119-123).

Steinbeck's Highway 66 was a fictional road very similar to the actual U.S. Route 66 that was known as both "The Mother Road" and "America's Road." When U.S. Route 66 was born the look and feel of the American heartland changed. It was the national road that ran through the heart of the country. It was one of the symbols of all that is American that endures today.

Highway 66 became the path of escape, not just for the Joad family, but for many of the migrants. Tenant farm families had been forced off their farms and they were using Steinbeck's Highway 66 as their path to the west and the prospects that California held. Steinbeck wrote the following description highlighting the physical qualities of Highway 66,

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66- the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield- over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys. (GOW, 119)

In the above quote Steinbeck described the physical landscape that Highway 66 tames. He used words that depict the local terrain that is taken for granted when one
travels across the continent today, but in the 1930s this benign landscape that we now traverse at 60 to 70 miles per hour in the comfort of our own car was a formidable obstacle to those wishing to migrate as late as the early 1900s. The highway was the technological answer to humankind’s desire to tame this environment.

As important as Highway 66 was in addressing the physically tough landscape it transcended the physical environment and became a cultural symbol. Steinbeck captured the cultural significance of Highway 66 when he wrote the following,

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert’s slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight. (GOW, 119)

Steinbeck’s Highway 66 showed the complex nature of that highway landscape. The highway represented the path of escape for the tenant farm families, it would lead them to a place where they felt they were wanted and needed--California. They believed there was ample work in the central valley and they would all be able to live happily ever after. But as much as Highway 66 provided the migrants with a sense of hope, and facilitated their move west, it also took away much of their personal freedom. Highway 66 was the great assimilator. It took migrants from all over the South and Plains states and brought them together into one assimilated group. Farmers from Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Kansas, and other places were all assembled together on the highway and forced to become one mass.

The normal migration west from Oklahoma to California took several days to several weeks to arrive in the central valley. Highway 66 provided a direct route that took much
less time than the first transcontinental automobile ride back in 1903.  
Most families loaded up as many supplies as their cars or trucks could carry when they left their farms on the Plains. These supplies, along with tents and cooking equipment, were used at each stop along the trek west. The highway assimilated the farm families with others in the same economic situation and the migration west on Highway 66 served as an opportunity to bring people together and build relationships with others who had a common background. Once they assembled on the highway they were united as brothers and sisters in the trek west. As Steinbeck showed with the Joads, many families developed deep and interdependent friendships with other migrants, and lived and camped together as they pursued their dream of a better life out west. These migrant camps will be looked at in depth later in Chapter 5 of this study. The path of escape along Highway 66 was the Joad family’s introduction to what life would be like living among the migrants after they arrived in California.

One of the characteristics defining Steinbeck’s Highway 66 was the places it linked together on the American landscape. It linked the small town with the constant stream of those moving west and Steinbeck showed the ability of the highway to serve as a tool for cultural assimilation as he highlighted the towns and regions along the way. Highway 66 appeared to be similar to a river with many branches flowing into it. He wrote about the

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35 Duncan, *Out West*, 375.
many towns all across America that the highway brought together as it flowed west.\footnote{Steinbeck described the small towns across the Plains that Highway 66 linked together when he mentioned, "Clarksville and Ozark and Van Buren and Fort Smith on 62, and there's an end of Arkansas. And all the roads into Oklahoma City...from Tulsa,...McAlester,...Wichita Falls,...Enid,...Edmond, Cloud, Purcell,...El Reno,...Clinton,...Hydro, Elk City, and Texola; and there's an end to Oklahoma. 66 across the Panhandle of Texas. Shamrock, McLean, Conway and Amarillo,...Wildorado and Vega and Boise, and there's an end of Texas. Tucumcari and Santa Rosa,...Albuquerque,...Santa Fe,...Los Ulnas,...Gallup, and there's the border of New Mexico... Holbrook and Winslow and Flagstaff,...Ashford and Kingman...and that's the end of Arizona. There's California just over the river, and a pretty town to start it. Needles on the river...Up from Needles and over a burned range, and there's the desert...At last there's Barstow, and more desert until at last the mountains rise up again, the good mountains, and 66 winds through them. Then suddenly a pass, and below the beautiful valley, below orchards and vineyards and little houses, and in the distance a city. And, oh my god, it's over." (GOW, 120)}

The symbol of assimilation Highway 66 provided was important to the country in the 1930s. The country was marked with numerous regional differences. Southerners, Northerners, Midwesterners, and Westerners were all different in dialect, customs, and agricultural techniques.\footnote{James N. Gregory in American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California, stated that, "To the extent that the migrants demonstrated divergent values and customs, a history of rural disadvantage or more recent poverty was to blame." James N. Gregory, American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California. New York: Oxford University Press, (1989), 140.} Moving west along Highway 66 brought them all together and forced them to work side by side. It served as a symbol of America as the world’s melting pot, smoothing out the differences between Americans. The Highway 66 landscape was a place where cultures and nationalities merged together to blur the differences, serving as the nation’s cultural crossroads, uniting people of differing cultures together under pressure and forcing them to create a unique culture based upon transportation agility, mutual aid, and hard work.

The effectiveness of the Highway 66 landscape to force assimilation and create a unified force of migrants from a group as diverse as the tenant croppers were when they left the Plains is easily seen. Comparing the regional differences incumbent in the migrants as they left their farms and began their journey west, with the migrants as they
arrived in California, and the transformation is vast. When the migrants arrived in California they were segregated from the local populace. Gregory made the observation that they had taken on the “appearance of a distinct ethnic group.” 38

The migration west along Highway 66 took on a sense of urgency. Reading the stories of the wagon trains that went west to Oregon, Utah, and California carrying settlers a century earlier one doesn’t get the same feeling of the rapidity of movement. The trip in the 1840s and 1850s took several months to complete, and was taken at the speed of a walk. The transcontinental railroad sped up movement across the continent, but there was not much freedom of travel as migrants were limited to places the train carried them. Highway 66 was different. There was a sense of freedom on the open road. The travelers could choose the destination, the stops, and the route to get there. And, they were able to travel across the country in a matter of a week or two, at their own pace. Steinbeck used the list of towns and the landscape Highway 66 rolled through as if it were a race to get west. Instead of taking the time to enjoy the sites, the migrants were moving as quickly as possible to get to their destination and promptly get to work. In the case of the migration west along Highway 66, the markers along the way were viewed as markers of progress to be checked off as you passed them by. The migrants were not on

vacation, but on a march to arrive in the central valley as quickly as possible. They had no idea that they would help turn Highway 66 from a conduit of transportation to an icon representing the American dream.

The migration west was attempted by so many displaced people that it almost seemed as if one continual stream of migrants was headed west. So many migrated on Highway 66 that Steinbeck described the migration in the following way,

Two hundred and fifty thousand people over the road. Fifty thousand old cars- wounded, steaming. Wrecks along the road, abandoned. Well, what happened to them? What happened to the folks in the car? Did they walk? Where are they? Where does the courage come from? Where does the terrible faith come from? (GOW, 123)

One of the unique stories that Steinbeck told spoke about this faith required of the migrant life on the highway. It is the story of how a family of twelve made it to California. We don’t know if Steinbeck fabricated this story to illustrate the faith of the migrants or if it really was, in fact, a true story. But, he wrote,

There was a family of twelve and they were forced off the land. They had no car. They built a trailer out of junk and loaded it with their possessions...And pretty soon a sedan picked them up...They got to California in two jumps. The man who pulled them fed them. And that’s true. (GOW, 123)

Steinbeck introduced the reader to a turtle crawling across the landscape in Chapter 3. The turtle made slow, but steady progress across the landscape, always moving west. The turtle transitioned through the landscape heading in a constant direction reacting to the changes in the landscape it was traversing, but not impeded by it. The Joad family, on the other hand, were moved by forces beyond their control, constantly reacting to
changes in the landscape and letting those changes dictate their direction. In many ways the collective group of migrants using Highway 66 resembled that turtle as they moved west, oblivious to the many different circumstances they encountered. They did not take time to enjoy themselves on the trek, making every opportunity to move as quickly as possible. If they needed to move more slowly due to the speed of those they depended on then they moved more slowly. Each story was unique, and the individual path each family took west was their own, but at the same time the road west forced assimilation. The migrants had left a place where they were not wanted and felt they could not accomplish their mission of finding a better life until they were working in the central valley. The path they followed to arrive in the central valley came from many different directions, but by the time they arrived in California they were all one, migrants with the same experiences and desires. Steinbeck illustrated the migrants’ common experiences that forced assimilation as he described the sights and sounds of the highway,

The people in flight streamed out on 66, sometimes a single car, sometimes a little caravan. All day they rolled slowly along the road, and at night they stopped near water. In the day ancient leaky radiators sent up columns of steam, loose connecting rods hammered and pounded. And the men driving the trucks and the overloaded cars listened apprehensively. How far between towns? It is a terror between towns. If something breaks—well, if something breaks we camp right here while Jim walks to town and gets a part and walks back (GOW, 120)

Steinbeck created this picture of migrants streaming out onto Highway 66 as a “people in flight” from their individual backgrounds and different experiences, but the farther they worked their way west the more they had in common with the other migrants. While he described the daily life of the migrants he was also creating a common

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framework for the reader to understand the migrant life. As the migrants made the trip west Steinbeck translated the character’s actions into the landscape around them. He used pictures and sounds to help the listener imagine they were part of the story. The pictures and sounds he used described the landscape surrounding Highway 66 in such a way that it breathed life, action and movement into the landscape. As the Joad family traveled along Highway 66 Steinbeck lured the reader into a participatory role in the story by providing us with a believable, but incomplete landscape, one in which the reader became Steinbeck’s co-creator as the story moves west. The sights and sounds are as much a part of the landscape as the physical look of the land.

We can identify and associate with the pain and suffering that accompanied most families along Highway 66. A two thousand mile migration forced people to live outside their level of comfort for long periods of time.

Steinbeck moved from a broad overview description of the Highway 66 landscape to a description of the Joad family’s specific trip west along the highway. As the family left Sallisaw and were now a part of the mass migration west they had become part of the great assimilation of migrants that headed out before them.

The ancient overloaded Hudson creaked and grunted to the highway at Sallisaw and turned west, and the sun was blinding. But on the concrete road Al built up his speed because the flattened springs were not in danger any more. From Sallisaw to Gore is twenty-one miles and the Hudson was doing thirty-five miles an hour. From Gore to Warner thirteen miles; Warner to Checotah fourteen miles, Checotah a long hump to Henrietta-thirty-four miles, but a real town at the end of it. Henrietta to Castle nineteen miles, and the sun was overhead, and the red fields, heated by the high sun, vibrated the air. (GOW, 124)

This was a very different approach for Steinbeck. Until the family left the farm in Sallisaw the story had been very descriptive, with Steinbeck providing the reader with an
incredible level of detail of the landscape surrounding the farm. Once the family left the farm and “grunted” to the highway the level of detail became much more coarse with six towns flying by in a single paragraph. The Joad family had left their individuality behind on the farm and would now be defined by the highway. It was hard for a family to pull up stakes and leave the farm they had known for generations. They loved the land, but once the decision was made there was no turning back. The Joad family was no longer an Oklahoma farming family, they were now migrants. Every mile that clicked by on the highway meant they were a mile closer to their future home in California. The move west would not only change the location of their lives, but would change the quality and very fabric of their future. Progress was measured in distance covered and towns checked off like items on a shopping list the entire way to California.

The trip almost had the rhythm of a large army moving into battle. The towns went by as if they were a progression of small tactical battle victories that were endured in the overall larger strategic campaign. The afternoon battle march continued on at the same pace as the morning. The Joad family drove past each town as if they were in a race against time. Steinbeck commented,

Castle to Paden twenty-five miles and the sun passed the zenith and started down. (GOW, 126)

The stories of life along Highway 66 brought out the best and the worst in difficult times. People died, babies were born, friendships were made and families disintegrated. But, progress was measured by traveling west on the highway and being another day closer to the destination.

Steinbeck helped us realize what life on the road was like as he continued to describe the march west. The landscape, although still centered on the highway, changed as the
Joad family entered Oklahoma City. It seemed as if they had entered a foreign country as Steinbeck wrote,

Paden to Meeker is thirteen miles; Meeker to Harrah is fourteen miles; and then Oklahoma city- the big city. Tom drove straight on. Ma waked up and looked at the streets as they went through the city. And the family, on top of the truck, stared about at the stores, at the big houses, at the office buildings. And then the buildings grew smaller and the stores smaller. The wrecking yards and hot-dog stands, the out-city dance halls. (GOW, 133)

The highway connected the small towns of Oklahoma with the Oklahoma City urban area. In the quote above Steinbeck didn’t mention the people of Oklahoma City. The Joad family had been enjoying the freedom of the open highway as they kept moving west, but now Steinbeck reintroduced the concept of the highway as a representation of oppression. What he highlighted was a landscape full of artifacts of consumption. The Oklahoma City landscape Steinbeck formed included numerous stores, big houses and office buildings, wrecking yards, hotdog stands, and dance halls. The farm families were connected to the consumption of the big city as viewed from the highway. All these artifacts in the landscape are symbols of a society that has disposable income, something the Joad family didn’t have. As they looked at these items as they passed through Oklahoma City on the highway, the reader must believe that the Joad family felt hopelessly out of place and couldn’t help but reflect on what had happened to them during this first long day on the road. They had lost their family farm, they had been forced into a life as migrants, and now they were looking at the landscape of consumption along the highway roadside in Oklahoma City. They must have understood that they were being looked at as an item of consumption themselves. The fruit of their working efforts kept the economic “monster” growing, but with very little profit to show for
themselves. They were viewed as another commodity that would be sacrificed for the

good of the monster.

Highway 66, as the funnel that brought the migrant families together on their trek
west, was the great equalizer. Many of the migrants entered the Highway 66 environment
at Oklahoma City. Oklahoma City served as the connection point for many of the feeder
highways and roads to the main route west. Those from Arkansas, Tulsa, Enid, Missouri
and farther east all came together in Oklahoma City. When the migrant families entered
the Oklahoma City landscape they understood, many of them for the first time, that they
were unable to go back to the farm and that their lives had changed forever. Most of the
migrants did not have the same opportunities available back home on the farm as the
residents of Oklahoma City, but they were on their way west to what they believed would
be a better life and future. They experienced the landscape of consumption as if they
were spectators watching a baseball game, wanting the items they saw in Oklahoma City,
but incapable of getting them.

After passing through Oklahoma City the landscape changed significantly. It was a
large town with suburbs that stretched for miles. Although Steinbeck stated that the Joad
family was on Highway 66 back in Sallisaw, he now states it again. After passing
through a landscape of consumption Steinbeck put the Joad family back on the migration
path west.

The scene in Oklahoma City illustrated how the migrants weren’t the only class of
people affected by the move west. As more and more families were forced to leave the
land the highway landscape changed as business opportunities began to prosper. To the
migrants the highway may have been a symbol of the freedom of the open road, but it
was also a symbol of prosperity and capitalism. Businessmen and businesswomen understood that wherever large groups of people were located profits could be made. Businesses began to dot the highway landscape providing services to those traveling west. But, the treatment the families received while traveling along Highway 66 was substantially different depending on whether they were traveling for pleasure or out of necessity for migration.

The highway was the primary route the migrants took west, but it also served as the economic artery for those communities it crossed. Today our interstate system allows us to pass through large towns without stopping for traffic, cross streets, or stop signs. Many of our largest urban areas have interstate by-passes that send us around an outer loop of the urban area, keeping us out of the traffic we might encounter with the large numbers of intrastate users in the downtown area. The interstate by-passes quickly route a traveler around the traffic of the downtown area of our cities, but they also insulate us from the city center, routing traffic through the suburbs. Highway 66 was made up of intercity roads; roads built to take a traveler from one city to another. The object of the earliest highways was to connect towns and cities, and bring travelers into them, not insulate the traveler from them. Each town and many smaller places along the highway offered services to the travelers. The communities along the migration route benefited tremendously from the constant flow of tourists and migrants across their land. The transportation infrastructure was already built and the communities saw Highway 66 not as the vehicle of escape to take the migrants west, but as an economic boom that was the path to bring people to their towns and businesses to spend money.
In 1930 Elizabeth Lawton, commenting on the landscape change as new highways were being built, wrote that “hot dog stands, filling stations and billboards spring up like magic.”

Lawton’s comment was echoed by the Highway 66 landscape Steinbeck created for *The Grapes of Wrath.* Steinbeck documented one of the economic beneficiaries of Highway 66, the hamburger stand, when he wrote,

Along 66 the hamburger stands-Al & Susy’s Place-Carl’s Lunch-Joe & Minnie-Will’s Eats. Board-and-bat shacks. Two gasoline pumps in front, a screen door, a long bar, stools, and a foot rail. Near the door three slot machines, showing through the glass the wealth in nickels three bars will bring. And beside them, the nickel phonograph with records piled up like pies, ready to swing out to the turntable and play dance music…

The walls decorated with posters, bathing girls, blondes with big breasts and slender hips and waxen faces, in white bathing suits, and holding a bottle of Coca-cola and smiling- see what you get with Coca-Cola. Long bar, and salts, peppers, mustard pots, coffee urns, shiny and streaming, with glass gauges showing the coffee level. And pies in wire cages and oranges in pyramids of four. (*GOW,* 153)

John Jakle and Keith Sculle captured the entrepreneurial opportunities, in *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America,* when they wrote, “A new or improved highway created new opportunities not only for road users but for owners of adjacent real estate. The nation’s highway margins…was a new kind of frontier that fully invited commercial pioneering.”

America’s highways provided hope for those who wanted to flee their problems in the Plains and head west, but it also provided commercial opportunities for those interested in supplying services and products to travelers. Steinbeck colorfully described the landscape associated with the commercial roadside along Highway 66. The

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Oklahoma City urban area was his first opportunity to illustrate the highway landscape in a populated area.

Steinbeck created the sights and sounds of the local community in his highway landscape. The westward movement of migrant farm families created more prospects for the local businesses to capitalize on their movement. The diners located all along Highway 66 were a permanent fixture on the landscape that only lost their economic impact when the interstate highway system began to bypass smaller towns in an effort to save travel time. As Steinbeck illustrated in *The Grapes of Wrath* Chapter 15 (*GOW*, 154-163), an interchapter where he described the roadside diners, most of the migrants were too poor to eat at the diners or use many of the services they provided, but the services were there in case of emergency or for those who could afford to use them. Perhaps, one of the reasons that Steinbeck included the description of the roadside diners was to visualize the growing gap between those who had disposable income and those who didn’t, in essence to separate those who were migrating from those who were traveling for business or pleasure. The truckers, the wealthy, and those who were mobile of their own choice had the income to spend in the diners and the services they provided, while those who were mobile out of necessity saw the diner as an oasis that they did not have the luxury of using. In an effort to show that the hamburger stands were there for the travelers and not the migrants Steinbeck included a description of the cars passing by on Highway 66, as seen from within the diner, cars from other places that represented those with disposable income. He wrote,

These cars were from other places and weren’t part of the plains landscape. They represented those who could afford to travel for pleasure. Moving along the highway at sixty-five miles per hour meant that they weren’t overloaded with all the memories and valuables from a home that had been left behind, like the migrants were. They didn’t have all their household belongings and worldly possessions piled high in the back of the truck. They were in a hurry to get to their destination, not looking back on what they left behind. Steinbeck described the migrants as they moved west as “bugs” (GOW 194), but here he used words of motion (whisking by, going west, cruising) and comfort (fine cars) to show that there was a marked difference between those traveling for pleasure and those traveling out of necessity.

Steinbeck created a scene where travelers were treated differently based upon their reason for traveling, whether for pleasure or business or out of necessity as a migrant. The following two passages highlighted two completely different world views. The first was of the wealthy business or pleasure traveler, the second of the migrant family. Steinbeck created the landscape to highlight the complex dual nature of oppression and opportunity along Highway 66. About the treatment of the wealthy business or pleasure traveler Steinbeck wrote,

Mae looks at and past them as they enter. Al looks up from his griddle, and down again. Mae knows. They’ll drink a five-cent soda and crab that it ain’t cold enough. The woman will use six paper napkins and drop them on the floor. The man will choke and try to put the blame on Mae. The woman will sniff as though she smelled rotting meat and they will go out again and tell forever afterward that the people in the West are sullen. And Mae, when she is alone with Al, has a name for them. She calls them shitheels. (GOW, 157)

As discussed in Chapter 1, the landscape Steinbeck created was his unwitting autobiography, documenting his beliefs and world view. It is clear from this paragraph

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that Steinbeck didn’t like the boorish pleasure or business traveler, with the money to be able to travel in comfort and move quickly across the continent.

Steinbeck saved his best description for the treatment of the migrants. He painted an entirely different picture, although he uses the same diner.

A 1926 Nash sedan pulled wearily off the highway. The back seat was piled nearly to the ceiling with sacks, with pots and pans, and on the very top, right up against the ceiling, two boys rode. On the top of the car, a mattress and a folded tent; tent poles tied along the running board. The car pulled up to the gas pumps. A dark-haired, hatchet-faced man got slowly out. And the two boys slid down from the load and hit the ground.

Mae walked around the counter and stood in the door. The man was dressed in gray wool trousers and a blue shirt, dark blue with sweat on the back and under the arms. The boys in overalls and nothing else, ragged patched overalls. Their hair was light, and it stood up evenly all over their heads, for it had been roached. Their faces were streaked with dust. They went directly to the mud puddle under the hose and dug their toes into the mud.

The man said, “Can we git some water, ma’am?” (GOW, 160)

Steinbeck created a scene with an entirely different theme when he described the second scene, that of the migrant traveler. He produced a portrait of an honest, hard-working family looking for a new future. It was a scene full of respect and admiration.

The services along Highway 66 were minimal. Yes, there were shacks with gasoline pumps, but the owners frowned if you only wanted to use the water and the restrooms and not purchase anything. The owners wouldn’t turn a profit from the migrants who only used water. They made their profit off of those who purchased gasoline, ate their food, and bought supplies. The migrant traveling out of necessity was again segregated from those traveling for pleasure or work. From the landscape Steinbeck described it didn’t seem like a very welcoming environment, and it wasn’t-- particularly if you didn’t have the means to purchase anything.
The Joads needed gasoline, so they stopped along Highway 66. The gasoline attendant said something key that applied to Steinbeck’s highway landscape.

Well, I don’t know what the country’s comin’ to. I jus’ don’ know. Here’s me tryin’ to get along, too. Think any of them big new cars stops here? No, sir! They go on to them yella-painted company stations in town. They don’t stop no place like this. Most folks stops here ain’t got nothing. (GOW, 127)

What is key in this excerpt is the fact that the big new cars don’t stop at his location. Steinbeck developed a landscape that highlighted the class differences between traveling and migrating. The migrants were poor and couldn’t afford all the amenities that the travelers could. The travelers went to the yellow-painted stations in town that offer all the amenities like diners and stores, while the migrants settled for the gasoline only establishments. There was definitely a difference in the way Steinbeck portrayed consumption among pleasure travelers and migrants.

The Joad family began to refuel and refresh as the gasoline attendant continued to talk with Tom. Tom and the attendant bantered back and forth about the people coming into the gas station and Steinbeck used Tom to focus on another key point. It is also linked to the difference in consumption between the traveler and the migrant. Tom had some cruel words for the attendant and then apologized. He then said,

“I didn’t mean to sound off at ya, mister. It’s the heat. You ain’t got nothin’. Pretty soon you’ll be on the road yourse’f. And it ain’t the tractors’ll put you there. It’s them pretty yella stations in town. Folks is movin’,” he saidashamedly. “An’ you’ll be movin’, mister.” (GOW, 129)

Tom hit the gasoline attendant right on target. Tom knew the economics of capitalism. The agricultural conglomerate put the Joad family off the farm and the oil companies would eventually put the small independent gasoline station out of business in
the same way. It was just another manifestation of the same “monster” that killed the Joad family farm.

Steinbeck brought the point to a climax in the landscape as he continued to illustrate the capability of the economic system to squash the small farmers and the gasoline stations. He did this by introducing the first disaster to hit the Joad family as they headed west on Highway 66. Their dog was thirsty and hopped out of the truck in search of water. Steinbeck described what happened,

The dog wandered, sniffing, past the truck, trotted to the puddle under the hose again and lapped at the muddy water. And then he moved away, nose down and ears hanging. He sniffed his way among the dusty weeds beside the road, to the edge of the pavement. He raised his head and looked across, and then started over. Rose of Sharon screamed shrilly. A big swift car whisked near, tires squealed. The dog dodged helplessly, and with a shriek, cut off in the middle, went under the wheels. The big car slowed for a moment and faces looked back, and then it gathered greater speed and disappeared. And the dog, a blot of blood and tangled, burst intestines, kicked slowly in the road. (GOW, 131)

This excerpt from the novel has many implications. Steinbeck used several incidents like this throughout the novel to highlight the survival of the fittest and elimination of the weakest in the American society of the 1930s. This description of the dog being crushed while crossing the road illustrated that it was a difficult world and many things were lurking beyond the horizon to pounce on you and break you, without caring what disaster was left behind. As the reader takes in the story of the dog being killed on the highway the reader assumes that the fierce landscape would continue to disintegrate the Joad family as they progressed on their trip west. Just as the dog didn’t see the car coming until it was too late, the Joad family has no idea what was waiting for them just beyond their small worldview. The Joad family had no choice, but to look inward for comfort while the process of losing and gaining new family members continued through the story.
The family rallied around grotesque incidents like the accident with the dog and survived them. 42

There was no time to grieve over the dog. Each time they slowed down it would keep them from working in the fields of California. They pushed on as if they were on a mission. The dog was the first member to leave the family, and served as an example of how the family overcame difficult situations and survived even stronger than before. They were becoming tested by fire.

The grotesque scene Steinbeck created with the dog being hit by the car at the family’s first stop served as a foreshadowing of the treatment the family would receive later in the novel. The Joads would be badly persecuted as the story continued. The Hooverville camps they lived in would be burned down, the landowners would pay them wages that wouldn’t allow them to purchase enough food to feed the family, and everywhere they went they were treated without dignity or respect. 43 They faced terrible odds in their struggle to survive, but they would continue the fight and move forward.

Steinbeck described the migrants in a poor and dirty, but noble way. The outsiders looking in saw their extreme poverty and thought they were less than human. But from inside the Okie migrant group they may not have had money, but they had dignity and moral fabric. Even more, they were tough. They had been through difficult times and had come out as survivors. It may have taken them a while longer to reach California than the pleasure travelers, but they would eventually get there. They didn’t know what was ahead of them once they arrived in California, but they were tried, tested, and ready

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43 Ibid., 201.
for it whatever it was. They were experiencing the euphoria of being on the American open road. Their future was ahead of them.

After the family left Oklahoma City the familiarity of home was gone, every landscape they experienced was new, and their only desire was to push hard to get to work in California as fast as possible. The traveling took its toll on the family and the landscape became more fierce and lonely the farther west they traveled. As they made their way across the plains Steinbeck described the changes that happened to both the landscape and the family. He wrote that,

Two days the families were in flight, but on the third the land was too huge for them and they settled into a new technique of living; the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression. Little by little they settled into the new life... The land rolled like great stationary ground swells... In the far distance, waved up in the sky, the mountains stood. And the wheels of the cars creaked around, and the engines were hot, and the steam spurted around the radiator caps. (GOW, 164)

The Joad and Wilson families (the Joads had met the Wilsons their first day on the road) had gone through a transition. The highway had become their home. It was a difficult life, but they had adjusted to being mobile and began to feel at home on the road. Highway 66 traversed a difficult landscape. The Texas Panhandle was a scene of shimmering heat in the summer, marked by dry and dusty eroded ravines. The earth absorbed the heat all day long and radiated it at night. The highway had done its best to tame the landscape, but it was still a fierce place. The landscape that Steinbeck described while the Joads were escaping from Oklahoma and flying across Texas continued to portray a future gloom for the family. At least they were joined by the Wilsons. There should be some form of safety in numbers.
As the families moved from the plains of Oklahoma and Texas into the mountains and deserts of New Mexico and Arizona Steinbeck began to describe the changes the family was making in order to cope with their surroundings. They no longer had roots in Oklahoma, but were now permanently in transition. The freedom the families found on the open road to flee the problems of the Plains came with a cost; the highway helped them escape the economics of the farm, but they had to sever their ties to the earth to gain that freedom. As they settled into their life on the road and became a part of the migration along the highway they had to learn new skills to cope with the changes in their lives. They had to stop struggling against life on the road and become defined by the highway. This came through the daily life of living on the road. The in-betwenness of having no permanent place to call home back in Oklahoma and a hope for a brighter future somewhere in the West kept them moving, but the anchors of home had been removed and realization had set in that they were now living a life of transition. But, they weren’t alone. The Joads had been joined by thousands of other families fleeing the problems on the Plains. Steinbeck used a conversation between Tom and Casy to illustrate the point that the family was only now beginning to understand the immensity of the economic problems. Casy said,

Tom, I been watchin’ the cars on the road, them we passed an’ them that passed us. I been keeping track.

Track a what?

Tom, they’s hundreds a families like us all a-goin’ west. I watched. There ain’t none of ‘em goin’ east- hundreds of ‘em. Did you notice that?

Yeah, I noticed. (GOW, 173)
The freedom of the open road was balanced by the need for the highway to bring the
diverse families together and assimilate them into their new home on the road. Some of
the families chose to remain separate and Steinbeck used the highway as the setting to
visualize what happened to those families that chose not to assimilate. He used the story
of a jackrabbit to symbolize the dual nature of the highway as a symbol of the economic
monster and the freedom associated with the open road. He wrote,

A jackrabbit got caught in the lights and he bounced along ahead, cruising
easily, his great ears flopping with every jump. Now and then he tried to
break off the road, but the wall of darkness thrust him back. Far ahead
bright headlights appeared and bore down on them. The rabbit hesitated,
falter, then turned and bolted toward the lesser lights of the Dodge.
There was a small soft jolt as he went under the wheels. The oncoming
car swished by. (GOW, 186)

Steinbeck described this incident shortly after the Joad family dog was killed. The
two incidents appear to be related. Both illustrate what could happen to the migrants if
they strayed too far out of the norm. If they refused to assimilate into the massive group
of migrants during the march west or if they refused to become part of the economic
factory system operating in California’s Central Valley there would be dangerous
consequences. In both instances, with the jackrabbit and the dog, Steinbeck was
highlighting the benefits and liabilities of living in a technological society. The same
lights that provided the jackrabbit an opportunity to see where it was going also took its
life. Steinbeck seized the opportunity this story provided to show that the economic
machine that built the highway that led to the hope of a better future, is the same
economic machine that demanded assimilation and limited freedom. We know the Joad
family was headed for a miserable fate through the continued effort of Steinbeck to create
a landscape of doom along the highway, but we don’t know what that fate would be yet.
They assimilated into the life on the highway, and like the jackrabbit, it radically defined
their limits while it also offered them the opportunity for a new future.

**The Highway as a Symbol of Manifest Destiny**

Earlier I mentioned America’s infatuation with Manifest Destiny. The Joad family
displayed similar characteristics to the founding fathers when they looked toward the
west as the answer to their problems as economics forced them off the family farm. It
was now their turn to move west in search of better circumstances.

The highway is what made this move possible. Economic and environmental
conditions were difficult on the southern plains, and although they were also difficult in
California, the Central Valley was viewed as the land of plenty where fortunes could be
made. Just as the settlers a hundred years earlier, the tenant farm families were drawn
west by the lure of perceived economic opportunity. This view of the west severely
affected Ma Joad’s flawed vision of California. She viewed California as the solution to
all of the family’s problems, and as the authority figure of the Joad family, her vision of
California was adopted by the entire family. Ma talked frequently about how different
life would be once they arrived in California, and as the family was out jettisoning their
belongings trying to earn enough money to make the trip she began thinking of California
again.

“But I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California. Never
cold. An’ fruit ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little
white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder- that is, if we all get
jobs an’ all work- maybe we can get one of them little white houses.”

*(GOW, 93)*

The Joad family had failed to recognize that Ma’s vision of California was flawed,
and the decision to move west followed by living a life of transition on the highway had
done nothing to change that vision of California. Steinbeck used the highway vantage point to provide the Joad family with their first view of the California landscape, one they hadn’t anticipated. The warning signs were there in Steinbeck’s highway landscape that California would not be welcoming to the family, but the family refused to accommodate them into their worldview. The first town they saw as they entered their new home state was Needles. As they approached Needles, a dry, dusty, desert town on the California/Arizona border, they began to discuss the California landscape.

And Tom, looking at the ragged peaks across the river and the Needles downstream: “Never seen such tough mountains. This here’s a murder country. This here’s the bones of a country...I seen pitchers of a country flat an’ green, an’ with little houses like Ma says, white. Ma got her heart set on a white house. Got to thinkin’ they ain’t no such country. I seen pitchers like that.”

Pa said, “Wait till we get to California. You’ll see nice country then.”

“Jesus Christ, Pa! This here is California.” (GOW, 204)

The problem they encountered was that this first glimpse of the California landscape didn’t correspond to their ideal of what it would look like. The reality of California was nothing like the imaginary California they had thought about since leaving Oklahoma. Their arrival on the highway in Needles was another warning that their life in California would not measure up to their expectations.

The family rested near the river for the afternoon and decided to attempt the desert crossing at night. They left Needles before sunset, but the journey across the desert was nearly 300 miles and the crossing would last until early morning. As they prepared to leave Needles the truck crawled back on Highway 66 and continued west. The highway landscape smoothed out the peaks and valleys while traveling through a fierce landscape, but could not insulate them from what waited in the central valley.
The truck took the road and moved up the long hill, through the broken, rotten rock. The engine boiled very soon and Tom slowed down and took it easy. Up the long slope, winding and twisting through dead country, burned white and gray, and no hint of life in it...

They topped the pass while the sun was still up, and looked down on the desert - black cinder mountains in the distance, and the yellow sun reflected on the gray desert... The burnt land and the black, cindery hills broke the even distance and made it terrible in the reddening light of the setting sun. (GOW, 221)

Steinbeck’s description of traveling through the California desert leads one to believe that there would be no way for the Joad family to escape alive. The landscape was described in such fierce terms that the reader understands something terrible would lie on the horizon for them. The complexity of the struggle to move west continued on all night as the Joad family proceeded west through the desert. When dawn came the next morning all that was in front of them was mountains. They filled up the gasoline tank and the radiator and pushed on west. Come dawn the desert was past. It was fitting for Steinbeck to describe in detail the final night and morning of their journey before they reached their new home, as though the desert they were traveling through would ultimately result in an unattainable mirage when they finally arrived. Immediately after leaving the desert for the mountains their surroundings improved as did the family’s outlook.

When the family reached the edge of California’s Central Valley the highway that had been the scene of their difficult trip now provided them with the initial view of their new home. At first glance it appeared to be everything Ma Joad had been hoping for. Steinbeck described the first glimpse of the central valley in much the same way we would read in a fairy tale. He wrote,
They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow...Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road, and “Jesus Christ! Look!” he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful. The trees set in rows, and the farm houses.

And Pa said, “God Almighty!” The distant cities, the little towns in the orchard land, and the morning sun, golden on the valley. A car honked behind them. Al pulled to the side of the road and parked...

Pa sighed, “I never knewed they was anything like her.” The peach trees and the walnut groves, and the dark green patches of oranges...

Ruthie and Winfield looked at it, and Ruthie whispered, “It’s California.”

(GOW, 227)

The sunrise signaled a new day for the Joads, and a new life in California’s Central Valley. Ma’s vision of the California landscape was totally flawed and that showed in their description of what they saw from the pass near Tehachapi. Pa said he never knew there was anything like her, and he was absolutely correct. The Joad family viewed the landscape through their tenant farmer worldview. They weren’t prepared for what they would find and they had no capability to fight the system they would become a part of. What they saw from the highway along that pass was a landscape they associated with a peaceful, sedentary life, but the reality was that they were migrants and life on the highway provided them with glimpses that the California agricultural fields would not be kind to them. The agricultural landscape was molded from an intense economic system that they could never control. The view of the central valley from the pass above Tehachapi validated the family’s flawed vision of life in California and became the transition point where the Joad family moved from the difficult task of migrating west to an even more challenging task of assimilating into California’s Central Valley.
The excitement of the family’s arrival was the culmination of their action to head west. They were looking for an opportunity to start anew in California, but they were still in the process of being defined by new circumstances.

The Joad family would not be able to find permanence in the farm fields of California, and they needed to find an object to provide the family some stability as they searched for work. The family farm was left behind, but the permanence it represented could only be replaced by the one item they had brought with them that helped keep them tied to their roots, the Joads’ truck. The truck provided the family with the opportunity to be mobile both geographically and economically. It was the tool that made highway access available to the family and it enabled them to shed the anchor of permanence and move on to where they believed the work would be. In the next chapter we will explore this focus on the family’s truck that defined their actions throughout the story.
CHAPTER 3

AUTOMOBILE

Introduction

John Jakle, in “Landscapes Redesigned for the Automobile,” wrote that, “No other technological innovation has so transformed the geography of the United States as the automobile. Landscapes inherited from pre-automobile times have been made to suit highway-oriented technology and new landscapes have emerged shaped strictly in its image.”¹ Steinbeck’s portrayal of the Okies as they migrated west includes vivid description of this landscape redesigned for the automobile, both the roadways, as analyzed in Chapter 2 of this study and the impact the roadways have had on the humans.

In this chapter I will analyze Steinbeck’s creation and use of the automobile as a tool for the Joad family to interact with and navigate through the highway landscape. In The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck created the landscape surrounding the automobile to illustrate the competing forces of mobility and domesticity. As I discussed in the last chapter, The Grapes of Wrath is a story dominated by mobility. When the tenant farm families were forced off the land they moved west in large numbers, and with the quest to find work as quickly as possible they took the shortest and fastest route west. The most direct route was often via Highway 66, America’s Road, and it soon became the lifeline connecting families from the southern plains to the west coast. Compared to the people migrating west along the California, Oregon, and Mormon trails eighty-five years earlier, the use of the automobile reduced the hardship to the migrating families, allowed them to make

¹ John Jakle, “Landscapes Redesigned for the Automobile,” 293.
the trip in a much shorter amount of time,\textsuperscript{2} and provided protection from the environment while they were mobile.\textsuperscript{3}

Kris Lackey in \textit{Road Frames}, stated that automobile travelers,

were spectators, insulated and relatively safe, symbolically reenacting the discovery and conquest of their nation. Railroad passengers, as many motoring travelers pointed out, were denied this experience. Not only were they bound by unwanted society, speed, and fixed routes, they were just too comfortable. They could not taste the weather or appreciate the mud and rain-swollen rivers braved by the first settlers. And they could not be left to their own thoughts.\textsuperscript{4}

This statement compliments Lackey’s belief that one of the primary reasons travelers preferred to drive coast to coast in the automobile rather than ride on the train had to do with the spirit of discovery. Those driving wished to “reenact the pioneer hardships, to recreate an innocent country, and to imaginatively possess the land.”\textsuperscript{5} It was the automobile that made all this possible; making the highways useable and the destinations more easily attainable.

The automobile and the highway (the network of roads) are separate entities that only make sense when they are viewed in relation to each other. Separately they are both icons of the technological changes that the US experienced in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. But, without the interdependent relationship between the automobile and the highway, separately they are nearly worthless. Combined we have a system that made

\textsuperscript{2} As mentioned back in Chapter 2, (See Chapter 2 footnote #3) Dayton Duncan in \textit{Out West: American Journeying Along the Lewis and Clark Trail}, noted that the first documented transcontinental automobile trip took sixty-three days. As the highway networks increased and automobile became more reliable, technologically matured, and travel worthy, the length of time to transit the continent continued to decrease. Today it takes less than a week to travel from coast to coast. Dayton Duncan, \textit{Out West}, 375.

\textsuperscript{3} Carlos Arnaldo Schwantes in \textit{Going Places: Transportation Redefines the Twentieth Century West}, “By 1916, those who drove straight through could make the trip nonstop in only five days, approximately the time necessary to make the same journey by rail. Carlos Arnaldo Schwantes, \textit{Going Places: Transportation Redefines the Twentieth Century West}, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), 129.

\textsuperscript{4} Lackey, \textit{Road Frames}, 3.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 4.
transcontinental mobility available to the masses in a way that was only dreamed of a
generation earlier. Travelers could move from southern plains to the west coast in a little
more than a week\textsuperscript{6} with a comfort and ease that would soon be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{7}
Coupled with an economy that was quickly eroding, families felt the economic pressures
pushing them off the farm while at the same time experiencing the pull of the open road
that was made more real through the freedom of travel the automobile provided. It was
difficult to overcome the desire to leave and move west, and many gave in to those
desires.

Just as the highway landscape had several interdependent themes woven into \textit{The
Grapes of Wrath}, the landscape of the automobile represented a similar level of
complexity. Steinbeck fashioned the highway landscape as a productive space to
demonstrate the complicated dual nature of living in a technologically advanced society.
The landscape of established farms and towns gave him the same capability, allowing
him to illustrate to the reader the sense of tension the citizens felt from an ever increasing
presence of technology in their lives, while at the same time providing new opportunities
of escape for those it affected. In the same way, Steinbeck created the landscape
surrounding the automobile to visualize a complex dual nature focused on the desire to
become mobile, while at the same time remaining true to the values of living with the
anchor of domesticity. Steinbeck used this theme many times to highlight the battle

\textsuperscript{6} James N. Gregory in \textit{American Exodus} stated, “The trip was usually fast and uneventful. In a good car
families would make it to California in as little as three days.” James N. Gregory, \textit{American Exodus: The

\textsuperscript{7} Gregory also stated, “Ease of transportation was the key to the volume of migration and to the special
frame of mind with which the newcomers began their California stay. The automobile gave these and other
twentieth-century migrants a flexibility that cross-country or trans-oceanic migrants of earlier eras did not
share. By reducing the costs and inconveniences of long-distance travel, it made it easy for those who were
tentative or doubtful, who under other circumstances would have stayed behind, to go anyway. They went
knowing that for the price of a few tanks of gasoline they could always return.” Gregory, \textit{American
Exodus}, 32.
brought on by increasing technology in the 1930s. The landscape of the automobile
provided him with a literary test track where he could explore these ideas of complexity
and conflict in the struggle the migrants faced in leaving the farm and becoming mobile.
The automobile became a valuable commodity for both the farm family and those who
chose to leave.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study, Steinbeck also crafted the automobile
landscape to represent the migrant families’ position of in-betweenness. Steinbeck used
the landscape to show that life on the farms was over, the productive capabilities of the
farmstead was dead, and the primary anchor of the family shifted from the farm to the
automobile. The automobile served the Joad family as their temporary “mobile” home
in-between permanent homes. Frank Cruz, in "In Between a Past and Future Town,”
makes the point that the truck itself was represented as an in-between or hybrid model. It
was originally a truck, but had been modified to fit into its surrounding landscape more
appropriately. Cruz described Steinbeck’s use of images and symbols of in-betweenness
including “the Joads’ jalopy, the Hudson Super-Six sedan, a truck with high sides, . . . the
front of it . . . a sedan, the top . . . cut off in the middle and the truck bed fitted on.”
Steinbeck capitalized on this dual nature of the landscape of the automobile.

The automobile was the tool which enabled the migrant families to survive through
what they believed was a temporary round of bad luck; they didn’t perceive the life as
migrants as a long term possibility. The Joads automobile helped them bridge the gap

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8 See Chapter 1 footnote #3 regarding Cruz’s thoughts on in-betweenness.
9 Cruz, “In Between a Past and Future Town,” 60.
between the despair of losing their family home and the uncertainty of finding their future home.\textsuperscript{10}

At the same time the migrant families were suffering with an uncertain future, the American public's desire to be mobile and its associated love for the automobile continued to grow. James L. Bossemeyer, in his 1957 essay "American Mobility," discussed the changing patterns of mobility after society became dependent on the automobile. He stated,

The people of the United States travel for business and pleasure to an extent which is unprecedented in the history of the world. The most distinctive feature of life in the United States is its mobility. Our people have the freedom to travel...the facilities with which to travel via land, sea, and air. They have the competitive urge to travel...They have the leisure and the money with which to travel for recreation and pleasure.\textsuperscript{11}

In a similar light, Will Rogers, as he spoke to a radio audience in Los Angeles on behalf of President Hoover's Unemployment Relief, ironically stated, "We'll hold the distinction of being the only nation in the history of the word that ever went to the poor house in an automobile."\textsuperscript{12}

In \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, Steinbeck demonstrated the introduction of the automobile profoundly affected the rural community in three unique ways. First, it provided the migrants with transportation mobility, or the ability to move on to new opportunities when economic times became rough. When the agricultural economics of the southern

\textsuperscript{10} Cruz mentioned that perhaps the most prevalent dimension of in-betweenness in \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} was the negotiation throughout the text between home and homelessness, or home and the unhomely, as the Joads are forced into an historical in-between space, with the home behind them destroyed and the home in front of them unclear and uncertain. When Tom sees the Joad place knocked off its foundation and its windows broken, he witnessed not only the work of a Caterpillar tractor and children who will walk "twenty miles to bust a window," but also the destructive, intra-colonial forces of the world. Cruz, "In Between a Past and Future Town," 60.


\textsuperscript{12} Will Rogers Memorial Commission, ed, \textit{Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers}, (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Oklahoma State University, 1990), 66.
plains forced families off of the farm the automobile provided them the opportunity to move west in search of work. Second, it provided the rural community with options of domesticity, or the ability to search for new opportunities within the commuting distance of the family farm. The automobile provided the farm family with opportunities to gain off-farm employment with the goal of remaining on the farm as long as possible. And, third, the presence of the automobile, along with the technology used to create the automobile, changed the dynamics of rural life by facilitating the rapid transfer of technology across the rural countryside. This study will analyze these three unique ways that Steinbeck used the landscape of the automobile in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

As much as the automobile changed the lives of the farm families, the automobile industry was also changed dramatically by the rural user. The relationship between the rural automobile driver and the automobile manufacturer was a close one that resulted in design changes requested by those using the automobile as a farm vehicle.13

Bossemeyer discussed the growth of automobile mobility over the first half of the 20th Century. He noted that from 1920 through 1940 the numbers of people traveling by public carrier had dramatically decreased while those traveling by private automobile had significantly increased, showing the effect the automobile was having on the country in general.14

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13 Kline and Pinch argue that the automotive industry was very sympathetic to the inputs provided by rural automobile users. The automobile manufacturers understood that rural users were highly dependent on the mobility provided by the automobile and were key in the social construction of the automobile, making them a force to be listened to. Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch, “Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States,” *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 1996), 764.

14 Bossemeyer stated that from 1920, when a great number of people moved about in a pattern set by railroad tracks, to 1940, when a vastly greater number of people moved around a great deal more in all of their daily pursuits, the pattern had changed so that about 85 per cent of the traveling was done by private automobile and only 15 per cent by public carrier.” Bossemeyer, “American Mobility,” 114.
By the 1930s the automobile was becoming accepted as the preferred method of
tavel, replacing the railroad out of convenience and freedom of mobility. A traveler
could now go anywhere there were roads. The traveler’s vision was no longer held in
check by the railroad schedule and tracks. Freedom of choice was now in the hands of
the traveler.

The automobile became such an important part of American life that families would
sacrifice other important items for the opportunity to purchase an automobile. In 1922
the Literary Digest reported that,

The clearly evident fact is that the passenger automobile has become so
important a factor in American life that thousands of families of moderate
means are entirely willing to make serious sacrifices of other things in
order to be able to possess them.\footnote{\textit{\textit{Who Owns a Motor Car?}} Literary Digest 75, (November 11, 1922), 78.}

The presence of the automobile increased mobility because it not only made travel
more convenient and fast, but automobiles were also more reliable than previous modes
of transportation.\footnote{Jakle and Sculle argue this point in \textit{Motoring}, 20.} The American love for the automobile, “not only began to replace
travel previously undertaken by rail (especially mass transit) but encouraged new travel
that previously might not have been undertaken at all.”\footnote{Jakle and Sculle, \textit{Motoring}, 20.}

There was another level of freedom that the reliance on the automobile provided farm
families. It allowed them to respond to shifting work conditions by pursuing work in
other places. The farm families could pack up their belongings and head for new
opportunities wherever their expertise was needed. But, the mobility of the automobile
also presented them with new alternatives closer to home. The commute to town was no
longer a large cultural divide. The farm family could make the trip quickly, safely, and more easily in any type of weather with the use of their automobile.

One of the big differences brought on by bridging the cultural divide between life on the family farm and life in town was that now the farm family had a better opportunity to become a part of the larger community. It was no longer necessary for a person to live in town to be able to take advantage of the benefits of the town. With the introduction of the automobile the movie theater, the restaurant, the grocery store, the feed store, the post office, and most importantly the schools, all became accessible for the farm family. It was no longer an all day trip to visit the town, in many instances the trip could be made in a very short time. Most of these entities had relied primarily on a customer base of those families who lived in town, but now their customer base grew as farm families became more mobile. In fact, many businesses could now employ members of farm families on a regular basis who not long before had lived too far away to commute. They still lived the same distance away, but the difficulty of commuting had become easier, and the farm families could now take advantage of the stability of working off of the farm. The relative distance of available opportunities had decreased.

These two definitions of mobility are in direct competition with each other. Transportation mobility helped a farm family cope with economics by moving on to another location. The family could improve their circumstances by fleeing the current situation and starting over. On the other hand, the introduction of the automobile helped promote domestic mobility, or the family’s ability to search for new opportunities within the commuting distance of the family farm while remaining firmly fixed to the family’s permanent homestead. The automobile gave the family a greater capability to be more
productive at home and not have to look for new work in other locations. Transportation mobility removed the family from the problem, while domestic mobility helped them cope with the problem. Use of the automobile enabled the farm family to pursue either path of mobility; the automobile made it easier to move west and escape the situation on the plains, but it also made it easier to secure work off of the farm in town. For the purposes of this study we will call the desire to escape the situation by fleeing "mobility" and the decision to stay firmly planted and cope with the problems of "domesticity."

In *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joad family had already lost their home; and Steinbeck chose to have their response become mobile and to flee the situation. But, there are other places in the story where Steinbeck crafted a landscape surrounding the automobile that was a landscape of domesticity, where the automobile helped the farm families stay grounded on the family farm. We will continue our look at the struggle between these two present and conflicting natures of mobility and domesticity; the desire to move and the desire to stay firmly planted as Steinbeck used them in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

After the Joad family had been evicted from their tenant farm on the Plains and was in-between homes the automobile even served them as a home by proxy. All the family's major decisions were made in or near the automobile, the automobile shielded them from the hazards of the road, and the automobile was one of the last remaining artifacts they brought from the Plains to California. The automobile was the only item of permanence left in their lives.

**The Automobile As a Symbol of Mobility**

The Depression and the Dustbowl dominated the headlines in the 1930s. Families in the southern plains were leaving their tenant farms and moving west in large numbers as
the automobile helped them cope with difficult times through the options it brought them. They had the opportunity to leave a difficult environment behind in search of better circumstances, or for those lucky enough to own their farms and have a decision to leave or stay, to expand their search for employment beyond the family farm.

Many farm families found themselves in the same situation as Steinbeck’s Joad family. They had served as tenant farmers, renting farmland with a payment of a portion of the crops, or a portion of the profit, because they could not afford to purchase land of their own. The tenant farmers cared for the land as if it was their own, but in reality it was not. The land was typically owned by an absentee landlord, who was only concerned with collecting his or her portion of the profits after harvest season.\textsuperscript{18} When economic times became more difficult, the landlords decided they could make a larger profit through merging their small farms into larger operations or by selling their land to agricultural conglomerates. Almost overnight the tenant farm system on the southern plains became obsolete as the owners opted for merging or selling their farms. The arrival of the automobile provided the tenant farm families with an opportunity to plan their escape and dream about moving west where they would be needed to work the farm fields.

The rapid rise in the use of the automobile for mobility led to changes in the landscape. Bossemeyer commented on one of the more obvious changes that the use of the automobile created in the highway landscape. He wrote that in the 1920s many people owned automobiles, but with a lack of adequate transcontinental highways a paving program was started to rapidly construct new highways. The construction of new highways was met with a greater number of automobile drivers. The freedom of driving

on the open road was contagious and within 20 years the preeminence of the railroads was gone and the automobile had become king.\textsuperscript{19}

Steinbeck understood the significant impact the automobile had on American culture and the American landscape and demonstrated this through the largest landscape shift in \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}. Steinbeck made this shift between the solid foundation and sedentary living on the family farm to that of living on the road, with no foundation other than the interrelationships within the family and dependence on the automobile. He made this shift early in the initial chapters of the novel to illustrate the Joad family’s inability to reverse the situation they found themselves in after leaving the farm.

In the early chapters of \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}, as Tom continued to make his way home, he met up with an old friend Casy, who would be his companion for much of the rest of the story. Tom and Casy had walked across the Oklahoma landscape on their way to the Joad family farmstead, giving Steinbeck the perfect opportunity to create a fierce landscape to prepare the reader for what was about to happen.

As Tom and Casy approached the Joad farm the landscape worsened. The first glimpse of the family farm after being released from prison wasn’t good for Tom. Steinbeck was preparing the reader for the shift from the farm home to the truck as the focus of the family. He described the dead home when he wrote,

\begin{quote}
The small unpainted house was mashed at one corner, and it had been pushed off its foundation so that it slumped at an angle, its blind front windows pointing at a spot of sky well above the horizon...Where the dooryard had been pounded hard by the bare feet of children and by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Bossemeyer stated that “By the middle 1920’s, a great many people owned automobiles, and although there were no suitable transcontinental highways...they took to their cars and took off in all directions...therefore paved highways were built everywhere. Many motels were built so the automobile tourist can always find accommodations wherever nightfall overtakes him. Within twenty years, from 1920 to 1940, the railroads lost their supremacy in the passenger business to the automobiles and to other rubber-tired vehicles- the bus and the airplane. And the hotels were confronted with formidable competition from the motor courts.” Bossemeyer, “American Mobility,” 114.
stamping horses’ hooves and by the broad wagon wheels, it was cultivated now, and the dark green, dusty cotton grew. Young Tom stared for a long time..."Jesus!" he said at last. "Hell musta popped here. There ain't nobody livin' there." (GOW, 43)

Steinbeck used this scene to emphasize the Joad family’s severed relationship with the family farm. There was nothing left for them on the farm and they had no choice other than to leave and pursue another path for their economic livelihood.

It is interesting to note that the Joads couldn’t make a living on the farm partly because of the inability to grow cotton due to Dust Bowl conditions. Why then does Steinbeck describe Tom and Casy’s first view of the family farm with cotton growing “dark green” and “dusty?” I argue that Steinbeck tried to show that while the ability to produce crops was diminished in the short-term through economic and environmental concerns, the long-term outlook for the family farm was much more bleak. The sun was setting on the economic processes that supported the small family farm and the new economic picture was not so favorable. As the physical drought continued, so did the economic drought. The cotton growing on the abandoned farm illustrated the economic system for the small farmer would be much more difficult to fix than the physical drought. If the problem was solely drought related Steinbeck would not have placed the cotton on the abandoned farm, because nothing would grow in those conditions. But he illustrated that the physical environment would eventually heal itself leaving the economic problems in place. The economic effects of the change in technology that allowed farmers to work larger plots of land would have much longer lasting effects on the farming communities than the environmental disaster of the drought. A man with a tractor could now take the place of twelve to fourteen farm families, so the families were no longer needed to nurture the system. The view of farm life had changed from one
with the farmer fulfilling the role as caretaker to one with the farmer fulfilling the role of a business manager. Landlords would no longer be happy to passively rent their land to sharecroppers who had marginal profits on the land. They were now looking to actively maximize their profits through intensive management of the business processes that drove agriculture.

Tom was expecting to be reunited with the familiarity of the landscape of home. He believed everything would be fine if he could only get back to the familiar environment and safety of the home he knew. It wasn’t to be so. During the four years, while Tom served time in prison, the collapse of the stock market, the economic effects of the great depression, and the environmental disaster of the dust bowl all radically changed life on his family’s farm. The world Tom knew was quickly being replaced by agribusiness, mechanization, and a sense of despair and loss of identity among the tenant farmers. The economics of the world had completely changed in a short amount of time. All that Tom knew and held dear as the foundational characteristics of his life: family, farm, and community was removed or replaced.

Tom then looked into the barn and found the condition of the barn,

Deserted...there was a skittering on the floor and a family of mice faded in under the straw. Joad paused at the entrance to the tool-shed leanto, and no tools were there- a broken plow point, a mess of hay wire...an iron wheel from a hay rake and a rat-gnawed mule collar, a flat gallon oil can crusted with dirt and oil, and a pair of torn overalls...”There ain’t nothing left,” said Joad. “We had pretty nice tools. There ain’t nothin’ left.”

(GOW, 43)

The description of Tom searching around the farm is a key point in The Grapes of Wrath. Just as the look around the farm told of its abandonment, it was also describing the abandonment of the tenant farming way of life. The peek inside the barn was
symbolic of what would happen over the course of the story to the Joad family and society in general. The mice skittering could be interpreted as those farm families who were forced off their farms and were fleeing to California to escape the economic problems they found in Oklahoma.

The farm tools inside the barn could also represent the lives of the farm families. The only tools that were there were those left behind when the Joads abandoned the farm. When the economics of monocropping forced the tenant farm families off the farm all that was left behind were the dilapidated farm houses, broken implements, and memories of a lifestyle that had vanished. The Joads’ farming tools were left behind because they weren’t needed any longer and they would become a liability to the family’s mobility. When monocropping and mechanization facilitated the move from agriculture to agribusiness, those tenant farm families were treated like the discarded farm tools in the barn. They were not needed any longer, were seen as a liability for the economic progress of the plains, and were forced off the farm—relics of a by-gone era.

Tom and Casy’s next stop on the farm was at the watering trough. Steinbeck described its condition,

The proper weeds that should grow under a trough were gone and the old thick wood of the trough was dry and cracked. On the well-cap the bolts that had held the pump stuck up, their threads rusty and the nuts gone. Joad looked into the tube of the well and spat and listened. He dropped a clod down the well and listened. (GOW, 43)

Water represented life on the plains farm and the water was gone. A dryland plains farm with no water was worthless, and the symbology of the farm tells us volumes about those who lived there. In the economic hierarchy they were viewed as useless also.
Tom and Casy came across more evidence that life on the farm was dead. The watering trough was dry for two reasons. First, because the farm’s well had run out of water. The life giving water that fueled all activity on a plains farm had given out signifying that the lifeblood of the farm was gone. Second, the trough was dry because it was no longer needed. The farm horses and the work they accomplished were replaced by the tractor. Tractors didn’t need water troughs, barns, or any other special treatment. At the end of the day they could either be parked in the barn or just left in the field until needed next. Unlike the living breathing animals that would typically work on a farm, they didn’t require any upkeep at the end of the day.

The farm scene that Steinbeck crafted was one of total abandonment. After Tom and Casy looked around they walked out to the farmhouse porch and sat down to think. Appropriately the sun was going down. Steinbeck portrayed the landscape of the farm thusly,

The sun had lowered until it came through the angled end windows now, and it flashed on the edges of the broken glass...The evening light was on the fields, and the cotton plants threw long shadows on the ground, and the molting willow tree threw a long shadow. (GOW, 45)

The sun had set on the Joad family farm and on their tenant farming way of life. The farmhouse was a series of broken and shattered relics and the people were all gone. Tom and Casy were about to set out in search of the family and also to find answers to the questions they had about what had happened to the way of life they had known on the farm. Steinbeck used the description in this scene to create that feeling of uncertainty or in-betweenness regarding the future of the Joad family. The family had moved on to another location and the permanence of the family home on the farm had already been replaced by the mobility of the automobile. During Tom’s four years in prison the values
of the Joad family had changed significantly, as he was about to witness. Steinbeck highlighted this tension through the change of the primary landscape from that of the farm to that of the automobile.

The Joad family was a strong one and the ties that kept them together were deep. The family had moved on to Uncle John’s farm to prepare for their move westward to California. The family abandoned their farmstead which had been consumed by the economic machine that was now feeding the very system that oppressed the Joads.

The reason why Steinbeck went into such detail describing the landscape of the death of the family farm, and the reason why I have dedicated so much space to it in this study is because of the dramatic change Steinbeck introduced immediately after the description of the dead farm. Something would need to replace the farm as the central anchor in the family’s existence. The walk to Uncle John’s farmstead was a long one, and neither Tom nor Casy knew what to expect when they arrived, but it symbolized what was happening in America in the early 1930s. As they neared the farmstead Steinbeck painted a scene that closed out his landscape description of the family farm. He wrote of a sunrise,

A redness grew up out of the eastern horizon, and on the ground birds began to chirp, sharply. “Look!” said Joad. “Right ahead. That’s Uncle John’s tank”...The hulk of the tank stood above a rise. Joad, hurrying, raised a cloud of dust about his knees...They saw the tank legs now, and the house, a square little box, unpainted and bare, and the barn, low-roofed and huddled. Smoke was rising from the tin chimney of the house. In the yard was a litter, piled furniture, the blades and motor of the windmill, bedsteads, chairs, tables. “Holy Christ, they’re fixin’ to go!” (GOW, 72)

The landscape created by Steinbeck signaled a change. The sun was rising with the arrival of a new day and as Tom and Casy viewed the windmill it was clear that the old life on the farm was gone. The windmill was in disarray, a windmill that provided the water for the farm to live on. Without a windmill pumping the water out of the ground
there would be no water, or only limited water at the farm. Uncle John’s farmstead had experienced the same fate as the Joad farmstead, it had died. No water meant there were no animals for plowing and planting. No plowing and planting meant there was no income. It was obvious that life on this farm was over.

The pile of litter in the yard showed that the Joads were in the process of leaving. Furniture, farm implements, and memorabilia were all discarded. Anything that would not help the family with its transition from a sedentary agricultural lifestyle in Oklahoma to the mobile lifestyle of a migrant could only be viewed as an obstacle to get in the way. The items had to be left behind, as if the Joad family was shedding its skin to reveal a new life from within. Steinbeck put these obstacles in the Joad family’s way to show the difficulty of transitioning from a life of domesticity to a life of mobility. Shedding the former life was a messy process that forever haunted those families who moved west. But, as they readied to leave Oklahoma, the Joad family felt as if they had some control of their future again. Steinbeck continued with the transition,

A truck stood in the yard, a truck with high sides, but a strange truck, for while the front of it was a sedan, the top had been cut off in the middle and the truck bed fit on. And as they drew near, the men could hear pounding from the yard, and as the rim of the blinding sun came up over the horizon, it fell on the truck, and they saw a man and the flash of his hammer as it rose and fell. (GOW, 72)

Almost as if it had been an actor illuminated by a spotlight, Steinbeck introduced the new character that he would anchor the rest of the story around: the family automobile. It was an abrupt change from the permanence of the house to the temporary nature of the automobile, but the Joad family was in store for some major changes in this next part of the novel. The family farm was now officially dead, replaced by the automobile as the most important item in the lives of the Joad family.
The significance of the change in focus from the family farm to the family truck began before the Joads left Sallisaw. Steinbeck placed a large emphasis on the family automobile and the opportunity it brought to the Joad’s dream of a better life. The change from the permanence of the family farm to the transient nature of the family automobile was seen in Steinbeck’s description of the landscape Tom and Casy saw when they arrived at Uncle John’s house. Instead of describing Uncle John’s house using some of the same terms as in the encounter at the Joad family homestead, this time Steinbeck placed his emphasis on the description of the family automobile at Uncle John’s homestead. The family automobile had been altered by the Joads to make it meet their needs and provide them comfort for the trip west. They were no longer willing to sit back and have someone else dictate their response, they would now take matters into their own hands, by using the automobile as a tool of mobility and respond by fleeing the situation in Sallisaw. This was a significant shift in the nature of the novel. The possession of an automobile is what made the transition possible for the Joads. Without the automobile the trip would have been much more difficult and they may not have chosen to make it. With the automobile becoming the new permanent structure and central focus of the Joad family the tragedy of losing the farm was soon replaced by the excitement of leaving for California.

After Steinbeck introduced the Joads’ automobile to the story, the landscape of the family farm changed dramatically. Steinbeck used this transition as the opportunity to move from a landscape centered on the family farm to one centered on transportation mobility. To show that the transition was irreversible, he devoted an entire interchapter
to the landscape of the family farm after the arrival of the automobile and the farmer's decision to leave.\(^{20}\)

The tenant farmers all felt a sense of attachment to the places they had farmed, even though it was not legally their land. But, Steinbeck illustrated the farmers’ transition from reliance on the farmstead to provide permanence to the reliance on the automobile to provide mobility in his description of the landscape. The sense of ownership inherent in the tenant farmers’ concept of place ran so strong through their blood that when they were pushed off the land their lives were forever altered. Steinbeck had to destroy that sense of ownership and replace it by a sense of abandonment. He summed up their feelings as he tried to capture the destruction of that strong attachment to a sense of place when he wrote,

> The anger of the moment, the thousand pictures, that’s us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can’t start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man—he got it all right, but we have it still. And when the owner men told us to go, that’s us; and when the tractor hit the house, that’s us until we’re dead. \((GOW, 89)\)

The description of the anguish the tenants felt as they made the decision to leave behind their accumulated possessions and become mobile was one of difficult stress. The decisions being made regarding what to take with them on the journey west and what to leave behind were heart wrenching. But when they were ready to leave the farm, they acted quickly and whatever couldn’t be sold in town was normally burned before they left the farmstead. They were headed for a new life in the West and the reminders of all they were leaving behind had now become disposable. They really had no alternative.

\(^{20}\) Steinbeck devoted Chapter 11 \((GOW, 117-118)\), an interchapter in *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a description of the abandonment seen in the vacant houses left on the land in Oklahoma. When the farmers left their homes behind it was as if the life had been sucked out of the land.
Steinbeck summarized the feelings well when he described the following scene of a family selling all their memories,

Well, take it- all junk- and give me five dollars. You’re not buying only junk, you’re buying junked lives. And more- you’ll see- you’re buying bitterness. Buying a plow to plow your own children under, buying the arms and spirits that might have saved you. Five dollars, not four. I can’t haul ‘em back- Well, take ‘em for four. But I warn you, you’re buying what will plow your own children under. (GOW, 88)

Roy Skinner was a native Coloradan, a dryland farmer from the four corners area of Colorado, who was forced out by the Dust Bowl. I remember hearing him tell his stories of leaving Colorado and moving west to California at family reunions and to anyone who asked him. His most difficult memory, and one that would cause him the most pain to recollect, was the memory of selling off his team and wagon. It would still make him tear up when telling the story over fifty years later just before he died. Leaving Colorado and selling off the team he believed marked him as a failure, and it was a feeling he was never able to overcome.21

Steinbeck captured the feelings of all those like Roy Skinner with regards to attachment to place when he wrote,

To California or any place- every one a drum major leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness. And some day- the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they’ll all walk together, and there’ll be a dead terror from it. (GOW, 89)

People never got over being forced off the land.

The truck played a large role making the transition from farm life to migrant life. It was the truck that took the family’s belongings to market to sell them for money to pay for the trip west. When the Joad family sold their belongings in town it was a difficult

day for them. Steinbeck visualized the depressing feeling in the landscape when the
truck came back from town after selling the belongings. He wrote,

In the late afternoon the truck came back, bumping and rattling through
the dust, and there was a layer of dust in the bed, and the hood was
covered with dust, and the headlights were obscured with a red film. The
sun was setting when they came back, and the earth was bloody in its
setting light. (GOW, 98)

The truck came back layered with dust so that even if the family sold all their
belongings they would still have the foundation of family home, farm, and Oklahoma
running through their lives. The Oklahoma dust and dirt would always remain in their
system metaphorically telling us that they will forever be Okies no matter where they
ended up. The Dust Bowl may have contributed to their demise in Oklahoma, but the
foundation of the family was built in Oklahoma and would be with them for the
remainder of their lives.

The sun was setting as the truck came back home, setting on the farm and the way of
life that the Joad family had lived. The reference to the earth being bloody in its setting
light is a great description of the situation of prying the family off the land they had
farmed and protected for so many years. The earth had been unkind to the Joad family
lately, and now it would no longer provide for them. Many people had lost their lives
protecting the land, and a few more would die before the family reached California.

The ride home contained a landscape full of references to what would happen later in
the novel and changes that were about to happen.

They fell silent while the truck battered along... There was a wooden
creaking from the wheels, and a thin jet of steam escaped through a hole in
the top of the radiator cap. The truck pulled a high whirling column of red
dust behind it. They rumbled up the last little rise while the sun was still
half-face above the horizon, and they bore down on the house as it
disappeared. The brakes squealed when they stopped, and the sound printed in Al’s head—no lining left. (GOW, 100)

Steinbeck used the illustration of the setting sun again as the truck approached the farm house. Over and over he reinforced the idea that the old way of life was over and in this case the Joad’s life on the farm had seen its last day. He kept repeating the sun set for effect, so that the reader could not miss the significance of it. The Joad family would be leaving in the morning and experiencing the adventure of migration to California. Al’s thoughts that there was no lining left leads one to believe the Joad family had lost the final battle for the farm and there would be no turning back from this point.

The final scene of the day marked the start of a new chapter in the life of the Joad family. When the truck returned home,

The evening was hot, and the thrust of light still flowed up from the western horizon. And without any signal the family gathered by the truck, and the congress, the family government, went into session. (GOW, 101)

The shift of focus had officially taken place. The important decisions the family was making now involved the truck. The farm life was hereby terminated and the migrant life had begun.

At one time or another, as the time came to pull up stakes and physically move west each tenant farm family faced the question, “how can we continue to live without the memories that we have left behind?” “How will we know it’s us without our past?” “What will guide us through the future?” Steinbeck answered these questions once and for all when he wrote, “Leave it. Burn it.” (GOW, 90) Not long after the decision was made to burn their remaining possessions the thought set in that it would not help to linger at the farm, that they would have to leave the land and that sooner was better than later. Suddenly the families would become nervous. They felt like they had to,
Get out quick now. Can’t wait. We can’t wait. And they piled up the goods in the yards and set fire to them. They stood and watched them burning, and then frantically they loaded up the cars and drove away, drove in the dust. The dust hung in the air for a long time after the loaded cars had passed. (GOW, 91)

Steinbeck intended to ensure the reader understood the significance of the transition from the family homestead to the family automobile, so over the course of the next few chapters he again emphasized the family’s preparations for leaving Oklahoma. Steinbeck wanted to make sure the reader didn’t miss the entrance of the automobile into story and the place of prominence it commanded with the Joad family, so he made it incredibly obvious in the landscape he described as the family was preparing to leave the farm. If there was any question of the new found significance of the family truck, Steinbeck answered them as he wrote,

The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but the truck was the active thing, the living principle. The ancient Hudson...this was the new hearth, the living center of the family; half passenger car and half truck, high-sided and clumsy. (GOW, 101)

The Joad truck became the central focus of the family. As Steinbeck wrote, it became the “new hearth,” the place where the family came together, made decisions, cooked (provided sustenance), and spent time visualizing the future. The hearth was the central place the family interacted. The truck now provided the same function. The truck was a mobile hearth, a place that became of prime importance to the family as the only connection to their home past home on the Plains.

Early in the morning, as the Joad family was to leave their home for California, Steinbeck described breaking ties with the land. The farm, the hills, the buildings, the roads, the cotton, all began to run together into one strange unfamiliar landscape. It was
no longer the familiar sight of home, but the sight of some place they were meant to leave
behind. He described the landscape as the family departed,

The light was sifting rapidly over the land. And the movement of the
family stopped. They stood about, reluctant to make the first active move
to go... They saw the shed take shape against the light, and they saw the
lanterns pale until they no longer cast their circles of yellow light. The
stars went out, few by few, toward the west. And still the family stood
about like dream walkers, their eyes focused panoramically, seeing no
detail, but the whole dawn, the whole land, the whole texture of the
country at once. \textit{(GOW, 114)}

Steinbeck communicated the significance of the move in the shift of focus for the
novel. The old life was dead, the new life is born. It is time to move on! The novel
shifts to a new scene with migration as the stage and Highway 66 as the landscape they
pass through. Mobility is the key to a new life in the Eden of California and the
automobile is the tool that provided the family that mobility.

The life on the family farm was a life characterized by stability and dependence. The
farm meant everything to the family and was the most important artifact on the Oklahoma
landscape. This new shift in focus from the farm to the automobile required the members
of the family to bond together to accomplish tasks, to communicate as they worked
together, and to form relationships that helped the group remain strong. Once the
transition was made to the new life of mobility and independence, with the focus on the
automobile, the family unit began to deteriorate. Over the next several chapters in the
story we begin to see the Joad family members leave the family through either death
(Grandpa and Grandma) or choice (Noah, Casy, Connie, and Tom). The automobile
helped the family become more independent from their economic conditions, but did so
at the expense of group cohesion. The loss of the sense of permanence that came with
the anchor of the family farm transitioned to a life of in-betweenness as a migrant family. The ability to be mobile came at a high cost.

**The Automobile As a Symbol of Domesticity**

The presence of the automobile facilitated the rapid transformation of many American farm families from the tenant farms of the southern plains to migrant laborers in the farm fields of the west coast. With the arrival of the automobile also came a reliance on mobility and the enormous changes in the lives of those who owned their own farms and chose to stay on them. The contrast of the automobile’s utility to those who chose to leave the farm as compared with those who chose to stay on the farm was highlighted in the dual nature of Steinbeck’s landscape of the automobile. This dual nature resulted from the use of the automobile to create a balance between mobility and domesticity.

People living in small towns across America became dependent on the mobility the automobile brought them, but for those choosing to stay on the farm it also provided opportunities to battle the economic “monster.” The changes the automobile brought to the rural landscape were important enough that Steinbeck dedicated an entire interchapter in *The Grapes of Wrath* to describe the visual changes that resulted from the introduction of the automobile in rural America.\(^{22}\) The small-town American landscape he visualized in *The Grapes of Wrath* is a part of what we experience today.

Small towns such as Sallisaw, Oklahoma, became dramatically altered with the introduction of the automobile. One landscape artifact that signaled the new reliance on the automobile was the number of automobile dealerships that began appearing in many

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\(^{22}\) Chapter 7 (GOW, 64-68) in *The Grapes of Wrath* is an interchapter written by Steinbeck that was dedicated to the automobile’s impact on the rural, small town American landscape.
Plains small towns. Steinbeck documented this change when he described a landscape we are all familiar with in today's America when he wrote,

In the towns, on the edges of the towns, in fields, in vacant lots, the used-car yards, the wrecker's yards, the garages with blazoned signs- Used Cars, Good Used Cars. Cheap transportation, three trailers, '27 Ford, clean. Checked cars, guaranteed cars. Free radio. Car with 100 gallons of gas free. Come in and look. Used Cars. No Overhead. (GOW, 64)

There wasn't much capital required to open a used car lot. All a person needed was a lot and a house large enough for a desk and chair and a blue book. Sheaf of contracts, dog-eared, held with paper clips, and a neat pile of unused contracts. Pen- keep it full, keep it working. A sale's been lost 'cause a pen didn't work. (GOW, 64)

The automobile and its effect on the landscape has become an enduring quality in small town America.

The Plains landscape changed dramatically as the demand for automobiles increased. Every small town had their used car dealer. The automobile had become more than just a luxury, it had become a necessity. For those families still on the farm it helped them work larger plots of land and brought more ease in transporting crops to market. And, for those families who had already lost their farms the automobile became the primary mode of coping with the economic uncertainty of the future. Owning an automobile gave the farm families options they never had before, and assured them that if the situation they found themselves in was not good that they could search for the right circumstances.

Steinbeck continued his description of the impact the used-car sales lots had on the small town landscape by writing about another scene every American is familiar with,

Flags, red and white, white and blue- all along the curb. Used Cars. Good Used Cars. (GOW, 65)
Today we take for granted the car dealerships dotting our landscape, but in the 1930s these were relatively new artifacts, documenting the growing dependence on the automobile for mobility and domestic uses. The economic impact of the used-car lots wasn’t missed by Steinbeck either. He wrote,

"Today’s bargain-up on the platform. Never sell it. Makes folks come in, though. If we sold that bargain at that price we’d hardly make a dime. Tell ’em it’s jus sold. Take out that yard battery before you make delivery. Put in a dumb cell. Christ, what they want for six bits? Roll up your sleeves—pitch in. This ain’t gonna last. If I had enough jalopies I’d retire in six months. (GOW, 65)"

The Joads were “taken for a ride” by their unscrupulous car dealer, but the historic account of the automobile’s effect on rural America has its positive aspects as well. With the help of the automobile, cotton was no longer the only dominant feature of the southern plains landscape. The automobile began to show up in many different ways; through advertisements, service stations and garages, used-car sales lots, and paved roads.

The use of the automobile not only helped the family farmer cope with a sputtering economy, but it also helped small-town America connect to the rest of the nation. The automobile, the tool making access to the highway possible, was responsible for the rapid diffusion of technology across the country. Historically, people often distrusted roads because they felt threatened by the new ideas and people that came to town from outside the community,²³ but over time it was these ideas and people that helped the small and isolated towns become more connected to the larger country. The road and the automobile were platforms to spread ideas throughout America, which rapidly helped the

nation become more homogeneous and united, smoothing out the regional differences among the various parts of the country.24

The transportation mobility the automobile brought to the small farmer increased his or her ability to work off of the farm and has helped the American farmer to become less reliant on a very unstable agricultural economy. Marsh and Collett stated that the Ford Model T “democratized mobility, opened up the suburbs. Brought the farmer to town, emptied the churches on Sunday.”25 Bringing the farmers to town has helped the small farmer to diversify and protect the family’s income. Off-farm employment offers an income supplement, at the expense of the opportunity cost of what could be earned on the farm, but it also offers a farmer the opportunity to combine income from two sources with potentially different risk characteristics.26 What could the farmer have accomplished on the farm with the time he spent working off the farm? According to Harold Breimyer’s article, “The Changing American Farm,” the most productive and viable unit in the farm economy is the part-time farmer, which does not depend heavily on farm income.27 The domestic mobility provided by the automobile is what made off-farm employment more accessible. Commuting to the workplace was no longer limited to the distance a worker could walk, and this made working off the farm much more possible for those farms located farther outside the town’s limits.

Steinbeck highlighted the functionality of the automobile, and how it helped the southern plains farmer cope with the economic problems through his description of its

utility in the landscape. As just discussed, the automobile helped the families interact economically with the rural communities providing them services by giving them options. The Joad family’s chosen option was to move west, so the automobile helped them prepare for the move by providing the medium for them to move their belongings to town in order to sell them and through facilitating closure with the local community before they left. But, Steinbeck also described the automobile as a tool that enabled the small farmer who had the option of remaining on the farm with a powerful vehicle to fight back at economic circumstances that were out of control.

The ability to work off the farm allowed many farm families, primarily those who owned their land and had the option to remain, anchored to the family farm. The number of total American farms significantly decreased throughout the 20th Century forcing those farm families who could not remain economically viable to choose between moving off the land to seek employment in other job sectors, or seek off-farm employment while remaining on the farm. In a survey of farmers’ attitudes and motivations, Bartlett found that the primary reason farmers worked off the farm was the variability, risk, and uncertainty associated with farm income. Sander found that total income was significantly less variable when farmers and their spouses worked off the farm. The availability of automobile transportation in the 1930s fueled this desire to stabilize income through off-farm work. The economy of the 1930s Plains was not conducive to finding steady work off the farm, but for those who were able to exploit the mobility the

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28 Mishra and Goodwin argued that the trend continued after the 1930s and that from 1950 to 1993 alone the total number of farms in the United States decreased by 63.5%, and over the same period, the total number of farm operators decreased by 18.9%, thus showing the conglomeration and merging of many small farms into larger, more economically viable enterprises. Ashok K. Mishra and Barry K. Goodwin, “Farm Income Variability and the Supply of Off-Farm Labor.” American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Volume 79, Number 3, (August 1997), 880.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
automobile provided it permitted the farmer to take advantage of employment opportunities when they became available. These opportunities were not available prior to the introduction of the automobile in the rural communities. The automobile also helped farm families become more of an integrated part of the small-town economy rather than remaining isolated on the farm.

Steinbeck used the landscape of small-town Oklahoma to illustrate that the automobile provided the farm families with a tool that empowered them to make decisions. Although many chose to abandon the family farm and move west, the automobile, at a minimum, provided the farm families with options other than severing all ties with the land they had farmed for generations. Would those tenant farmers who didn’t own the land they farmed choose to move west in search of steady on-farm employment or choose to stay behind and fight the “monster” for a while longer by moving into town and trying to secure off-farm employment? For those who owned their farms, would they choose to sell off or abandon their farms and move west to start over, or secure off-farm employment and stay rooted on the farm? The automobile, as no tool had done to this point, provided the farm family the opportunity to make their own choice. It was a complicated decision and one that illustrated that the rural economics of the 1930s was a complex and difficult field to navigate. The automobile provided the farm families with the hope that they could continue to live another day and prolong their survival on the farm.

The Automobile As a Symbol of The Assembly Line Process

Steinbeck was perceptive in annotating the assembly line processes existing in the modern agricultural processes both in Oklahoma and California. In many ways the
economic processes responsible for the production of the automobile were the same processes the Joads encountered in the farm fields. Steinbeck introduced these processes through the landscape surrounding the automobile.

The mass production processes that were being used in the automobile assembly lines in the Midwest found their way into the processes of the agricultural farm fields of California and eventually into other parts of the country. The small farmers who cared for their crops from planting to harvest, as the Joads had, began to be replaced by machines and hired hands who, together, could produce agricultural products faster and more efficiently, but who only had control over small, limited parts of the production process. The automobile manufacturing industry found that the cradle to grave production method was slow, unscientific, and inflexible, and limited the amount of product an employee could produce. The assembly line method was a more “scientific” method that was capable of boosting production to previously unheard of levels by fine-tuning small processes within the production system. These same production principles translated well from the automobile factories to the agricultural factories.

The manufacturing of an automobile is a very complex process which requires specialization and synchronization to complete. The complexity of the process forced a change in methods of mass production as industry began to adopt technology and focus on the scientific study of assembly line manufacturing methods. The assembly line became a place to experiment with new production techniques. A small change in production techniques initiated in an assembly line can save a few seconds per item, and over the course of a large assembly line running twenty-four hours per day could make a massive difference in production capabilities. The assembly line process was used
extensively for the production of the automobile and was so successful that it found its way into factories and other production lines across the country. It streamlined the production time and costs and revolutionized the automobile industry.

Mass production of automobiles via the assembly line method was best exhibited by the Ford Motor Company. In 1908, when Model T production started Ford constantly worked to reduce production costs through mass-production which allowed them to reduce the price of the Model T to $213. At that price it became affordable for the masses. These mass-production strategies evolved into what we know as the assembly line process which Ford introduced in 1914 in the Highland Park manufacturing plant and in 1926 in the River Rouge manufacturing plant. The Highland Park plant was equipped with machines that speeded up individual movements and minimized the human effort as much as possible. These two plants are the best examples of the early fully functional assembly line manufacturing process.

A. J. Scott described the components of the assembly line method of production as “a search for massive internal economies of scale based on assembly line methods, technical divisions of labour and standardization of outputs.” The assembly line production process began with the ability of a craftsman, who previously had responsibility to create a product from cradle to grave, and through elimination of all inefficiencies and the compartmentalization and specialization of tasks broke the process down into small, repeatable tasks, so that each worker would reduce their area of responsibility from the

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33 Jakle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 16.
entire production process to smaller, more manageable, portions of production. In “Flexible Production Systems and Regional Development,” Scott highlighted the economies of scale that were emphasized in this process. But, as the factory production line became more efficient, the compartmentalization of skills also meant that the worker became alienated from the overall production process. Under the pre-assembly line production methods, the worker had “ownership” of all tasks of production as he or she was responsible for the entire production process. With the assembly line method of production the employee’s “ownership” of the product was reduced to the area of production he or she had control over, resulting in alienation from the completed product. The changes in production methods and the associated shift in process ownership resulted in a high turnover rate at the Ford factories adopting the assembly line methods.35

The craftsmanship and artisanship involved in the production of the automobile had been replaced by compartmentalization. After the introduction of the assembly line process production would hinge on simplified, repeatable tasks. Soon the tasks were so simplified and repeatable that in many positions paid employees were replaced by machines to accomplish the production tasks. In “Making Cars and Making Money in the Interwar Automobile Industry: Economies of Scale and Scope and the Manufacturing Behind the Marketing,” Daniel M. G. Raff outlined the changes to the production methods used at the Ford automobile plant. Raff stated that, “The thrust of the Ford innovations was to routinize radically all but a handful of the jobs at the plant. Workforce skills that were still crucial for producing autos elsewhere became progressively irrelevant to making cars at Ford, because Ford engineers built those skills into forges,

35 Jakle and Sculle, Motoring, 17.
foundries, and (ultimately) single-purpose machine tools that made completely
interchangeable parts."

Steinbeck used the same compartmentalization of tasks used in the assembly line
method of automobile production to illustrate the alienation people were experiencing as
these production methods moved into other industries and even into agricultural
communities. One way he illustrated this alienation was in his description of
automobiles. As we discovered earlier in Chapter 2 of this study, Steinbeck created the
big red truck outside the diner at the beginning of the story as a tool to help Tom Joad
return home. Tom was able to navigate the Oklahoma landscape using the truck as his
mode of transport and as his shield against the heat, wind, and fierceness of the
countryside. Steinbeck also used this text to illustrate the truck as the finished product of
the assembly line production process. He described the truck using the impersonal terms
and alienation found in the assembly line process as a testament of the economic monster.
(See GOW, 9)

In The Grapes of Wrath, the truck symbolized the assembly line production process.
Steinbeck used it to show both the power of the production system to manufacture
complex commodities, but also to show that the objects produced by the process were so
much more powerful and meaningful than the people who produced them. The assembly
line production method valued the finished product over those who produced it, and
accordingly, there were no humans visible in Steinbeck’s description of the landscape
surrounding the red truck. The voices of humans could be heard, but they could not be
seen. It was the continuation of the alienation associated with the compartmentalized

36 Daniel M. G. Raff, “Making Cars and Making Money in the Interwar Automobile Industry:
Economies of Scale and Scope and the Manufacturing Behind the Marketing,” in The Business History
production and increased technology that drives the reader to thoughts of the power associated with this system of production on which Steinbeck capitalized.

Steinbeck wrote a similar description, one where the work of humans could be seen, but where individuals were relegated to a supporting cast, not directly seen in the landscape, to illustrate the depth of consumption and individual alienation in California’s Central Valley. There was identification with the larger companies and modern methods of production (insignias on cars, trucks owned by wholesale grocery houses, etc.), but no individual people identified in the landscape. He wrote,

The forenoon traffic on the highway increased, salesmen in shiny coupes with the insignia of their companies painted on the doors; red and white gasoline trucks dragging clinking chains behind them, great square-doored vans from wholesale grocery houses, delivering produce. The country was rich along the roadside. (GOW, 365)

Whether in Oklahoma or California, Steinbeck used the automobile to symbolize America’s infatuation with the assembly line production system. California’s Central Valley symbolized the “agricultural factory” where the assembly line system lived in the agricultural fields. The economic benefits of the production system paid for the shiny coupes the sales force drove and the extravagant logos on the doors. But, even for all the production resulting from the assembly line manufacturing process, the results appear to be hollow because of the lack of human participation and control. His illustrations of the alienation associated with modern methods of production seemed to come from the perspective of humans who have lost the ability to control their own destiny and are beaten into submission by the economics of the situation. The complexity of life as the characters struggle against and eventually become part of the economic “monster” grant Steinbeck another productive area for the setting of The Grapes of Wrath.
The Automobile As a Symbol of Home

Steinbeck illustrated the ambivalence he felt towards technology when he described the automobile’s benefits and liabilities to society through the Joad family. He employed the alienation from the production process created by the assembly line production methods to illustrate the emphasis an industrializing society places on commodities at the expense of personal relationships. Steinbeck utilized the automobile to illustrate the alienation citizens were feeling as technology crept into various parts of their lives. But the complexity and dual nature of the effects of technology in the lives of people were also shown as the automobile became the Joad family’s newly adopted home, protecting and insulating them from the outside world. The Joad automobile served as the one avenue by which the family could take their concept of home with them on the adventure they were about to undertake.

Steinbeck used his description of the automobile several times to illustrate the ways the reliance on technology insulates us from the rest of the world. One of his best examples is when the Joad family drove through the suburbs and urban area of Oklahoma City. I noted this highway landscape the family encountered in Chapter 2, but here we will analyze the automobile’s ability to keep them separate and safe from the landscape they encountered. The automobile served as their moveable fortress, protecting them from the outside world as they drove through the city.

In his account of Oklahoma City Steinbeck had created a landscape of consumption that appeared to surround the Joad family. The artifacts he placed in the landscape highlight that the economy of Oklahoma City was far different than the farm economy of the Joad’s abandoned home in Sallisaw. As they traveled through Oklahoma City the
Joads are merely spectators as they pass through town. The Oklahoma City landscape is one that they could never participate in. They were outsiders, viewing the landscape as they traveled through it from the comfort of their automobile. The landscape Steinbeck described included numerous symbols of a society that operated with disposable income, something the Joad family didn’t have. The Joads desperately wanted these things, but they were incapable of getting them, so Steinbeck portrayed them as outsiders in the landscape. They were migrants with no anchor other than the automobile, which isolated them and prevented them from interacting with the Oklahoma City landscape.

Steinbeck explained the scene as the family entered Oklahoma City. They had been traveling across Oklahoma all day long, their first day on the road. They pushed on as if they were on a mission. The march across Oklahoma earlier that day was described almost as if it had been a race. The small individual towns passed by in a blur. But, when they entered the Oklahoma City area the tone of the story and the description of the landscape changed. The family wasn’t a part of the suburban and urban landscape, they were only passing through it, and the truck served as their mobile home from which they watched the Oklahoma City landscape pass by. From the vantage point of their truck the family took notice of the big houses, office buildings, stores, wrecking yards, hotdog stands, and dance halls. (GOW, 133)

Steinbeck’s writing mirrored the changing societal values of the 1930s. He used the styling of the American automobile to document some of the changes the Joad family experienced on their drive through Oklahoma City. James Newcomb, in “Depression Automobile Styling” documented many of the changes in the design of automobiles in the 1920s and 1930s. These changes seem to fall right in place with what Steinbeck
wrote about the societal values of the 1930s. Newcomb wrote, “The decade of the 1920s began with more than 80 per cent of the production devoted to open cars, ended with nine out of ten cars manufactured being closed models; by the end of the 1930s, open cars constituted less than 1 percent of production.”

No longer were Americans satisfied with the automobile simply providing transportation; in the 1930s Americans wanted to travel in the comfort and insulation of an enclosed automobile. The automobile would serve as a vehicle that not only moved people, but moved them without the mess and trouble of interacting with the physical and cultural world going on outside the vehicle. As Jakle and Sculle wrote in *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America*,

Enclosed bodies, of course, had also radically changed motoring. Now cocooned in metal and glass, motorists found themselves farther removed from the road and the roadside. No longer was the force of wind directly in one’s face, nor the outside smells and outside noises quite so evident.

The automobile helped travel become even safer for people as they were protected from hazards outside the automobile. But, along with the protection came the isolation of the automobile, as Jakle and Sculle mentioned above, no more outside smells or noises.

The changes in the design of the American automobile correspond with the rise in technology in the American economy. People were becoming more comfortable with increasing technology and were open to allowing it to encompass larger parts of their lives, isolating them from what was happening just a few feet from them. Kris Lackey, again in *Road Frames*, wrote about the change in values of the American traveler as the preference for travel switched from railroad to the automobile. He wrote, “Among the

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most commonly mentioned advantages of the automobile over the railroad...is the intimacy with landscape and people it allows...Modern railroads, by contrast, move rapidly through a fixed corridor, and the outside world passes by in a blur.” As Americans came to embrace increasing technology they began to abandon railroad traveling in favor of the automobile because of the intimacy with the landscape and the freedom it provided them. But at the same time the automobile was becoming more enclosed and protective, insulating the occupants from the outside world. The automobile provided the protection the railroad offered with an increase in the freedom to travel wherever the driver wanted to go. The automobile truly symbolized the dual nature of providing freedom of travel along with isolation from other people along the way.

One passage from *The Grapes of Wrath* that effectively illustrated this principle was Steinbeck’s description of the death of the Joad family dog on the road in Oklahoma that we discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. *(GOW, 131)* As the Joads made their first refueling stop fate struck them. Their dog was thirsty and hopped out of the truck in search of water and was killed by a car passing by on the highway. The family witnessed the death of their beloved family dog, while the nameless faces in the car only looked back for a moment and then sped off. The faces inside the automobile were effectively separated from any events happening outside the car. They saw what their car had done and understood that it was horrible, but it was “written off” as the cost of progress. They were alienated from the disaster through their reliance on the technology of the automobile.

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39 Lackey, *Road Frames*, 34.
After passing through Oklahoma City the Joads settled into a routine (GOW, 164) and began to understand that just as the farm home in Oklahoma protected them from the outside weather and unwanted intrusions, now the family automobile would provide the same protection on the road west. The cars people were traveling in for pleasure or business would zoom past them, as travelers were in a hurry to get to their destination. But, the Joad family was now more comfortable in their new home on the road, and their only hurry was to get to California to land jobs. They were not traveling to a vacation destination, they were traveling into the unknown. Steinbeck, as he did with the highway landscape, incorporated a dual nature to the insulation provided by the automobile. The same family automobile that insulated the Joad family so well from real world disasters they encountered all along Route 66 and once they arrived in California also insulated them from many of the personal relationships and interaction they needed. In the life of the Joads, the transition of the automobile from a mode of transportation to a home was complete.

Steinbeck used the sounds and vibrations of the automobile to show the insulation the family had from the outside world. He described how the automobile driver would listen to the sights and sounds of the automobile to determine how the trip was going. Success was no longer measured as it was on the farm by the outside influences of rain and sun and the price of seed. Success was now measured in how well your automobile was running, how much progress west the family made each day, and whether or not you could keep from being entangled in the many disasters that happened each day on the road. Steinbeck described the sights, vibrations, and sounds of the automobile in the following way,
Listen to the motor. Listen to the wheels. Listen with your ears and with your hands on the steering wheel; listen with the palm of your hand on the gear-shift lever; listen with your feet on the floor boards. Listen to the pounding old jalopy with all your senses; for a change of tone, a variation of rhythm may mean—a week here. (*GOW*, 122)

This was the micro view of the migration. What was happening to each individual family was common to most. But, the macro view of the mass migration included similar sights and sounds. Steinbeck described the mass migration landscape as, “Cars piled up beside the road, engine heads off, tires mended. Cars limping along 66 like wounded things, panting and struggling. Too hot, loose connections, loose bearings, rattling bodies.” (*GOW*, 122) The enormity of the migration was summarized in the sights, sounds, and vibrations of automobiles moving west and those being discarded or repaired along the way.

Steinbeck used the presence of the automobile in Oklahoma, along Highway 66, and in California, as an opportunity to describe to the reader how the reliance on technology affected our personal relationships with other humans. We put trust in the reliability and the functionality of objects produced with the increase in technology. Unfortunately, those objects tend to dilute our relationships with those around us. The best example Steinbeck created is the scene where he described how the owner of the land evicted the tenant farm families. In this scene the automobile served to provide the owners with insulation from the families who would lose their farms. The bad news the owner men delivered to the families was insulated by them not having to leave the comfort of their automobile to deliver the news. Steinbeck wrote,

The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came. They came in closed cars, and they felt the dry earth with their fingers, and sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests. The tenants, from their sunbeaten dooryards watched
uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields. And at last the owner men drove into the dooryards and sat in their cars to talk out of the windows. The tenant men stood beside the cars for a while, and then squatted on their hams and found sticks with which to mark the dust...

And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won’t work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don’t like to do it. But the monster’s sick. (GOW, 36)

The reliance on technology as a psychological crutch to dilute personal relationships is not new to the 1930s. But, with the presence of the automobile and other machinery that came to dominate the farming communities the value of technology over human effort became stronger. In a similar excerpt Steinbeck described his ultimate picture of technology conquering human effort. In this excerpt Steinbeck describes the “tractor man.” In two forceful paragraphs, which I have quoted verbatim below to stress Steinbeck’s level of description, he wrote,

The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over his nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat. The thunder of the cylinders sounded through the country, became one with the air and the earth, so that earth and air muttered in sympathetic vibration. The driver could not control it—straight across country it went, cutting through a dozen farms and straight back. A twitch at the controls could swerve the cat’, but the driver’s hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest. He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. He sat in an iron seat and stepped on iron pedals. He could not cheer or beat or curse or encourage the extension of his power, and because of this he could not cheer or whip or curse or encourage himself. He did not know or own or trust or beseech the land. If a seed dropped did not germinate, it was no skin off his ass. If the young thrusting plant withered in drought or drowned in a flood of rain, it was no more to the driver than to the tractor.

He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land. He could admire the tractor—its machined surfaces, its surge of power, the roar of its
detonating cylinders; but it was not his tractor. Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades - not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of disks cut it and pushed it to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth. And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combing with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrows, the long seeders - twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion. The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control. And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had not prayers or curses. (GOW, 38)

How did society get to the point where technology could take the place of human effort? This next excerpt will serve as Steinbeck's commentary on the needful balance of technology and human effort. Technology was created to serve human needs, not to replace them. Steinbeck took the reader a level deeper in this battle when he documented the end of one family's life on the farm,

The tenant sat in his doorway, and the driver thundered his engine and started off, tracks falling and curving, harrows combing, and the phalli of the seeder slipping into the ground... The iron guard bit into the house-corner, crumbled the wall, and wrenched the little house from its foundation so that it fell sideways, crushed like a bug. And the driver was goggled and a rubber mask covered his nose and mouth... The tenant man stared after it, his rifle in his hand. His wife was beside him, and the quiet children behind. And all of them stared after the tractor. (GOW, 41)

This was Steinbeck’s idea of how generations of work could be uprooted with the introduction of a single piece of technology. The family had struggled for years, but the tractor and the tractor men no longer cared. The tractor was built to plow and nothing would get in its way. The reliance on technology diluted the relationships between people and replaced them with a reliance on machinery to carry out the harder tasks.
It was a complex problem that Steinbeck was attempting to describe; the farmers who stayed behind relied on the increasing technology of the automobile to help them stay on the farm, while at the same time the increasing technology was forcing many others into a new life on the road as migrants. Those who chose to flee turned to the automobile to get them to the West, while those who stayed behind turned to the automobile to help break the isolation of living on the farm and making their farm more accessible to the markets in town.

Once the Joad family arrived in California, life continued to revolve around the automobile as a substitute home for the family. It was the lifeline on which they depended for shelter, transportation, and as a rallying point. Soon after the family’s arrival at their first migrant work camp, Hooverville, Tom and Casy had a scuffle with the police. Casy hit the police officer, knocked him out, and was arrested and taken to jail. It was obvious that the Joad family must move on as quickly as possible. They packed up the automobile and escaped Hooverville that night using the automobile to search for a new safe haven. As they left Hooverville they encountered a mob of local vigilantes wanting to burn down the camp. Steinbeck described the scene,

The car jolted along. Ahead, a little row of red lanterns stretched across the highway.

“Detour, I guess,” Tom said. He slowed the car and stopped it, and immediately a crowd of men swarmed about the truck. They were armed with pick handles and shotguns. They wore trench helmets and some American Legion caps. One man leaned in the window, and the warm smell of whisky preceded him.

“Where you think you’re goin’?” He thrust a red face near to Tom’s face. (GOW, 279)
Steinbeck used the automobile’s capability to insulate the family from the outside world in this encounter. The vigilantes marched into the migrant camp and burned it to the ground, but the Joad’s truck provided them the protection they needed against the wild mob. The truck provided them with both their escape from the camp and protection and insulation from the angry mob.

Later in the story the Joad family was hungry and looking for work when they arrived at the Hooper Ranch near Pixley. They slowed down because of a disturbance outside the ranch. Encountering a patrolman, the following scene occurred,

The patrol man lounged back. “Got a little trouble up ahead. Don’t you worry. You’ll get through. Just follow the line.”

There came the splattering blast of motorcycles starting. The line of cars moved on, with the Joad truck last. Two motorcycles led the way, and two followed. (*GOW*, 368)

The Joads were feeling uncomfortable in the line being escorted by the police. But, they hadn’t seen the worst yet.

Suddenly the leading policeman turned off the road into a wide graveled entrance. The old cars whipped after them. The motorcycles roared their motors. Tom saw a line of men standing in the ditch beside the road, saw their mouths open as though they were yelling, saw their shaking fists and their furious faces. A stout woman ran toward the cars, but a roaring motorcycle stood in her way. A high wire gate swung open. The six old cars moved through and the gate closed behind them. The four motorcycles turned and sped back in the direction from which they had come. And now that the motors were gone, the distant yelling of the men in the ditch could be heard. Two men stood beside the graveled road. Each one carried a shotgun. (*GOW*, 368)

The insulation the automobile provided the Joad family is what allowed them to find work at the Hooper Ranch. If the family had to walk past the upset people and interact with them as fellow migrants they might not have made it through the scene. But, in the safety of the car, and with the ability it afforded them to isolate them from what was
going on in the world outside their car, the family made it inside the gate of the Hooper Ranch and were quickly put to work.

The automobile served the Joads well. It carried them to California and insulated them from the dangers and disasters that followed them west. The automobile gave them the opportunity to continue the march west despite the circumstances, but it could not change the economic situation the Joad family was in. They were migrants and they were living on the edge of economic ruin.

The Joad family took part in a foundational transition when they left the family farm in Oklahoma. The farm had been the fixed anchor in the family for generations. The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression combined to make staying in Oklahoma impossible. It was time to abandon the family history in Sallisaw and head west to new fortunes in California. As they prepared to leave, the automobile became the family’s new home. It took on the critical characteristics of home; it was the new family anchor, it protected and insulated the family from the outside world, and it provided them the opportunity to migrate in search of a new and brighter future.

The automobile became one of the primary symbols of the increasing technology of the 1930s. It changed the look of the American landscape. The memorable pictures of migrants proudly headed west are almost always taken with the automobile as a part of the scene; they were proud of their automobiles. They had much in common with the overland migrants a century earlier, except that the use of the automobile shortened the trip from several months to a couple of weeks. The automobile gave the 20th Century migrants opportunities that those a century earlier could not have anticipated. It replaced the farm house as the home, the place where all the important decisions were made, the
insulation against the outside influences of the world, and it provided protection from the elements.

Steinbeck’s portrayal of the automobile balanced the complex dual natures as choices faced the tenant families; whether to move on and experience new adventures, or to stay firmly rooted on the farm and experience the new mobile reality. The automobile provided opportunity to the Oklahoma families regardless of the direction they decided to head. It also symbolized the compartmentalization of tasks associated with the increasing technology of the assembly line process.
CHAPTER 4:
MIGRANT CAMPS

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyze Steinbeck’s creation and use of the migrant camp landscape as a device to demonstrate the competing themes of community and dislocation found among those fleeing the Dust Bowl and heading west. As we discussed in the last two chapters, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a complex narrative in which John Steinbeck explored the tension created in an industrializing society. In Chapter 2 I analyzed the different artifacts Steinbeck placed in the highway landscape to document the dual natures of oppression and opportunity. In Chapter 3 I analyzed the landscape Steinbeck created around the automobile and his use of it to illustrate the competing dual natures of mobility and domesticity. As the novel chronicles the Joad family’s move from a sedentary farming life in Oklahoma, to the fast paced movement along Highway 66 and the transient migrant work camps in California’s Central Valley, there are major shifts in Steinbeck’s landscape focus. Steinbeck created the migrant travel camps and work camps to highlight the competing forces of community and dislocation, both of which are found in each migrant camp landscape.

I mentioned earlier an insightful article by Frank Eugene Cruz titled, "'In Between a Past and Future Town': Home, The Unhomely, and *The Grapes of Wrath.*" In the article Cruz remarked that the, "'American experience’ is quickly becoming more about multiple, rather than monolithic subjectivities—more about in-between, as opposed to essentialist conceptions of culture and ethno-racial formations, as the lines between ‘Us’
and ‘Them,’ ‘Here’ and ‘There,’ and ‘Home’ and ‘World’ blur.”

Cruz summed up the dual nature of the migrant camp in *The Grapes of Wrath*; the migrants’ feeling of “in-betweenness” identified them as ones who did not belong anywhere. The migrants were forced out of their former home, and headed west with only the hope of finding a permanent home sometime in the future and somewhere ahead of them enticing them on. They were living life marked by the competing senses of community found among their fellow migrants and dislocation from the rest of the world.

Steinbeck found productive literary space in this in-betweenness. Many times the migrant work camps in the story initially appeared to be blemishes on the highway landscape, but as the Joad family became part of the camp community, even during a one night stay, the description of the camp would soften a bit. At Weedpatch Steinbeck described a model community, or an ideal society, where there were no individuals; but each looked after the others. Peter Lisca, in his essay, “The *Grapes of Wrath* as Fiction,” discussed Steinbeck’s efforts to place value on the group rather than individuals. He wrote, “Whatever value the Joads have as individuals is ‘incidental’ to their primary function as a ‘personalized group.’” Steinbeck did not hold the individual in high regard, but he elevated the ability of group accomplishments in the novel. Each of the individual members of the Joad family had their flaws, but as a united family they became very strong.

Within the migrant camps Steinbeck described the best and worst in people. George Henderson, in his article, “John Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” summed up Steinbeck’s view of the migrant camps when he wrote that

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1 Cruz, “In Between a Past and Future Town,” 55.
"Steinbeck imagined a reinvention of a natural, organic society formed by the exigencies of the highway life along the ‘Great American Roadside.'"³

Henderson then continued with a similar observation regarding Steinbeck’s created migrant camp Weedpatch,

Weedpatch was the vector of several important themes in the novel... Weedpatch was the over-lapping space of three ‘institutions’: the short term needs of the migrant workers, federal relief policy, and large scale capitalist agriculture. For all its importance of bringing these systems together, however, Weedpatch remained a marginal place. It was a holding area for the worker in a place where employment was scarce after the harvest. Inside, the migrant community was strong.⁴

There are two different types of migrant camps created in Steinbeck’s fictional landscape. The first type was the migrant travel camps placed all along Highway 66. These camps were very temporary, formed new each night, and broken apart each morning as the migrants continued their move west. Other than for automobile repairs or emergencies, rarely did campers remain for more than one night. The goal of the migrant family was to reach California quickly, and every night spent in a traveling camp marked one less day they could work in the agricultural fields out west, so there was no time for lingering. The migrant camps were only gathering places where the migrant families could pull off the side of the highway and spend the night. We will call these temporary camps along Highway 66 “migrant travel camps.”

The second type of migrant camp is what the Joad family encountered when they arrived in California. These camps were only slightly more permanent and existed to provide a short-term place for migrant families to live and protect themselves while they searched for work and a new home in the central valley. The migrant families believed

³ Henderson, “John Steinbeck’s Spatial Imagination,” 104.
⁴ Ibid., 112.
they would only be living in these work camps temporarily, until they could find permanent work and move their families into local communities. In reality, migrant families tended to remain in the California work camps for extended periods of time, as long as the work held out. In this study we will call these California camps “migrant work camps.” With no money, and no jobs there were very few alternatives.

After losing the farm home, the automobile became the Joad family’s anchor throughout the novel, and kept them mobile both on Highway 66 as they crossed the continent and along Highway 99 as they moved up and down the central valley in pursuit of work. The migrant camps they encountered along Highway 66 and in the central valley dramatically affected the way the family interacted with other migrants. Steinbeck described the camps as gathering places, opportunities to develop relationships with other travelers, protection for those who were vulnerable, and rest times where the family could reflect on the events of the previous day and the events that would unfold before them the following day. These were many of the same characteristics of the sense of community that the family had left behind when they were evicted from the farm home in Oklahoma.

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5 Gregory, in American Exodus, stated that, “The San Joaquin Valley lured the rural-oriented (migrants). The southern and most populous half of the Central Valley, the San Joaquin attracted more than 70,000 Southwesterners between 1935 and 1940, 60 percent of all migrants settling in the nonmetropolitan areas. The numbers piled up heaviest at the southern end of the valley, especially in Kern County where an economy based on cotton and oil echoed Oklahoma and Texas.” Gregory, American Exodus, 40.


7 Gregory noted that, “Housing accommodations fell way behind the requirements of the 1930s influx. Some families found houses to rent, but tiny incomes forced many others to make their homes in auto courts, trailer parks, or in the private campgrounds usually located just outside established towns... Even cheaper were the Farm Security Administration camps, more than a dozen of which were scattered throughout the state’s different agricultural valleys. Clean, generally well managed, with tent platforms, sometimes metal cabins, and assorted recreational facilities for up to 300 families, these were the federal government’s principle answer to the problems created by the Dust Bowl migration.” Gregory, American Exodus, 70.
Steinbeck also created the migrant camps as places where people were taken advantage of by other migrants, the governmental authorities, and the farmers' associations. As much as the migrant camps represented all that was good and honorable in humans, they also represented the evil that is experienced when people are alienated from others by the technology that surrounds them. These characteristics are highlighted by the sense of dislocation felt in the camps, a characteristic which followed the Joad family from Oklahoma to California after the economic machine uprooted them from their tenant farmstead in Oklahoma.

Steinbeck was fascinated by the migrant camps. In real life he became close friends with Tom Collins, the manager of the Weedpatch government migrant work camp near Bakersfield, California. At Weedpatch, Steinbeck found migrants who relied on each other, looked out for each other, and created a community environment. The living conditions in Weedpatch were a drastic improvement from the other camps the Joad family had lived in during the migration along Highway 66 and after they reached California. It is only inside the government work camps that Steinbeck portrayed the migrant families as having any control whatsoever over their lives, surviving with some dignity and self-respect intact. Outside the work camps their lives were completely dominated by the agricultural and social economics of the 1930s, but the migrant families still maintained that sense of community that was present among the Okies.

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8 The Farm Security Administration and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration, planned and managed thirteen labor camps for California's migrant agricultural workers between 1936 and 1941. Hise, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes," 243.

9 Charles Wollenberg in the introduction to The Harvest Gypsies argued that Steinbeck created the work camps to serve as that one vestige of stability in the lives of the migrant families. They lived a functional life inside the Weedpatch camp, but once outside the protective fence of the camp life was turned upside down. Steinbeck, The Harvest Gypsies, x.
In both of these types of migrant camps Steinbeck created circumstances that affected the Joad family and highlighted the dual nature of the camps as places where the sense of both community and dislocation abounded. In the camps, Steinbeck created a place where the migrants could come together and help each other through difficult times, but they also were a place where the outside world preyed on the helpless families and forced them to make decisions that left them vulnerable and exposed.

**Migrant Travel Camps**

Steinbeck dedicated large amounts of *The Grapes of Wrath* to description of the landscape of the migrant travel camps found along Highway 66. The day the Joad family left their farm in Sallisaw was a long and difficult day for them. They had made it to the suburbs on the west side of Oklahoma City and were ready to camp for the night. Unlike those who traveled for pleasure or business and stayed in motels or hotels, the migrants did not have the money to spend the night in luxury. A road intersection, a drainage ditch, a tree for shade, anywhere they could pull off the road and rest could serve as a temporary overnight home for the family. The travelers did not blend in to the highway’s roadside landscape that served the business and pleasure travelers. They were dislocated from the mainstream, and because of this dislocation they found camping along the route west to be a place to build a temporary sense of community with other like-minded refugees. The migrant travel camp was a place where information was shared, people were encouraged, and relationships were established. Edwin T. Bowden sums up this ability to create community when he wrote in “The Commonplace and the Grotesque,”
“under the pressures of a common need the whole people slowly become one large family in themselves.”

At the end of the first and most difficult day of traveling on the road the Joads reached Bethany, on the edge of Oklahoma City’s western suburbs. As the Joads pulled off the road, in a convenient place where migrants had camped evening after evening, they met the Wilsons and began to make camp with them. The Joad family’s relationship with the Wilsons continued for most of the trip west.

Steinbeck used sunset to signal change throughout the novel. This case is no different. As the Joad family searched for a place to pull off the road in Bethany, Steinbeck described a magnificent sunset, signifying that the sun has set on the Joad family’s life on the farm and their new life as a migrant family had begun. To culminate this ending, new beginning, and the severed relationship between the Joad family and the farm behind them in Oklahoma, Steinbeck used Grandpa’s death as a capstone. As they were setting up camp with the Wilsons Grandpa Joad began to feel ill and the Wilson’s gave up their tent when it became apparent that he was seriously sick. As the family continued to set up camp Grampa suffered a stroke and passed on. Although the Joads and Wilsons remained close friends, as the friendship developed through reaching out to a fellow family in need, Steinbeck showed in the following visual picture that life outside the travel camp didn’t wait for grieving, but continued on immediately.

Life began to move again. The sun touched the horizon and flattened over it. And along the highway there came a long line of huge freight trucks

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10 Edwin T. Bowden continued on to say, “The family in the long run does not diminish but rather expands more and more. Preacher Casy had early been accepted as a member, and along the road Mr. and Mrs. Wilson are added until sickness forces them out again. Others move more quickly in and out. But these are simply examples of a continuous process in which all the people find themselves increasingly drawn into a larger family relationship.” Edwin T. Bowden, “The Commonplace and the Grotesque,” *A Casebook for The Grapes of Wrath*, 198.
with red sides. They rumbled along, putting a little earthquake in the ground, and the standing exhaust pipes sputtered blue smoke from the Diesel oil. One man drove each truck, and his relief man slept in a bunk high up against the ceiling. But the trucks never stopped; they thundered day and night and the ground shook under their heavy march. (*GOW*, 139)

In the travel camp where all were grieving for Grandpa, the family was trying to come to a difficult decision. They had to create an uneasy balance, with a need to pause and spend time mourning, while also understanding that they were between homes and time did not stop, so the family must continue to move on. But, just as they had done when the decision to leave Oklahoma was made, they quickly said their goodbyes and moved out promptly.

The dislocation from the rest of the world the migrating families felt was balanced by the sense of community found in even the most temporary of travel camps. The Wilson and Joad families knew that they would be stronger and survive longer if they looked out for each other’s interests, so their bond grew stronger as the trip unfolded before them.

Steinbeck was fascinated with the migrant travel camps along Highway 66 to the extent that he devoted an entire interchapter \(^\text{1}\) to their description. He documented the daily cycle of life in the migrant travel camp, including both the sense of dislocation and community.

The migration west took several days to several weeks from the southern plains to California’s Central Valley. Most families loaded up as many supplies as their cars or trucks could carry when they left their farms, supplies that were needed and used at each

\(^{1}\) Steinbeck devoted all of Chapter 17 in *The Grapes of Wrath*, an interchapter, to the description of the ephemeral migrant travel camps found along Highway 66. Steinbeck portrayed the migrant travel camp as a place of continual movement, a place where the families learned to transition from a sedentary lifestyle to one focused on mobility, and a place where the families built new relationships. They were traveling to a new destination across the country, but they were also on a personal journey moving from a worldview centered on the stability of the Oklahoma farming community to a migrant world view centered on transition, speed, and mobility. (*GOW*, 194-200)
stop along the trek west. The migration west was an opportunity to build relationships with others in the same situation. The path of escape along Highway 66 was the Joad family’s first introduction to what life would be like living among the migrants after they arrived in California.

Steinbeck used vivid illustration to describe the camps. He wrote,

The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and then took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. (GOW, 194)

He described a group of people that had no control at all over their circumstances. They were dislocated from the mainstream and survived in a purely reactionary mode, with hope, but no concrete plan for the future. He documented the building of community that the families experienced when they camped together as he wrote,

In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream. (GOW, 194)

Through Steinbeck’s eyes we can understand how the many migrant families would come together on the road to build community. They were sharing a common goal, brought on through common circumstances.

Steinbeck described the complex relationships that developed in the migrant travel camps when he wrote that,

Every night a world created, complete with furniture- friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus. (GOW, 194)

The reader can understand how the migrant families would come together for the opportunity to build upon each other’s strengths and to share common stories. This
would continue to be one of Steinbeck’s focuses throughout the rest of the novel. The necessity to build relationships is one that stayed with the Joad family throughout their trek. The Wilson family stayed with them, traveling together as far as Needles, California, and became part of the Joad’s extended family, but most other relationships were temporary, though beneficial in nature.

The migrant travelers, whether they were from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Colorado, or other places all had the same basic needs when it came to characteristics of a good place to camp. The ideal location for a temporary migrant camp included a stable water supply, enough flat land to pitch tents, and some wood or brush for fires. Places with these characteristics were of limited supply, especially as the landscape became more arid the farther west one traveled, so most of the camps became fixed sites. Each camp was a short day’s journey from the next. Soon the landscape became dotted with migrant travel camps, which survived out of necessity. Most camps had a very similar fate. Every evening the camps were built, with tents, cars or trucks, and people. Every morning the camps came down. The sites were fixed, but each night the campers were different. Steinbeck wrote about the ephemeral nature of the camps,

The canvas was folded, the tent poles tied along the running board, the beds put in place on the cars, the pots in their places. And as the families moved westward, the technique of building up a home in the evening and tearing it down with the morning light became fixed; so that the folded tent was packed in one place, the cooking pots counted in their box. 

(GOW, 196)

Each person had their own specific job, so that not a minute was wasted when the family pulled into the evening’s campsite. Each person knew what they had to do to build the camp and the community as quickly as possible in the hot evenings.
Every day the migrant camps saw the same cycle. In the morning the campground was busy with the travelers packing up and heading out on the road at daybreak. The late morning and afternoon were quiet, but again in the early evening there was another flurry of activity as the migrants were scurrying to find and set up their new campgrounds, each family settling into their well-rehearsed routine. This was a common occurrence all along the length of Highway 66.

Young boys and girls made quick friendships that ended as fast as they began. Steinbeck wrote,

> When the water was carried and the wood cut, the children walked shyly, cautiously among the tents. And they made elaborate acquaintance gestures. A boy stopped near another boy and studied a stone, picked it up, examined it closely, spat on it, and rubbed it clean and inspected it until he forced the other to demand, What you got there? (GOW, 198)

Young girls were even more cautious as they tried to pass on information that helped them to be a part of migrant society. Sure, they were poor, but they still liked to boast. Steinbeck summed up what you could find out about a migrant family at dinner time in this quote,

> Young girls found each other and boasted shyly of their popularity and their prospects. The women worked over the fire, hurrying to get food to the stomachs of the family- pork if there was money in plenty, pork and potatoes and onions. Dutch-oven biscuits or cornbread, and plenty of gravy to go over it. Side-meat or chops and a can of boiled tea, black and bitter. Fried dough in drippings if money was slim. Dough fried crisp and brown and the drippings poured over it.

Those families which were very rich or very foolish with their money ate canned beans and canned peaches and packaged bread and bakery cake; but they ate secretly, in their tents, for it would not have been good to eat such fine things openly. Even so, children eating their fried dough smelled the warming beans and were unhappy about it.

> When supper was over and the dishes dipped and wiped, the dark had come, and the men squatted down to talk.
And they talked about the land behind them. I don’t know what it’s coming to, they said. The country’s spoilt. (*GOW*, 198)

This same ritual between migrant families played out in camp after camp all across the western half of the continent. Steinbeck illustrated how people’s actions can unknowingly form their impact on the landscape. Along Highway 66, all across the western United States, the same scene was being acted out by family after family, in migrant travel camp after migrant travel camp. Dislocated families were sharing their lives with others and building a sense of community where there previously was none. And when the sun came up the next morning the camp was vacant, with only a little trash left behind. And the camp was ready for the new world that would be built on it that evening. Steinbeck, alluded back to his vision of the migrants as bugs when he wrote,

> But along the highway the cars of the migrant people crawled out like bugs, and the narrow concrete miles stretched ahead. (*GOW*, 200)

The layout of the migrant travel camp changed the social life of the families. They were familiar with a solitary way of life on the farm. The men were accustomed to long periods of time in the farm fields without anyone else to talk with. Their concerns as farmers were with the weather; will we get enough rainfall, will the wind ever stop, and how can the crops survive with so much dust? Their concerns as migrants were different, they were focused on the sounds the car’s tires made, listening to the clattering of motors, watching engine oil and gasoline levels, and monitoring strange vibrations the car made. Their fear was of anything that could slow down or stop the movement west. They were spending all day in a cramped car with several of their family members, and when they arrived at a place to camp they were surrounded by other families looking for a few hours of rest before starting out again in the morning. The automobile was the only permanent
structure left in most migrants’ lives. It had replaced the farmhouse as the place where
the family could recuperate for the evening before heading out again in the morning.
Over the course of a few days the social life of the farm family had been turned upside
down. Once inside the migrant travel camp there was no longer any right to privacy, all
who were homeless and farmless were now expected to share and take care of each other;
family first, but then others.

The landscape of the migrant road camp created an atmosphere in which no one was
an outcast. Each family had been dealt a severe blow when they lost their farms, but the
highway, as mentioned earlier, was the great assimilator. All were looked at as equals on
the road. All had the opportunity to help, all had the opportunity to share, and all felt
wanted and needed by the group of fellow migrants. It was a rebirth of what they had
experienced on the family farm, only in the short-term. Each person was valued for what
he or she brought to the community, not where they were from, not what their
background was, and certainly not their financial status. People’s needs were cared for
from within the group and new temporary extended families were created on a daily
basis. The impact of the dislocation from the outside world was made up for by the
caring of those who have shared similar circumstances. Steinbeck may have used bugs to
try to illustrate the scattering migrants as they marched west, but he also described the
collective oneness that was found within the confines of the camp. It was a place where
needs were met and people were valued. It was a place where dislocation gave way to
community.

This building of community in the migrant travel camp was described by Steinbeck in
many different ways. Sometimes the migrant travel camp experience brought favorable
results to the Joad family and other times unfavorable. The migrant travel camps served a purpose as a gathering point and a rallying point for the families moving west, a place where they could come together in the evening and trade stories of home or the trip west. Sometimes those coming back from the west would tell of their struggles and victories. As Tom, Al, and Casey approached a campground in New Mexico the scene was set by Steinbeck in the following excerpt,

A small wooden house dominated the camp ground, and on the porch of the house a gasoline lantern hissed and threw its white glare in a great circle. Half a dozen tents were pitched near the house, and cars stood beside the tents...A group of men had gathered to the porch where the lantern burned, and their faces were strong and muscled under the harsh white light, light that threw black shadows of their hats over their foreheads and eyes and made their chins seem to jut out...The proprietor, a sullen lanky man, sat in a chair on the porch...Inside the house a kerosene lamp burned, but its thin light was blasted by the hissing glare of the gasoline lantern. The gathering of the men surrounded the proprietor. (GOW, 186)

The gathering each evening became a custom-made environment for passing information, some good, some bad, some believable, and some not. It was the migrants’ version of the television’s evening news. Travelers heard the news of what was happening throughout the world, in the travel camp, and most importantly, in the fields of California where they were headed. Men from all around the southern Plains gathered to hear the stories of where travelers were from, where they were headed, and what their plans were once they arrived in the west. Occasionally, contact was made with those returning to the plains after a stay in the west, and the picture they painted of life there was typically very bleak; that was why they were returning to the plains. Steinbeck fashioned the shadows of the evening light into an eerie feeling, as if campers were sitting around the campfire and telling ghost stories. We understand from the setting that
the Joad family would gather information from the meetings that would change their
destiny, and we assume from the atmosphere that it wouldn’t be favorable information.

One evening the information wasn’t good. In fact it was so bad it was difficult for the
Joad and Wilson families to hear. As I have noted, the Joads’ vision of California was a
very flawed one. The truth was that the California economy wasn’t an easy place for
migrants to fit in, and the realization was beginning to dawn that the Joads’ future home
in California wasn’t going to be much like the Oklahoma home they left. The Joad
family’s first true glimpse of what life would be like in California happened at this camp
site. As the conversation turned to life in California, Pa Joad talked about how life would
change for the better once they arrived there. Steinbeck used this classic camp scene to
introduce more uncertainty to the Joad family’s future.

Near the edge of the porch a ragged man stood…He stared while Pa
spoke, and then he laughed, and his laughter turned to a high whinnying
giggle…“You goin’ out there-oh Christ!” The giggling started again.
“You goin’ out there an’ get-good wages-oh, Christ!” He stopped and
said slyly, “Pickin’ oranges maybe? Gonna pick peaches?..”

The ragged man said slowly, “Me- I’m comin’ back. I been there.”

The faces turned quickly toward him. The men were rigid…“I’m goin’
back to starve. I ruther starve all over at oncet.”

Pa said, “What the hell you talkin’ about? I got a han’bill says they got
good wages, an’ little while ago I seen a thing in the paper says they need
folks to pick fruit.” (GOW, 189)

Pa Joad was about to learn his first lesson of the economics of the California
landscape of consumption,

The ragged man reached a decision. “Look,” he said. “How many men
they say they want on your han’bill?”

“Eight hundred, an’ that’s in one little place”...
“Look,” said the man. “It don’t make no sense. This fella wants eight hundred men. So he prints up five thousand of them things an’ maybe twenty thousand people sees ‘em. An’ maybe two-three thousand folks gets movin’ account a this here han’bill. Folks that’s crazy with worry.”

“But it don’t make no sense!” Pa cried.

“But you see the fella that put out this here bill. You’ll see him, or somebody that’s workin’ for him. You’ll be a-campin’ by a ditch, you and fifty other famblies. An’ he’ll come in. He’ll look in your tent an’ see if you got anything left to eat. An’ if you got nothin’, he says, ‘Wanna job?’ An’ you’ll say, ‘I sure do, mister. I’ll sure thank you for a chance to do some work.’ An’ he’ll say, ‘I can use you.’ An’ you’ll say, ‘When do I start?’ An’ he’ll tell you where to go, an’ what time, an’ then he’ll go on. Maybe he needs two hundred men, so he talks to five hundred, an’ they tell other folks, an’ when you get to the place, they’s a thousand men. This here fella says, ‘I’m payin’ twenty cents an hour.’ An’ maybe half a the men walk off. But they’s still five hundred that’s so goddamn hungry they’ll work for nothin’ but biscuits. Well, this here fella’s got a contract to pick them peaches or-chop that cotton. You see now?” (GOW, 189)

At this point the reader starts to realize how flawed the Joad’s picture of California really was. The picture of a great and carefree life in California had been shattered. The Joad family and the reader suddenly realize that life in California would not be promising. The Joad family’s future did not look bright and their lives would probably fall apart once they arrived in the “Promised Land.” The words of the “ragged man” were a shock to the Joad family and the reader alike. The landscape of despair Steinbeck created through the words of the “ragged man” changed the entire tone of the novel. Again, the migrants were completely at the whim of events beyond their control.

Steinbeck, through the “ragged man,” displayed his dual nature of community and dislocation found in the migrant travel camp. The migrants had built a sense of community among the campers that night. They were coming together and bonding around the porch of the wooden house in the campground in their quest to hear the news regarding their common fate once they reached California. The “ragged man” became
part of the migrant travel camp landscape to show the migrants how dislocated they were from what was happening beyond their small, isolated, worldview.

**Migrant Work Camps**

Steinbeck's devotion of an entire interchapter to the description of the migrant travel camp showed us that he valued the travel camps and the landscape surrounding them. He saw the travel camps along Highway 66 as a place where community was built on a nightly basis, but his description of the migrant work camps in the California Central Valley was much harsher, with one exception. He viewed Weedpatch as a model community, but the other camps in which he placed the Joad family were places of total dislocation. The hopelessness of finding work was coupled with the filthy living conditions and oppression from the local police and farmers associations to create an environment that isolated each migrant family from others, not through geography, but through psychological defenses.

The history of migrant work camps in California's Central Valley is long. Until the 1870s the interior valleys of California were sparsely populated, undeveloped, and economically insignificant.\(^{12}\) The railroad began the transformation in the valley by fueling the layout of towns, recruiting settlers, selling off large sections of land to wealthy land speculators, and opening up the isolated valley to world-wide markets. The railroad was followed by the canal builders, who brought water to the far reaches of the valley, which served the wealthy land owners with the political clout to manipulate the water policy for the valley to bring them the water they needed to turn the land from

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\(^{12}\) Gregory argued this point. He believed the southern central valley witnessed a great transformation between 1870 and 1930 that took it from an agriculturally insignificant area to one of the most intensively farmed regions in the world. Gregory, *American Exodus*, 53.
worthless scrubland to the agricultural powerhouse Steinbeck wrote about in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{13} James N. Gregory, in \textit{American Exodus}, wrote, “By the early twentieth century California farmers led the nation in their reliance on irrigation, modern equipment, chemicals, hired labor, and scientific experimentation.”\textsuperscript{14} The amount of capital investment required to survive California’s agricultural economy was staggering. This level of investment effectively kept the Okies from partaking in the benefits of land ownership in the valley and kept them from moving up the ladder of social mobility. If they wanted to live in the agricultural rural central valley most were stuck firmly in their roles as migrant laborers until economic conditions improved.

The setting of the central valley was beautiful to look at, and if you were a landowner it was a beautiful place to live. But, the Joad family would not be privileged to claim any of it. They were “Okies” and they would always be looked at as misfits.\textsuperscript{15} The family’s first introduction to California’s migrant work camps was just outside Bakersfield in a makeshift camp called “Hooverville,” a name given to many of the migrant work camps. Steinbeck’s description of the Joads’ first “Hooverville” began as the family left Bakersfield looking for their first place to camp in the Central Valley. Steinbeck’s description of their first sight of their new home was this:

\textsuperscript{13} Gregory made these observations in \textit{American Exodus}. He also stated that, “The valley never lost the imprint of its corporate beginnings. Most of the land was in time sold, some in small parcels, some in large acreages, a few hundred thousand acres still maintained by the land companies today. But the mode of development dictated the basic patterns of use. Expensive to purchase and expensive to farm because of irrigation, the land demanded efficiency.” Gregory, \textit{American Exodus}, 54.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Wollenberg, in the Introduction to \textit{The Harvest Gypsies} made the argument that Both Steinbeck and Tom Collins viewed the migrants as displaced Jeffersonian yeomen who deserved and needed their own small plots of land, but would never be able to attain them. They were not well-equipped to function in California's agricultural factory. Steinbeck, \textit{The Harvest Gypsies}, x. Toni Ann Alexander also makes the same argument in her PhD dissertation “From Oklahomans to ‘Okies’: Identity Formation in Rural California” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2004), 28.
Tom started the car and they rolled through the streets and out toward the country. And by a bridge they saw a collection of tents and shacks. Tom said, “Might’s well stop here. Find out what’s doin’, an’ where at the work is.” He drove down a steep dirt incline and parked on the edge of the encampment. \((GOW, 241)\)

The Joad family was doing what so many families before them had done. They were quickly realizing that life in California would not accommodate their desires for stable work and owning land. It would be a continuation of the migrant life they lived on the highway west. There would be no magical jobs or nice houses with white picket fences. There were only tents and shacks down a steep incline by the river. After the initial sighting of the camp, Steinbeck added a little more depth to the commentary by documenting what the Joads saw inside the camp,

There was no order in the camp; little gray tents, shacks, cars were scattered about at random. The first house was nondescript. The south wall was made of three sheets of rusty corrugated iron, the east wall a square of moldy carpet tacked between two boards, the north wall a strip of roofing paper and a strip of tattered canvas, and the west wall six pieces of gunny sacking. Over the square frame, on untrimmed willow limbs, grass had been piled, not thatched, but heaped up in a low mound. The entrance, on the gunny-sack side, was cluttered with equipment. A five-gallon kerosene can served for a stove. It was laid on its side, with a section of rusty stovepipe thrust in one end. A wash boiler rested on its side against the wall; and a collection of boxes lay about, boxes to sit on, to eat on. A Model T Ford sedan and a two-wheel trailer were parked beside the shack, and about the camp there hung a slovenly despair. \((GOW, 241)\)

The Joad family, as with most migrants, was not ready for what they found in the labor camps. The difficulty of life in the migrant camps was hard to imagine until one
experienced it.\textsuperscript{16} Their dreams of arriving in California and finding work and a nice place to live were unjustified and the foreshadowing of the conditions in California that they had heard in the camps along the way west proved to be true. Steinbeck continued to document their discovery,

Next to the shack there was a little tent, gray with weathering, but neatly, properly set up; and the boxes in front of it were placed against the tent wall. A stovepipe stuck out of the door flap, and the dirt in front of the tent had been swept and sprinkled. The camp was neat and sturdy. A Model A roadster and a little home-made bed trailer stood beside the tent.

And next there was a huge tent, ragged, torn in strips and the tears mended with pieces of wire. The flaps were up, and inside four wide mattresses lay on the ground. A clothes line strung along the side bore pink cotton dresses and several pairs of overalls. There were forty tents and shacks, and beside each habitation some kind of automobile. Far down the line a few children stood and stared at the newly arrived truck and they moved cautiously toward it, little boys in overalls and bare feet, their hair gray with dust. (\textit{GOW}, 241)

This camp was the Joad family’s first experience with the labor camp in the central valley and they were stunned.\textsuperscript{17} The migrant lifestyle was a stark contrast to the life most expected to live when they arrived in California. Charles Todd commented that, “Parents worried about their children. ‘They’ll be just nomads, not caring for anything except their eats—no home life, church, or school. All this is enough to worry me to death,’ a mother explained.”\textsuperscript{18} The migrants were able to overcome such misgivings, but

\textsuperscript{16} James Bright Wilson, in “Social Attitudes of Certain Migratory Agricultural Workers in Kern County, California,” wrote that, “Every day life in a migratory camp will actually disgust you,” a young Oklahoman summarized. “There are every day hardships in living this type of life that no one can understand without actually experiencing it.” James Bright Wilson, “Social Attitudes of Certain Migratory Agricultural Workers in Kern County, California,” (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1942), 249.

\textsuperscript{17} Gregory wrote that, “For families especially, the way of life of the road contrasted sharply with what was considered a proper mode of existence. Gregory, \textit{American Exodus}, 68.

\textsuperscript{18} Charles Todd, “The Pea Patch Press,” Unpublished typescript in Charles Todd Okie Studies Collection, (1946?), 9,
only because the living conditions created a strong sense of community among those living on the road.

Not long after the family’s arrival in Hooverville Tom met a local man working on his car. They chatted for a while about the camp and then Tom continued, “We ain’t no bums, We’re lookin’ for work. We’ll take any kind a work.” (GOW, 244) Tom still didn’t understand that the camp was their destiny.

Tom looked about at the grimy tents, the junk equipment, at the old cars, the lumpy mattresses out in the sun, at the blackened cans on fire-blackened holes where the people cooked. He asked quietly, “Ain’t they no work?”

“I don’t know. Mus’ be. Ain’t no crop right here now. Grapes to pick later an’ cotton to pick later. We’re movin’ on, soon’s I get these here valves groun’. Me an’ my wife an’ my kid. We heard they was work up north. We’re shovin’ north, up aroun’ Salinas.” (GOW, 244)

The man working on his car provided Tom with his introduction to the dislocation of the migrant work camp. It would be tough to build a sense of community in a place where there was so much competition for work. Tom was having difficulty understanding this concept, so the man in Hooverville then explained the reality of life in the work camp to Tom in a way that he could understand, through a visual picture of the landscape of agribusiness,

The young man squatted on his heels. “I’ll tell ya,” he said quietly. “They’s a big son-of-a-bitch of a peach orchard I worked in. Takes nine men all the year roun’.” He paused impressively. “Takes three thousand men for two weeks when them peaches is ripe. Got to have ’em or them peaches’ll rot...If ya don’ wanta take what they pay, goddamn it, they’s a thousand men waitin’ for your job. So ya pick, an’ ya pick, an’ then she’s done...When ya get ‘em picked ever’ goddamn one is picked. There ain’t another damn thing in that part a the country to do. An’ then them owners don’ want you there no more...They don’ want you aroun’. So they kick you out, they move you along. That’s how it is.” (GOW, 245)
Steinbeck utilized the landscape to illustrate the point that the Joad family was one of the pawns in the economic fabric of the central valley. They hadn’t heeded the warnings they heard up until this point, and now the system was going to consume them and make them a part of the “monster.” They were helpless, and their future would be just like those two hundred and fifty thousand migrants ahead of them. The migrant work camp was where all the hostility of the farm families came together. Thousands of families all across the central valley, all in search of the same job. The search for work that was scarce pitted the families against each other. But, as difficult as it was, most remained true to their morals and looked out after each other.

The Central Valley migrants were in a mode of constant transition. The factory fields offered work for many migrants, but the harvest season was short and difficult, keeping the families on the move across the valley throughout the year.¹⁹ The migrants had great difficulty finding a place where they could settle permanently and still earn adequate wages to feed their families. Employment between harvest seasons required flexibility. For most families that meant struggling to find and keep odd jobs with a twenty- to thirty-mile radius of where they lived.²⁰ The odd jobs included packing-shed, construction, and other seasonal work. Numerous families lived a life of compromise; hitting the road and being mobile during the summer harvest months, but trying to stay put during the winter economic slowdown.²¹

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¹⁹ Gregory stated that, “Settling down and refusing to follow the crops made it difficult to earn a living from agricultural work. Some areas offered more employment than others, but not even the southern San Joaquin Valley, where potatoes, grapes, and cotton all matured at different times of the year, could support settled harvest workers year-round.” Gregory, American Exodus, 69.  
²⁰ Ibid.  
²¹ Ibid.
As the Joad family settled into their new temporary home Ma Joad began cooking the first dinner in the labor camp and was soon surrounded by hungry children. She began a conversation with one of the young labor camp girls. The girl described the government-run migrant labor camp near Weedpatch in an illustrative way, so vividly that Ma Joad could see the camp although she had never been there.

"Over by Weedpatch. Got nice toilets an' baths, an' you kin wash clothes in a tub, an' they's water right handy, good drinkin' water; an' nights the folks plays music and Sat'dy night they give a dance. Oh, you never seen anything so nice. Got a place for kids to play, an' them toilets with paper. Pull down a little jigger an' the water comes right in the toilet, an' they ain't no cops let to come look in your tent any time they want, an' the fella runs the camp is so polite, comes a-visitin' an' talks an' ain't high an' mighty. I wisht we could go live there again." (GOW, 253)

Just when the reader gets to the point where there seems to be no solution in store for the Joads to escape the oppression and the hopelessness of the migrant work camp Steinbeck restores hope that there was a future for the Joads. The description of Weedpatch gave them hope that the future hadn't been sealed, that there was an opportunity to improve their place in life. They would continue to look for work and eventually try their luck at the government labor camp.

It must be discussed that although many of the Okies could not imagine how difficult life would be once they arrived in the West, there were some who experienced an increase in living conditions when they arrived in California. Those who lived in the Farm Security Administration camps in the Central Valley were able to live in consistent, clean, and well-planned facilities, with sanitary drinking water and sewage systems. An Okie recently arrived in California described life back in Oklahoma, "People just can't make it back there, with drought, hailstorms, windstorms, duststorms, insects. People
exist here and they can’t do that there. You can make it here if you sleep lots and eat little, but it’s pretty tough.”

One of the constants of life in Steinbeck’s Hooverville was the transition of families into and out of the camp in search of work. There was a constant flow of migrants into California’s Central Valley, all in search of places to live and work. The planting and harvest seasons created a flow of migrants around the valley from south to north, keeping the families moving as they searched for a few days of work. They couldn’t stay put in any one location for very long as the opportunities for work moved around the state.

When time came for the Joad family to move on from Hooverville, they left in search of living space at Weedpatch. They were lucky enough to find an open campsite inside the government labor camp. Tom checked into the camp as everyone else was unloading the truck. He was told about the layout of the camp and given an overview of all the camp rules. While Tom was walking back to the campsite Steinbeck took the opportunity to describe the landscape of the government labor camp.

Tom walked down the street between the rows of tents...He saw that the rows were straight and that there was no litter about the tents. The ground of the street had been swept and sprinkled...He neared Number Four Sanitary Unit and he looked at it curiously, an unpainted building, low and rough. Under a roof, but open at the sides, the rows of wash trays. (GOW, 288)

The Weedpatch labor camp was everything that Hooverville wasn’t. It was orderly, clean, quiet, and safe. It was consistent. A family was treated like a family, with dignity,

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not like a group of vagabond Okies. The Joad family still wasn’t happy to be living in a labor camp, but the Weedpatch camp was about as good as they came.

The Weedpatch camp succeeded because they gave the families an opportunity to “own” the camp. Each family was required to donate time to clean the camp and the camp was run by a Central Committee made up of campers. The campers created and enforced their own rules. This created a sense of “ownership” in the camp that was missing in the Hoovervilles. The campers took pride in governing Weedpatch and it showed in the landscape of the camp. James Gregory summed up the mission of the government camps when he described them as, “A political symbol as a practical answer to the problems of farm labor. Intended to foster cooperative values as well as provide emergency shelter, the design called for platform camp sites surrounding a common washroom and recreational center.” These government work camps provided the basic necessities of shelter and human interaction for the migrants, allowing them to concentrate on working, feeding their family members, and building a sense of community among the residents. The families within Weedpatch felt wanted. They were still migrants, but they felt that life had meaning in Weedpatch. It was a calm and peaceful setting compared to Hooverville. It was not the responsibility of the federal government to create that sense of community among the residents, but with the government providing the basics the campers could concentrate on higher level needs and interaction.

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23 The government work camps tried to create a sense of community among the families living within their boundaries. The camp managers instituted a variety of programs. They encouraged the formation of an elected camp council and urged residents to participate in civic affairs and attend council meetings. They sponsored reading groups, sewing clubs, and newspapers. The migrants established “good neighbors” clubs to acculturate newcomers, child welfare committees to stress the importance of personal health and hygiene, and recreational committees to promote athletics and sponsor competitive events. Hise, “From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes,” 248.
24 Gregory, American Exodus, 71.
In Hooverville the scene described by Steinbeck was one of transition and turnover, but in Weedpatch he described a landscape of consistency and stability. Of course Weedpatch only provided a small foundation of stability because it was still greatly affected by the agricultural economics of the central valley, but life in Weedpatch was as stable and constant as possible for the migrant families. Hooverville, though, provided a landscape of total dislocation while Weedpatch, although dislocated from the outside world, provided hope and a sense of community among the residents. The difference to the migrant families was huge. The Weedpatch work camp was the place the Joad family felt most at home. People cared about each other and the camp was inviting.

The Joad family settled into life at Weedpatch, but all was still not well in California’s Central Valley. Tom had already been at work digging a ditch when the rest of the men awoke, got ready, and began looking for work. As they took the truck out of Weedpatch to look for work Steinbeck documented what they found,

The truck moved along the beautiful roads, past orchards where the peaches were beginning to color, past vineyards with the clusters pale and green, under lines of walnut trees whose branches spread half across the road. At each entrance-gate Al slowed; and at each gate there was a sign: “No help wanted. No trespassing.” (GOW, 318)

The orchards and vineyards of California were the setting for one of the more difficult times the Joad family faced. The fruit was growing on the trees and vines, and would soon need to be picked, but there was no work to be found until they ripened. They were becoming desperate.

Steinbeck used his landscape description again to warn of what was to come the family’s way. Pa and Ma Joad had a conversation reminiscing about the trip west and planning for the future during which Ma said,
"I can remember them mountains was, sharp as o’ teeth beside the river where Noah walked. I can remember how the stubble was on the groun’ where Grandpa lies…"

Pa’s voice took on her tone. “I seen the ducks today,” he said. “Wedgin’ south- high up... An’ the ducks drivin’ on down, wedgin’ on down to the southward.”

Ma smiled… “Remember what we’d always say at home? ‘Winter’s a comin’ early,’ we said, when the ducks flew. Always said that, an’ winter come when it was ready to come. But we always said, ‘she’s a-comin’ early.’ I wonder what we meant.” (GOW, 323)

These last two excerpts go together well. The orchards and vineyards were in the midst of producing crops, but soon winter would arrive, when there would be no work in the central valley. Steinbeck used the description of these two landscapes to prepare the reader for the inevitable, a season of no work. What would happen to the Joads when winter came? Would they survive? Winter would come when it was ready, so the Joad family, and the entire Weedpatch family, needed to prepare for it, but how can the family prepare for it when there was no work to be found?

Weedpatch, as a government run camp, sat on federal land. Residing on government land gave the camp a unique distinction: local law enforcement didn’t have jurisdiction over it. The local police couldn’t enter the camp and harass the migrants, and since local law enforcement was the most direct tool the farmer’s associations had to oppress and harass the migrants, those living at Weedpatch felt a sense of security while within its borders. Weedpatch was a type of sanctuary. They felt safe there, they were treated humanely, people looked out after each other, and they were free from the harassment that was directed at the Hoovervilles. The only time the local police were allowed on the premises was if there was a large fight or problem that was beyond the government’s ability to control with the limited number of administrators they had in the camp. If the
problems were too big for the camp and it looked like it would spill over into the local jurisdiction, the police would be called to help solve the problem. But, they did not have free access to the camp and for that the migrants were happy and the farmer’s association was upset.

The farmer’s associations were continually trying to keep the migrants on the defensive in the hope that it would stop them from uniting and becoming a powerful force in the valley’s agricultural economics. The associations enjoyed being the most powerful entity in the valley and did not want to lose their control. So, they developed secret plans to make the Weedpatch labor camp look disruptive in the hopes that the federal government would shut it down.

One way the migrant families escaped their problems and built relationships with each other was through the Weedpatch community Saturday evening dance. The families looked forward to the dance all week. When Saturday morning dawned the entire camp was involved in cleaning themselves and the campground to make everything look as neat as possible for the dance that evening. Steinbeck described this process,

On Saturday morning the wash tubs were crowded. The women washed dresses, pink ginghams and flowered cottons, and they hung them in the sun and stretched the cloth to smooth it. When afternoon came the whole camp quickened and the people grew excited. The children caught the fever and were more noisy than usual. About mid-afternoon child bathing began, and as each child was caught, subdued, and washed, the noise on the playground gradually subsided. Before five, the children were scrubbed and warned about getting dirty again; and they walked about, still in clean clothes, miserable with carefulness. (GOW, 331)

The landscape Steinbeck described is one easily understood. The migrants were eagerly cleaning the camp in order to show it off later that evening at the dance. They enjoyed living at Weedpatch and wanted everyone else who came to the dance to envy
their camp. Weedpatch had become more than a migrant work camp to them; it had become their home and they were eager to display it.

As evening came and the dance was soon to begin, Steinbeck detailed the setting for the beginning of the dance,

And now the dusk was falling, and as the darkness deepened the practicing of the string band seemed to grow louder. The lights flashed on and two men inspected the patched wire to the dance floor. The children crowded thickly about the musicians. A boy with a guitar sang the “Down Home Blues,” chording delicately for himself, and on his second chorus three harmonicas and a fiddle joined him. From the tents the people streamed toward the platform, men in their clean blue denim and women in their gingham. They came near to the platform and then stood quietly waiting, their faces bright and intent under the light. (GOW, 334)

Steinbeck’s landscape description at Weedpatch highlighted a safe, friendly, and fun environment. But, that was the internal feeling of community within Weedpatch. How did Weedpatch interact with the outside world? Steinbeck, in the very next paragraph added,

Around the reservation there was a high wire fence, and along the fence, at intervals of fifty feet, the guards sat in the grass and waited. (GOW, 334)

The migrants were living in a place where they were valued, but they had to protect themselves from the outside world. The sense of dislocation was heightened and the reader begins to understand that something was not right. Weedpatch could organize and promote building a sense of community within its own fences, but the high wire fence highlighted the separation from the outside forces affecting the migrants.

Steinbeck used the landscape of Weedpatch to illustrate the complex relationships between the sense of community within the camp and the dislocation with the outside world in some unique ways. While the Joads were camped in Weedpatch, they experienced a true sense of community being built among the families who were willing
to look out for others. The bond between migrants at Weedpatch was stronger than any other location in the novel, even stronger than back home in Oklahoma. Steinbeck used Weedpatch to show the best that society could accomplish if it could only work in unison. He showed what individuals could accomplish if the government would only protect them from those with evil intentions. From within the fences of Weedpatch the migrants also experienced the worst oppression and discrimination found in the novel, from those outside the fenceline. Inside the fence the migrants trusted and relied on each other and the government; outside the fence was a foreign world they could not cope with. The fence at Weedpatch was the author’s true line of demarcation between community and dislocation.

The Joad family’s time in Weedpatch came to an end as the central valley’s economics dictated they continue their search for work. Their search drove them north to pick peaches at Hooper Ranch. Steinbeck used this change of venue in the novel to also change the course of the Joad family’s conditions. They worsen dramatically. Regarding the family’s conditions, Peter Lisca, in “The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction,” made the observation that as the family group declines morally and economically it also begins to break up.25 Weedpatch had been a place of cooperation among the migrant families and the federal government. The camp took care of those who were unable to take care of themselves, but life on the Hooper Ranch would be a different story; it was to be a migrant camp that was steeped in complete dislocation.

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25 Lisca stated that, “Grampa dies before they are out of Oklahoma and lies in a nameless grave; Granma is buried a pauper; Noah deserts the family; Connie deserts Rosasharn; the baby is born dead; Tom becomes a fugitive; Al is planning to leave as soon as possible; Casy is killed; and they are forced to abandon the Wilsons.” “Although the primitive family unit is breaking up, the fragments are going to make up a larger group. The sense of communal unit grows steadily through the narrative…and is pointed to again and again in the interchapters.” Lisca, “The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction,” 178.
As time was running out at Weedpatch the reader understands that the Joad family was in for yet another change. Steinbeck described the final sunset in Weedpatch this way,

In the Weedpatch camp, on an evening when the long, barred clouds hung over the set sun and inflamed their edges, the Joad family lingered after their supper. (*GOW*, 350)

The sunset was described in a very negative way as the family prolonged their stay in Weedpatch with heavy decisions to be made. The work had run out and along with it the food supply was dwindling. They had two young children who needed nourishment and a daughter who was expecting to deliver a baby soon. They couldn’t feed the family without working, but at the same time they didn’t want to leave the government camp and live in another Hooverville. The family needed to make a quick decision as to whether they could stay at Weedpatch or needed to move along and find work in other locations. The mood was as gloomy as it had been throughout the entire novel. Ma Joad was determined to leave the camp and look for work up north, but the reader understands from the tone of the narrative that when the family left the comfort of Weedpatch, their lives would change for the worse.

Nevertheless, they decided to leave in the morning and head north.

The clouds over the west had lost the red edging now, and the cores were black. (*GOW*, 355)

Steinbeck used the landscape description of the sunset at Weedpatch to signal that leaving the shelter, protection, and community of Weedpatch would bring a course of terrible events to the family.
The following morning the Joads witnessed a new dawn as the family prepared to move. Steinbeck described the process of gathering and stowing everything to ready the move.

It was still dark when Ma roused her camp. The low lights shone through the open doors of the sanitary unit. From the tents along the road came the assorted snores of the campers…

The floor of the tent squirmed into slow action. Blankets and comforts were thrown back and sleepy eyes squinted blindly at the light. Ma slipped on her dress over the underclothes she wore to bed. “We got no coffee,” she said. “I got a few biscuits. We can eat ‘em on the road. Jus’ get up now, an’ we’ll load the truck. Come on now. Don’t make no noise. Don’ wanta wake the neighbors.”

It was a few moments before they were fully aroused. “Now don’ you get away,” Ma warned the children. The family dressed. The men pulled down the tarpaulin and loaded up the truck. “Make it nice an’ flat,” Ma warned them. They piled the mattress on top of the load and bound the tarpaulin in place over its ridge pole. (GOW, 360)

Just as when they left Oklahoma, once the decision to move had been made to leave Weedpatch it didn’t take long for them to spring into action. The family pulled out of Weedpatch and left their memories behind. Steinbeck detailed the landscape as they left,

The truck edged slowly over the big hump and into the road. Tom retraced the road he had driven before, past Weedpatch and west until he came to 99, then north on the great paved road, toward Bakersfield. (GOW, 361)

This description echoes their departure from Uncle John’s farm in Oklahoma. (GOW, 116) In Oklahoma it was the beginning of the transition to the migrant way of life. In California it was the resumption of that same life after leaving Weedpatch. The Joad family had experienced a good period within the fences of the government camp, but they were now heading out beyond the fence and would be at the mercy of the economic system again.
The family arrived at the Hooper Ranch where they had heard there was work available for picking peaches. As mentioned in Chapter 3 of this study, when they arrived at the ranch they were required to drive through a line of protestors at the gate of the Ranch who were trying to stand up to the economic policies of the landowners and the farmer’s associations in the central valley. Once the family crossed into the Hooper Ranch and the gate was closed behind them they entered the most dislocated landscape in the novel. They gave up all their rights and became a part of the agricultural machine working in the central valley. When the gate was shut behind them, they lost contact with the real world, their own people, and any freedom they might have had to live as they wanted. The scene shifted from one of interaction with the other migrant families around them at Weedpatch to one that was completely self-centered and focused on survival at Hooper Ranch. Inside the gate they were nothing more than a commodity which lived only to serve the economic machine. The freedom they had found at Weedpatch had vanished and they were now totally dislocated from the outside world and from the other migrants. I believe this was a result of there being no sense of community established among the residents at the Hooper Ranch. Steinbeck doesn’t describe any other families there and there is no interaction among the campers. The fence at Weedpatch was erected to keep the migrant families protected from the outside world while at the Hooper Ranch it was to keep them cut off from the outside world.

Steinbeck created this landscape of dislocation from the very beginning of the Joad family’s stay at the Hooper Ranch. As soon as they entered the gate he changed the landscape drastically as he described the work camp,

There were fifty little square, flat-roofed boxes, each with a door and a window, and the whole group in a square. A water tank stood high on one
edge of the camp. And a little grocery store stood on the other side. At the end of each row of square houses stood two men armed with shotguns and wearing big silver stars pinned to their shirts.

The six cars stopped. Two bookkeepers moved from car to car. "Want to work?"

Tom answered. "Sure, but what is this?"

"That's not your affair. Want to work?"

"Sure we do…"

"O.K. Find house sixty-three. Wages five cents a box. No bruised fruit. All right, move along now. Go to work right away."

The cars moved on. On the door of each square red house a number was painted. "Sixty," Tom said. "There's sixty. Must be down that way. There, sixty-one, sixty-two- There she is." (GOW, 368)

The situation had changed dramatically for the Joads. They had been assigned a living space, and were now officially the occupants of house sixty-three. The living conditions of the Hooper Ranch were not like Weedpatch. The houses were dark and dreary and designed to keep the migrant families separated from each other. When they walked into house sixty-three,

Ma opened the door of the house and stepped inside. The floor was splashed with grease. In the one room stood a rusty tin stove and nothing more. The tin stove rested on four bricks and its rusty stovepipe went up through the roof. The room smelled of sweat and grease. Rose of Sharon stood beside Ma. "We gonna live here?" (GOW, 369)

Life in the central valley was beginning to close in on the Joad family. The housing compound on the Hooper Ranch was very quiet as all available people were at work. The hope they had earlier in the day when they heard about the work had vanished after they arrived. The factory-style agricultural economics began immediately as the clerk came to check the family in. He asked how many would work,
Tom said, “They’s four men. Is this here hard work?”

“Picking peaches,” the clerk said. “Piece work. Give five cents a box.”

“Ain’t no reason why the little fellas can’t help?”

“Sure not, if they’re careful.”

Ma stood in the doorway. “Soon’s I get settled down I’ll come out an’ help. We got nothin’ to eat, mister. Do we get paid right off?”

“Well, no, not money right off. But you can get credit at the store for what you got coming.”

“Come on, let’s hurry,” Tom said. “I wanna get some meat an’ bread in me tonight. Where de we go, mister?” (GOW, 370)

The family had just arrived and had not even settled in yet, but the clerk was indoctrinating them to the economic factory way of life. They would not initially get money, but would get credit at the company store. This served the Hooper Ranch for two reasons. First, it ensured the Ranch that they had built in customers. They could inflate the prices of food and make a huge profit off of the workers. The workers could not safely or easily get through the gate to shop for food and supplies on the open market, so the management had no real competition for the prices they charged in their company store. The second reason this served the Hooper Ranch well is that it immediately put the working families into debt. The families would have to continue to put up with the substandard working conditions and pay in order to fulfill their debt to the company store. The company credit would serve to enslave the migrants throughout the picking season. The families would work hard to pay off their debt, but never quite be able to do it, forcing them to work longer and harder. The more they worked the farther in debt they would get.
As the Joads finished their first day of work on the Ranch and were walking back to shack sixty-three they began talking. Tom decided that he would head outside the gate that evening and find out what all the commotion outside the ranch was. Pa, Al, and Uncle John decided to stay inside the ranch gate for the evening.

They emerged from the orchard into the dusty street between the red shacks. The low yellow light of kerosene lanterns shone from some of the doorways, and inside, in the half-gloom, the black shapes of people moved about. At the end of the street a guard still sat, his shotgun resting against his knee. (GOW, 377)

Steinbeck brought us back to a landscape of gloom after the Joad family’s first day at work. Tom wanted to go outside the gate that evening to explore what was happening, and Steinbeck used the cognitive landscape to create a picture of despair that surrounded the entire Hooper Ranch, both inside and outside the fence. The reader senses from Steinbeck’s landscape that Tom’s foray outside the ranch property would end in disaster.

As Tom made his way to the gate that night the narrative described a dark landscape, full of oppression and depression.

The smoke from the houses hung low to the ground, and the lanterns threw their pictures of doorways and windows into the street. On the doorsteps people sat and looked out into the darkness. Tom could see their heads turn as their eyes followed him down the street... Tom’s feet sounded softly on the dusty road, a dark path against the yellow stubble... Tom could hear the whisper of water against the grasses in the irrigation ditch. He climbed up the bank and looked down on the dark water, and saw the stretched reflections of the stars. The State road was ahead. Car lights swooping past showed where it was. Tom set out again toward it. He could see the high wire gate in the starlight. (GOW, 380)

Steinbeck used the darkness of the landscape to prepare the reader for the menacing sequence of events that would follow and which culminated in Tom killing a man. He signaled a change in the Joad’s life and circumstances; the gloomy and deteriorating landscape of Hooper Ranch told us that it was time to move on to another camp.
The family understood that they needed to flee the situation and quickly abandoned the Hooper Ranch in search of a new home. It was late in the picking season and they would need to find a camp to settle into for the duration of the winter, one that provided protection from the weather, one that would keep Tom out of sight of the authorities, and one that would facilitate them in the search for community. As they fled north they stumbled across their new home in a cluster of abandoned box cars.

The boxcars, twelve of them, stood end to end on a little flat beside the stream. There were two rows of six each, the wheels removed. Up to the big sliding doors slatted planks ran for cat walks. They made good houses, water-tight and draftless, room for twenty-four families, one family in each end of each car. No windows, but the wide doors stood open. In some of the cars a canvas hung down in the center of the car, while in others only the position of the door made the boundary. (GOW, 409)

Steinbeck took the situation, in which a family was considering living in an abandoned railroad boxcar, and made it sound appealing. The Joad family never would have considered living in a railroad boxcar in Oklahoma, but the situation was different here in the central valley and they were in desperate need of shelter. The situation made the boxcar seem inviting. The boxcars even had some of the same characteristics as the Joad family: they were solid, expansive, and built for movement. But also like the Joad family, the wheels were removed and they were stranded, out of their environment. The family was marooned in the agricultural system of the central valley. They had no prospects for escape and appeared to be in for a very rough ride. They had made it through the harvest to cotton picking season, which they were well equipped to do, but the season would not last long and they would need to be preparing for the winter soon. The outlook seemed bleak, but the Joads quickly got to work and the new camp helped make life bearable again.
The boxcar camp was a camp at work. In contrast to what we read about the Hooper Ranch, here Steinbeck described the busy landscape using a sense of movement.

People streamed toward the boxcar camp. The tents were lighted. Smoke poured from the stovepipes. (GOW, 411)

The Joad family housed themselves in the boxcar, all except for Tom. He was still on the run from the police for the man he killed at Hooper Ranch. He was living down at the stream near the boxcars; he was close enough for Ma to bring him food, but far enough away that others didn’t know he was there. Steinbeck described the location of his hideout as Ma went to find Tom,

Ma stepped in among the willows beside the stream. She moved off the trail and waited, silently, listening to hear any possible follower...

She waited five minutes and then she stood up and crept on up the trail beside the stream...Trail and stream swung to the left and then to the right again until they neared the highway. In the gray starlight she could see the embankment and the black round hole of the culvert where she always left Tom’s food. She moved forward cautiously, thrust her package into the hole, and took back the empty tin plate which was left there. She crept back among the willows, forced her way into a thicket, and sat down to wait. Through the tangle she could see the black hole of the culvert...In a few moments the thicket crept to life again...And then a wind stirred the willows delicately, as though it tested them, and a shower of golden leaves coasted down to the ground. Suddenly a gust boiled in and racked the trees, and a cricking downpour of leaves fell...Over the sky a plump black cloud moved, erasing the stars. The fat drops of rain scattered down, splashing loudly on the fallen leaves, and the cloud moved on and unveiled the stars again...The wind blew past and left the thicket quiet, but the rushing of the trees went on down the stream. From back at the camp came the thin penetrating tone of a violin feeling about for a tune. (GOW, 415)

The landscape was different here in the boxcar camp. The situation was almost unbearable for Ma, with Tom wanted by the police, but Steinbeck formed the landscape with an emphasis on the natural world and its benevolent comings and goings. The weather signaled an end to the picking season, but the landscape was not one of
oppression or gloom. Steinbeck was using the landscape to describe a change. It seemed as if the Joad family had a bit more control over their circumstances in the boxcar camp, but the author let the reader know that it wouldn’t last for long.

Ma Joad awakened early the next morning to get a quick start on readying the family for another day of picking, but at a new farm. Steinbeck signaled the start of something new in the Joad family’s lives with a description of the new day.

In the lightless car, Ma stirred, and then she pushed the blanket back and got up. At the open door of the car the gray starlight penetrated a little. Ma walked to the door and stood looking out. The stars were paling in the east. The wind blew softly over the willow thickets, and from the little stream came the quiet talking of the water. Most of the camp was still asleep, but in front of one tent a little fire burned, and people were standing about it, warming themselves. Ma could see them in the light of the new dancing fire as they stood facing the flames, rubbing their hands; and then they turned their backs and held their hands behind them. For a long moment Ma looked out, and she held her hands clasped in front of her. The uneven wind whisked up and passed, and a bite of frost was in the air. Ma shivered and rubbed her hands together. She crept back and fumbled for the matches beside the lantern. The shade screeched up. She lighted the wick, watched it burn blue for a moment and then put up its yellow, delicately curved ring of light. She carried the lantern to the stove and set it down while she broke the brittle dry willow twigs into the fire box. In a moment the fire was roaring up the chimney. (GOW, 425)

It was the humans who brought life to the boxcar camp. When Steinbeck described them in the earlier excerpt at the beginning of the scene (GOW, 409), the boxcar camp was only a collection of lifeless abandoned railroad cars. They had potential to be a home for the family, but only in the second excerpt did Steinbeck bring life to the scene. The people were standing around a campfire warming themselves and talking. Ma Joad brought light and warmth into the family’s boxcar by starting a fire in the firebox. The boxcar camp was beginning to exhibit the sense of community the Joad family brought with them everywhere they went. It was time for the family to get to work.
As the Joads made their way to the new farm Steinbeck described a sight that lifted the spirits of the entire novel.

They drove along the dark road. And other cars followed them, and behind, in the camp, the cars were being started, the families piling in; and the cars pulled out on the highway and turned left.

A piece of cardboard was tied to a mailbox on the right-hand side of the road, and on it, printed with blue crayon, "Cotton Pickers Wanted." Al turned into the entrance and drove out to the barnyard. And the barnyard was full of cars already. An electric globe on the end of the white barn lighted a group of men and women standing near the scales, their bags rolled under their arms. Some of the women wore the bags over their shoulders. (GOW, 427)

Steinbeck used an incredible word in this description of the landscape. Instead of the sign reading "Cotton Pickers Needed," it read "Cotton Pickers Wanted." If he was trying to set this scene steeped in a landscape of consumption he would have use the word "Needed." But, he was trying to show an improvement in the life the Joad family was leading. He used the word, "Wanted." "Wanted" is a word with more emotional attachment than "needed." "Wanted" is a word that appeals to the Cotton Pickers' sense of community. They were desired, they belonged. This sign in the landscape description pointed to. It may only be for a brief period, but for the Joad family to see a sign that reads "Cotton Pickers Wanted" must have made them feel as though there was hope in the valley.

The people moved quickly out into the cotton field and took their rows. They tied the bags to their waists and they slapped their hands together to warm stiff fingers that had to be nimble. The dawn colored over the eastern hills, and the wide line moved over the rows...

Pa looked quickly at the western hills. Big gray clouds were coasting over the ridge, riding the wind swiftly. "Them looks like rain heads," he said.

His neighbor stole a squinting look. "Can't tell," he said. And all down the line of rows the people looked back at the clouds. And they bent lower
to their work, and their hands flew to the cotton. They raced at the picking, raced against the rain and against each other- only so much cotton to pick, only so much money to be made...The line of people moved frantically across the field, weighed at the end, marked their cotton, checked the weights into their own books, and ran for new rows.

At eleven o’clock the field was picked and the work was done...The pickers clustered disconsolately back to the barnyard and stood in line to be paid off. (GOW, 428)

The scene was one of cooperation between and among the pickers and the farmer.

The pace was set by the race against the weather and the numbers of other workers arriving. But, by noon the field had been picked and the day was done. Just as the ominous clouds were rolling in to signal that the work would be done soon, the economic outlook was cloudy for the Joad family as they prepared for a long winter. The rain started just after the picking was done.

Back at the boxcar, life continued,

The afternoon was silver with rain, the roads glittered with water. Hour by hour the cotton plants seemed to blacken and shrivel. Pa and Al and Uncle John made trip after trip into the thickets and brought back loads of dead wood. They piled it near the door, until the heap of it nearly reached the ceiling, and at last they stopped and walked toward the stove. Streams of water ran from their hats to their shoulders. The edges of their coats dripped and their shoes squished as they walked...

The evening came early. In the boxcars the families huddled together, listening to the pouring water on the roofs. (GOW, 431)

The California rains had come. Although the Joad family was dry in the boxcar, they were in no way prepared for the coming winter. The rain is what Steinbeck would use to frame the landscape of the final scene of The Grapes of Wrath.

In the boxcar camp Steinbeck created a complex environment where community and dislocation were contrasted over and over. The scene began as the members of the Joad
family had finished the harvest season and were waiting out the winter rains in the boxcar camp.

In the boxcar camp the water stood in puddles, and the rain splashed in the mud. Gradually the little stream crept up the bank toward the low flat where the boxcars stood. (GOW, 435)

The rain continued and the water rose. Al removed the tarpaulin separating the Joad and Wainwright families and they became one family. Steinbeck contributed his own commentary on the value of community when he had Tom quote Ecclesiastes 4:9 to Ma,

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up. (GOW, 418)

It appeared that Steinbeck was using this scripture quoted in the previous chapter to bring the families together to try to combat the effects of winter on the group as a whole rather than individually.

Now, without separation, the two families in the car were one. The men sat together, and their spirits were damp. Ma kept a little fire going in the stove, kept a few twigs burning, and she conserved her wood. The rain poured down on the nearly flat roof of the boxcar. (GOW, 435)

Steinbeck continued commenting on the affects of the storm pounding the boxcar camp,

On the third day the sound of the stream could be heard above the drumming rain. Pa and Uncle John stood in the open door and looked out on the rising stream. At both ends of the camp the water ran near to the highway, but at the camp it looped away so that the highway embankment surrounded the camp at the back and the stream closed in on the front. (GOW, 435)

The environment was completely controlling the Joads’ and Wainwrights’ actions at this point. They were totally surrounded by the water and had almost no ability to react to what was happening to them.
About the time the families needed to make the decision to move out to higher ground
Rose of Sharon began her labor pains and the coming baby dictated that the families
would stay in the boxcar and attempt to ride out the coming flood. Pa Joad decided that
in order to divert water away from the camp, the families must build the stream bank
higher. In trying to fight the rising stream, Pa,

Hurried to the lowest part of the bank and drove his shovel into the mud.
The shovelful lifted with a sucking sound. He drove it again, and threw
the mud into the low place on the stream bank. And beside him the other
men ranged themselves. They heaped the mud up in a long embankment,
and those who had no shovels cut live willow whips and wove them in a
mat and kicked them into the bank. Over the men came a fury of work, a
fury of battle. When one man dropped his shovel, another took it up.
They had shed their coats and hats. Their shirts and trousers clung tightly
to their bodies, their shoes were shapeless blobs of mud. A shrill scream
came from the Joad car. The men stopped, listened uneasily, and then
plunged to work again. And the little levee of earth extended until it
connected with the highway embankment on either end. They were tired
now, and the shovels moved more slowly. And the stream rose slowly. It
edged above the place where the first dirt had been thrown. (GOW, 440)

Steinbeck entered into a new form of interaction with the landscape. In this scene the
Joad family attempted to modify the landscape to ensure their survival. They were
powerless to control their own destiny; the landscape was just too dominant for them to
compete against. Modifying the stream bank proved fruitless, but it did provide the Joads
an avenue to fight back. When it looked like the families were making progress against
the stream,

The stream eddied and boiled against the bank. Then from up the stream
there came a ripping crash. The beam of the flashlight showed a great
cottonwood toppling. The weary men watched, their mouths hanging
open. The tree moved slowly down. Then a branch caught on a stump,
snagged and held. And very slowly the roots swung around and hooked
themselves on the new embankment. The water piled up behind. The tree
moved and tore the bank. A little stream slipped through. Pa threw
himself forward and jammed mud in the break. The water piled against
the tree. And then the bank washed quickly down, washed around ankles,
around knees. The men broke and ran, and the current worked smoothly into the flat, under the cars, under the automobiles. (GOW, 441)

Steinbeck again showed that the Joad family was no match for the forces of nature at work in the landscape. They tried to modify their surroundings to make it suit their needs, but nature had a different outcome in store.

When the dyke swept out, Al turned and ran...The water was about his calves when he reached the truck. He flung the tarpaulin off the nose and jumped into the car. He stepped on the starter. The engine turned over and over, and there was no bark of the motor. He choked the engine deeply. The battery turned the sodden motor more and more slowly, and there was no cough. Over and over, slower and slower...He felt under the seat for the crank and jumped out...He ran to the front end. Crank case was under water now. Frantically he fitted the crank and twisted around and around, and his clenched hand on the crank splashed in the slowly flowing water at each turn...The motor was full of water, the battery fouled by now. On slightly higher ground two cars were started and their lights on. They floundered in the mud and dug their wheels down until finally the drivers cut off the motors and sat still, looking into the headlight beams. And the rain whipped white streaks through the lights. Al went slowly around the truck, reached in, and turned off the ignition. (GOW, 441)

The truck, which had served the Joad family so faithfully since they left Sallisaw, finally was overcome by the elements and died. This left the family with no hope of mobility. The truck was their link for upward mobility, and as a vehicle of escape from circumstances beyond their control. It was now gone and the family was left to battle the system with their only tools being their own ingenuity and resources. The truck having become disabled was a devastating event for the family. The truck had been the family’s primary gathering place since just before they left Oklahoma. It replaced the farmstead as the place the family felt at home. And now, just like the farm house in Oklahoma, it was gone, leaving the family to drift without an anchor in California.
The rain outside removed the truck from the Joad family’s dwindling list of resources, but it wasn’t the only devastating event that happened. As the men battled the rising stream Rose of Sharon gave birth to a still born baby. The water continued to rise and the family would soon be forced to act. But, as Steinbeck did throughout the novel, the new dawn came to signal another change for the family.

The Joad family continued to try to fight against the elements, but they were losing the battle quickly. The water continued to rise and the cognitive landscape Steinbeck created around them continued to worsen. The dawn had come, but this time the references to light were metallic, gray, deep and solid with clouds (GOW, 446). Steinbeck was not providing the Joad family with much of an opportunity to battle back. The situation continued to worsen, not improve with the arrival of a new day.

Uncle John was given the task to bury the stillborn baby delivered by Rose of Sharon. As he left the boxcar to perform the task Steinbeck described the boxcar camp landscape around him,

In the gray dawn light Uncle John waded around the end of the car, past the Joad truck; and he climbed the slippery bank to the highway. He walked down the highway, past the boxcar flat, until he came to a place where the boiling stream ran close to the road, where the willows grew along the road side. He put his shovel down, and holding the box in front of him, he edged through the brush until he came to the edge of the swift stream. For a time he stood watching it swirl by, leaving its yellow foam among the willow stems. He held the apple box against his chest. And then he leaned over and set the box in the stream and steadied it with his hand. He said fiercely, “Go down an’ tell ‘em, Go down in the street an’ rot an’ tell ‘em that way. That’s the way you can talk. Don’ even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain’t gonna find out. Go on down now, an’ lay in the street. Maybe they’ll know then.” He guided the box out into the current and let go. It settled low in the water, edged sideways, whirled around, and turned slowly over. The sack floated away, and the box, caught in the swift water, floated quickly away. (GOW, 446)
The family decided to take action to secure themselves and built a platform in the boxcar to help keep dry, above the water level. As they were building the platform the landscape continued to deteriorate.

As they ate, the water crept up and up. Al gulped his food and he and Pa built the platform. Five feet wide, six feet long, four feet above the floor. And the water crept to the edge of the doorway, seemed to hesitate a long time, and then moved slowly inward over the floor. And outside, the rain began again, as it had before, big heavy drops splashing on the water, pounding hollowly on the roof. (GOW, 448)

Steinbeck used the landscape to show the power of the Joad family’s determination. When the water reached the doorway of the boxcar it hesitated a long time before it proceeded. The Joad family had incredible will and determination, but they were still no match for the forces that were acting upon them.

The family huddled on the platforms, silent and fretful. The water was six inches deep in the car before the flood spread evenly over the embankment and moved into the cotton field on the other side. During that day and night the men slept suddenly, side by side on the boxcar door...

The rain had become intermittent now- little wet squalls and quiet times. On the morning of the second day Pa splashed through the camp and came back with ten potatoes in his pockets. Ma watched him sullenly while he chopped out part of the inner wall of the car, built a fire, and scooped water into a pan. The family ate the steaming boiled potatoes with their fingers. And when this last food was gone, they stared at the gray water; and in the night they did not lie down for a long time. (GOW, 449)

Ma Joad made the decision to vacate the boxcar and look for higher ground. As the authority figure in the novel her decision was final and the family left. They waded through the flood and made it to the highway. Once there,

They stood on the highway and looked back over the sheet of water, the dark red blocks of the cars, the trucks, and automobiles deep in the slowly moving water. And as they stood, a little misting rain began to fall. (GOW, 450)
The cars and trucks were the symbol of home, but they were no match for the forces of nature working in the landscape. The families were helpless against both human and natural forces acting upon them.

The family made their way to a barn not far from the boxcars, the setting for the dramatic final scene of the novel. The home and primary anchor for the Joad family, ever since they left the farm in Oklahoma had been the automobile. They appeared to be hopelessly lost after the automobile succumbed to the environment. The family no longer had an anchor and was desperately in search of another symbol that would stabilize them and protect them from the outside world. The barn would fulfill this need, so they decided to make their way to the barn to seek shelter from the storm.

Just when all seemed totally lost and the family looked as though they had no future, Steinbeck introduced another artifact into the landscape,

Ahead, beside the road, Ruthie saw a spot of red. She raced to it. A scraggly geranium gone wild, and there was one rain-beaten blossom on it. *(GOW, 451)*

When the outlook seemed to be the most grim a new life was introduced into the narrative, through Ruthie’s vision. Pa and Ma Joad were busy battling the elements, but the next generation, Ruthie and Winfield, have hope of a brighter future. The action continued until,

They came panting up to the rain-soaked barn and staggered into the open end. There was no door in this end. A few rusty farm tools lay about, a disk plow and a broken cultivator, an iron wheel. The rain hammered on the roof and curtained the entrance. Pa gently set Rose of Sharon down on an oily box, “God Awmighty!” he said.

Ma said, “Maybe they’s hay inside. Look, there’s a door.” She swung the door on its rusty hinges. “They is hay,” she cried. “Come on in, you.”
It was dark inside. A little light came in through the cracks between the boards. (GOW, 451)

The situation was grim, but Steinbeck still allowed some light to shine through. Once inside the barn they were out of the rain and were able to take stock of their surroundings. Winfield noticed them first,

Ma looked. There were two figures in the gloom; a man who lay on his back, and a boy sitting beside him, his eyes wide, staring at the newcomers. (GOW, 452)

The man was desperately sick and starving.

Ma walked to the corner and looked down at the man. He was about fifty, his whiskered face gaunt, and his open eyes were vague and staring. The boy stood beside her. “Your pa?” Ma asked.

“Yeah! Says he wasn’t hungry, or he jus’ et. Give me the food. Now he’s too weak. Can’t hardly move.”

The pounding of the rain decreased to a soothing swish on the roof. The gaunt man moved his lips. Ma knelt beside him and put her ear close. His lips moved again.

“Sure,” Ma said. “You jus’ be easy. He’ll be awright. You jus’ wait’ll I get them wet clothes off’n my girl.” (GOW, 452)

Steinbeck cleverly set up the final few minutes of the novel. The Joad family tried as much as possible to leave the world behind them better than they found it. They carried a desire to build community wherever they ventured. They had limited resources, but their purpose never faltered. Rose of Sharon was about to make an unbelievable sacrifice and act of kindness.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. “There.” She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. “There!” she said. “There.”
Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (GOW, 453)

Steinbeck created an incredible final scene. Theodore Pollock in “On the Ending of The Grapes of Wrath” wrote that, “The ending in particular has proved a source of disaffection among careful readers, who find it either offensively sentimental or not really an ending at all.”26 It is a difficult ending to understand, but it is the offering of Rose of Sharon’s breast that documents the sacrifice and sense of community that is what the Joad family stood for and in the end turns this novel into an optimistic look at what lies ahead. The final scene combined all the character traits that the Joad family had exhibited over the course of the novel. They put family before self, took care of their neighbors, acted with dignity whenever possible, and respected others. This final scene was very unexpected, but edifying. Again, Steinbeck showed that the future of society, the lifeblood of humanity, lies in our relationships. The landscape the Joad family battled throughout the novel led them to many discoveries, disappointments, and challenges, but this final scene is the biggest discovery of all. Each of the landscapes has extracted its own price from the family, but each interaction also proved how deep their resourcefulness and personal strength ran.

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CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

Jackson J. Benson, in “John Steinbeck: The Favorite Author We Love to Hate,” made the argument that Steinbeck was “a writer who not only created memorable stories, but he really cared about people, particularly the dispossessed and the persecuted.”¹ This statement summarized very well the life of the writer and activist John Steinbeck. He deeply cared about people, especially the migrant workers who often served as his topic. It is difficult to separate Steinbeck’s political activism and desire to help the disposed and the persecuted from his story telling ability. In the case of The Grapes of Wrath, some have made the interpretation that Steinbeck is anti-capitalist and anti-industrialist² because of his desire to document the living conditions of the migrant workers, but in reality, Steinbeck’s novel documented his own ambivalent beliefs and attitudes regarding the increasing technology driving 1930s economics. The migrant workers needed help, and he documented that very thoroughly, but he was hesitant to assign responsibility for their plight to any one individual or group. Through the landscapes he created for The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck described a changing world where the migrants were caught in a precarious situation, and unfortunately they were being sacrificed for the sake of progress.

Steinbeck was familiar with the economic forces that affected people’s lives; he comprehended them both from the need to make our country economically strong but also from the personal side as people suffered as the victims of industrialization. The Grapes of Wrath flowed from Steinbeck’s perspective of desiring to understand the

¹ Benson, “John Steinbeck: The Favorite Author We Love to Hate,” 8.
² Schultz and Li in Critical Companion to John Steinbeck, 90.
polarizing effects of industrialization, making sense of the benefits to society as we moved forward balanced by the individual hardships endured by those struggling or left behind. Steinbeck incorporated this ambivalence into the landscapes he created as the setting for the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this study I analyzed Steinbeck’s ambivalence toward increasing industrialization as documented in three major landscapes he created.

In many novels the setting, or landscape, supports and contributes to the development of the author’s plot. But, in *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck’s cognitive landscape determined and drove the plot forward. Steinbeck’s organizational flow of alternating landscape development (interchapters) and narrative chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* provided the reader with a clear understanding of how important the author believed the landscape was to the storyline. As I stated in Chapter 1, landscape development was important enough for the author to devote roughly twenty percent of the text solely to interchapter landscape description without any mention of the characters, which provided a foundational setting for the story in each following narrative chapter.

The plot developed as the characters act out their lives within the cognitive landscape.

The three major landscapes Steinbeck fashioned to serve as the setting for this novel were the landscapes of the highway, automobile, and migrant camps. Each landscape was developed in depth, each was acted upon by the characters of the novel, and each drove the plot forward in *The Grapes of Wrath*. All three landscapes contained artifacts that acted as the anchors, or the centerpieces, of the landscape.

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One section of the story captured all three of the landscapes in a single episode. The short section in Chapter 3 (GOW, 18-19) in which Steinbeck described a turtle wandering across the landscape brings this all together. I will use the turtle as a symbol to discuss the major themes of novel’s cognitive landscapes. Several authors have used Steinbeck’s turtle to illustrate their points.\(^5\)

The author introduced the turtle in the highway landscape crawling across the grass at the roadside, making slow but steady progress. The turtle encountered a berm that it needed to climb to access the elevated concrete of the highway. The berm impeded the turtle’s progress, but with enough effort and time the turtle prevailed and was able to continue its trek. During the struggle to climb onto the road the turtle was bitten by a red ant and responded by pulling itself into its shell thereby crushing the red ant and in the process lodging a head of wild oats between its skin and its shell.

The turtle continued its path across the highway where it encountered a truck that swerved to hit it. The front wheels struck the side of the turtle’s shell and sent it spinning and flipped it upside down. While trying to right itself the turtle freed the oat head which, “fell out and three of the spearhead seeds stuck in the ground. And after the turtle righted itself and crawled on down the embankment, its shell dragged dirt over the seeds,” (GOW, 19) planting them in the in the ground. Then the turtle continued on its way across the landscape not realizing the impact it has had on the landscape.

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\(^5\) Two of the more frequently quoted literary discussions of Steinbeck’s use of the turtle come from the following sources: Eric W. Carlson, “Symbolism in the Grapes of Wrath,” College English, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Jan., 1958), 175. Carlson stated that, “The turtle is a remarkable example of creative nature symbolism, further developing the idea of interdependence and introducing the central theme, the primal drive of life. The former is implied by the description of the seeds in the opening paragraph, and of the way the head of oats caught by the turtle’s leg is dropped and covered with earth by the turtle’s shell. The latter theme is symbolized by the turtle’s dogged movement forward, the way all life naturally seeks to go somewhere through an instinctive urge to self-realization.” Peter Lisca also compares Steinbeck’s use of the turtle to the biblical narrative of the Israelites leaving Egypt (Oklahoma) and marching to Canaan (California). Lisca, “The Grapes of Wrath as Fiction,” 174.
The Joad family is represented by the turtle in many different ways. With regard to the highway landscape, the Joad family can be viewed as the turtle struggling to climb up the berm to head out on the highway. As so many others had done before them, the Joads looked to the highway as their path to freedom while fleeing the troubles in Oklahoma and accessing the unlimited opportunity in the west. Their flawed vision of California beckoned them to leave Oklahoma and head west, but just as the turtle struggled to climb up the berm, the opportunity the highway presented the Joads was balanced by the oppression they experienced from the same economic machine which built the highway. The highway represented freedom, while at the same time accessing the highway and becoming part of the larger economic machine that built the highway required sacrifice.

With regard to the landscape surrounding the automobile, the Joad family was also represented by the turtle. When the red ant bit the turtle it suddenly snapped its head, legs, and tail into the shell crushing the ant, but at the same time lodging the head of wild oats into the shell where it stayed with the turtle as it crawled across the landscape. When the Joad family lost the farm and decided to leave Oklahoma they discarded all their extraneous possessions and jettisoned all but the few items that were of extreme importance to them. These items, those they determined were of the most value, they loaded into the truck which became their “in-between” home. They had left their home on the plains of Oklahoma and the truck became the central stabilizing figure of the story as they searched for their future home in California. As with the turtle’s shell, the truck provided the family with protection from the outside world. It also became a rallying point for the family; an icon that replaced the farm home, where all the important decisions would be made. And, as the turtle took the seed with it, the Joad family,

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6 Cruz, "In Between a Past and Future Town," 54.
through the use of the truck as a symbol of home, took a piece of their Oklahoma roots with them. The truck provided the Joad family with the tools to take advantage of the mobility required to reach the opportunities that awaited them in the west, while at the same time bringing with them the domesticity and stability of their Oklahoma roots.

With regard to the landscape of the migrant work and travel camps, the turtle again represented the Joad family. Steinbeck crafted the landscape of the migrant camps to illustrate the competing dual nature of dislocation and community. The turtle crawling across the landscape was a powerful illustration of this dual nature. The turtle’s shell insulated it from the outside world. Predators, weather, and other threats could be avoided simply by the turtle turning inward and pulling itself into its shell. Steinbeck’s turtle did this when it sensed the red ant on its body. The turtle pulled itself into its shell where it felt safe and could choose the situation and time to emerge. The shell also protected the turtle when it was struck by the automobile on the highway and afterwards, as the turtle emerged, it dropped the oat seed and covered it up with dirt, planting it in the earth. The turtle was dislocated from its surroundings when it pulled itself into the shell. The problems of the outside world disappeared, replaced by an environment the turtle was comfortable with. As the turtle emerged from its shell it planted the oat seed which represented the building of the sense of community, illustrating the Joad family as they reached out beyond themselves to help humanity in the migrant camps, even in the midst of difficult times.

The dual nature of dislocation and community also affected the Joad family in another way as they made the trip west. Under the pressure of the trip west the family unit began to disintegrate as GrandPa, GrandMa, the family dog, Noah, and Connie left
the family either through death or choice. As the family disintegrated, those left within the family began to build a stronger sense of community with the other migrants they came in contact with, those sharing in their plight. The family made it to California, but only after enduring a long struggle on the highway.

John Steinbeck created complex cognitive landscapes for *The Grapes of Wrath*. His landscapes illustrated the constant struggle Americans faced in the early 1930s as the increasing rate of industrialization pushed them into an age of reliance on technology while they tried to maintain a firm hold on their traditional values. Industrialization forced them to find ways to cope with change.

Steinbeck’s landscapes highlighted the relationships that develop when we encounter stressful and difficult situations. It is easy to come to quick conclusions; either blaming the migrants for their own difficulties because they were unable to embrace the changes in technology, or blaming the landowners and farmers’ associations for trying to use technology to increase their profits. The economic situation in the 1930s was very complex and Steinbeck presented a balanced viewpoint. Steinbeck’s viewpoint documents what was happening without placing blame on any one individual or group. The oppression the migrants felt was due to the extreme economic difficulties present in the 1930s and was balanced by the opportunities available to them that weren’t available a generation earlier. In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck used the dual natures of the highway landscape as a metaphor to illustrate the constant tension present when living

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7 Jules Chametzky makes this argument in his article, “The Ambivalent Endings of *The Grapes of Wrath*.” He stated that “Two opposed themes are interwoven: the breakdown of the family unit economically and morally, which gave rise to an opposite and ‘upward’ theme of the ‘communal unit’-into, that is, a wider sense of their common humanity, which is, in effect, an ‘education and conversion’ to the virtues and desirability of cooperation with their fellows.” Jules Chametzky, “The Ambivalent Endings of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath*, Agnes McNeill Donohue, ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 234.
among both opportunity and oppression. The highway provided benefits to the migrants as it facilitated the move to better opportunities in the west, but at the same time it served as a symbol of the enormous economic system that held the tenant and migrant farm families hostage. Although the highway offered the tenant farm families a choice to become migrants and flee the economic circumstances they encountered in the plains, their future once they arrived in the valleys of California had already been determined by the same economic system that provided them with the choice. The migrants believed that the highway represented the path to a better life in the west, but once they arrived they experienced more oppression and entrapment than they had in the plains. It was not an oppression caused by individuals, but rather by the sacrifices one must make to participate in the collective economic system, in this case for the benefit of technological progress. The individual was noble in Steinbeck's story; it was the collective actions of an impersonal economic group, perhaps, that caused the oppression.

The landscapes of the highway and the automobile were interdependent in the novel. The automobile was the tool that the Joad family used to move west along Highway 66, the landscape of which represented the path to a better future for the migrants. But, the automobile also represented the changing economics of home. The presence of the automobile in the story signaled a significant change in the family's status. Prior to its introduction the family was anchored to the farm, where the family had resided for generations. The seclusion and sedentary life on the family farm had been replaced by a lifestyle dominated by the mobility the automobile provided the tenant farmer.

After the introduction of the automobile the family's life became attached to that mobility. Steinbeck highlighted the importance of the truck by using it as the location
where the family made all the major decisions for the rest of the novel. The family’s reliance on the mobility provided by the automobile was offset by Steinbeck’s description of the changing landscape of small town America and its incorporation of the automobile into the vernacular landscape. Steinbeck used the landscape of the automobile to represent the struggle between the emphasis placed on mobility in an industrializing society and the desire to remain focused on the values of home and family. The introduction of the automobile not only helped the migrant families move west to begin new lives, but also helped those who chose to stay behind cope with the rapidly changing economic conditions of the plains. Steinbeck used the automobile, in this case the Joad family truck, to illustrate the tension of living among the competing dual natures of mobility and domesticity.

As the migrant families moved west Steinbeck created the landscape of the migrant work and travel camp as the appropriate setting to highlight the dual nature of dislocation and community. Once they arrived in California the migrant farm families were completely separated from society, serving at the whim of the farmers’ association. When the Joad family arrived in the central valley they encountered a new way of life. The life they found in the migrant work camp was one always maintained in a state of transition and dislocation. The cultural and physical fabric of the work camp would change on a daily basis. When harvest season approached, the farms could not find enough migrant workers to pick the fruit or cotton as fast as they wanted. Each extra day the produce was still in the field was lost opportunity for the farmers. But, once harvest season was over the same farmers’ associations wanted the migrant families out of their neighborhoods. The viewpoint from outside of the migrant camp was that the workers
were less than human and seen as a commodity to be used, similar to the crops growing on the farm. But, inside the work camp Steinbeck created an atmosphere where family and individuals were valued and relationships were paramount. Steinbeck, in an earlier work, even gave the migrants an affectionate name, “The Harvest Gypsies,” which fit them very well as they were a close knit, but mobile collection of families following the harvest from location to location.

These migrant families were dislocated from any reasonable opportunity to climb the social ladder and were isolated from the rest of society. But, they found a way to rely on each other and formed a bond of community among themselves. The Joad family always managed to help those who were less fortunate than themselves, bringing the values of small town and rural Oklahoma with them as they traveled west. The economic situation was oppressing them, but they sought to create a sense of community and family values wherever they went. The migrant camps were a fitting subject for Steinbeck to use as his metaphor for the struggle between dislocation and community.

In this dissertation I analyzed Steinbeck’s use of the highway, automobile, and migrant camp landscapes to illustrate his agenda that meaningful life is lived among the tension and complex dual natures of oppression and opportunity, mobility and domesticity, and dislocation and community. The benefits that society received from increasing industrialization would be weighed against the costs to be paid by individuals through sacrifice. This was a very complex issue for 1930s America and Steinbeck did a masterful job illustrating this concept through cognitive landscape development in *The Grapes of Wrath.*

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In this study I have also attempted to show that there is productive space for analysis in the overlap between the disciplines of literature and geography. As alluded to earlier in this study, Pierce F Lewis's statement that our human landscape is our "unwitting autobiography"\(^9\) applies well to the cognitive landscapes created by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It could be applied to the cognitive landscape in any number of fiction or non-fiction works, not solely limited to the analysis of the alteration of the physical landscape.

At the beginning of this study I quoted from Warren French's article "Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939)." French discussed Steinbeck's letter to his editor, Pascal Covici, in which Steinbeck stated "that there are 'five layers' to the novel and that a reader will find as many as he can and won't find more than he has himself."\(^10\) The layers to *The Grapes of Wrath* are so intricately designed that I am not sure if anyone will ever discover all of them. Steinbeck created a masterful story with a complex plot accompanied with the associated complexity in the cognitive landscapes he crafted to support the story. A question I have been asked several times is, "Does your reading of Steinbeck suggest that he knowingly meant to display the complexity of technological advances—one beneficial and one negative, or whether his social agenda and plot line simply allowed the discerning reader to discover the dichotomy?" This is a difficult question to answer.

Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* very quickly, a process that began in February 1938 and ended in October 1938.\(^11\) He produced the completed story without need for editing, other than when his wife, Elaine, took John's hand-written notes and typed them

\(^9\) Lewis, "Axioms for Reading The Landscape," 12.
\(^{10}\) See Warren French’s essay "Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath," 35.
\(^{11}\) DeMott, *John Steinbeck: Working Days*, ix.
to submit to the publisher. A story created and written this quickly, with almost no editing is very unusual and would lead one to believe that he had the story outlined in his head before he started. Steinbeck spent years working and living with the migrants. The story he created flowed out of him, but it was the result of the years of life experience he had working with the migrants. He was writing the story from his experience; he wasn’t telling someone else’s story, he was telling his story. I believe this is what allowed him to create a story with so many deeply intertwined levels in such a short amount of time.

To illustrate what I am saying, if *The Grapes of Wrath* represented a war it was as if Steinbeck didn’t need to concentrate on the small individual battles. He already knew the outcome of the war and could concentrate on the overall campaign plan. Steinbeck knew where he was starting from and knew the final scene and most of the details of how he wanted to arrive at the final scene. The path of the story was laid out before him, and his task was to link the events of the story together as seamlessly as possible. So to answer the question I posed on the preceding page, I believe Steinbeck purposefully wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* to display the complexity of the problem with the plight of the migrants, but while doing so he unwittingly illustrated the positive and negative qualities of the increasing technological advances in the 1930s. As the quote earlier from Pierce Lewis showed us, this novel, including Steinbeck’s cognitive landscape, served as his unwitting autobiography, reflecting his tastes, values, aspirations, and fears, in tangible, visible form. It provided us a glimpse into the life and thoughts of John Steinbeck. His ambivalent feelings towards increasing technology drove him to portray a complete and balanced view of the effects of that technology on society. It was a remarkable
accomplishment given the short amount of time Steinbeck required to produce The Grapes of Wrath.

**For Further Study**

There are several questions left unanswered that are worthy of further analysis. This study only analyzed one author’s work over a very short period in time. Questions that are similar that would provide productive areas of research are: How does the cognitive landscape of The Grapes of Wrath compare with cognitive landscape development of California’s Central Valley in Frank Norris’ The Octopus. Norris wrote about the central valley in the early 1900s and Steinbeck wrote in the 1930s. The landscape of the central valley changed dramatically in the thirty years between the novels. What do the changes in the description of California’s Central Valley tell us about the changes in industrialization and societal values?

How do the travel diaries of those heading west along the California/Oregon/Mormon Trails in the 1850s and the Transcontinental Railroad in the late 1800s compare with the diaries of those headed west during the Dust Bowl? This would be an interesting documentation of the increase in industrialization for migrant populations over an eighty year span.

How does the cognitive landscape Steinbeck created for The Grapes of Wrath compare to the landscape as depicted in the travel journals of migrants in the 1930s? Was Steinbeck glamorizing the trip West? Was his landscape simplified?

How does Steinbeck’s Highway 66 landscape compare to the diaries of those returning to the Plains from the West in the 1930s? Do those returning from the West document as much despair and see the landscape as harshly?
As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, John Steinbeck deeply cared about people, especially the migrant workers that often served as his topic. He was politically active in seeking social justice for the oppressed migrants and desired to tell their story. In *The Grapes of Wrath* he succeeded in telling a very politically charged story in such a way that it became a favorite of those with even moderate political views. This is a testament to his story telling ability as he created a balanced landscape, displaying his ambivalence towards increasing technology in the society of the 1930s.
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Vita Auctoris

Rick Marshall was born in Altadena, California and spent his childhood growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles. His interest in the study of place and landscapes began as a young man reviewing issues of National Geographic Magazine. Mr. Marshall continued his fascination with the study of place and landscape and received a Bachelor of Arts in Geography from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1981. He was then commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force, where he served as a C-130 and C-5 Navigator for twenty-one years, flying to every continent in the world. The Air Force assigned Mr. Marshall to northern California twice, North Carolina, Delaware, South Korea, and Illinois twice.

While serving in the Air Force Mr. Marshall continued his studies and completed a Master of Arts in Management from Webster University in 1987 and a Master of Arts in Geography from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville in 1999. Mr. Marshall has served as an adjunct Professor of Geography for Southwestern Illinois College since 2002 where he has taught the World Regional Geography course.