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# Jazz Babies, a Femme Fatale, and a Joad: Women and the Automobile in the American Modernist Era

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JAZZ BABIES, A FEMME FATALE, AND A JOAD:  
WOMEN AND THE AUTOMOBILE IN THE AMERICAN MODERNIST ERA

by

JESSICA BREMMER

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

The 1920's and 30's saw the advent of the automotive era in America as Henry Ford's vision of production and technological progress was fully realized. But the pleasure of automobility was initially afforded to a select few, and so the automobile revealed a growing chasm between social classes. Additionally, the automobile contributed to a transformation of the social ideology of gender as more and more women spent time in cars as passengers and as drivers. And while some viewed this ideological shift as a welcome change, many Americans worried about the negative implications of women in cars. Representations of automobiles in American literature reveal this juxtaposition between positive and negative reactions, and this thesis explores the cultural impetus behind this duality, as well as the manifestations of this duality in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

INDEX WORDS: automobile, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, Myrtle Wilson, Phyllis Nirdlinger, Ma Joad, *The Great Gatsby*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Grapes of Wrath*

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of Master of Arts  
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Georgia State University

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## INTRODUCTION

There are perhaps few images that are as symbolic of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American culture as the automobile. The machines produced during Henry Ford's reign over the American economy came to represent this country's ingenuity, technological progress, and financial success. Warren Susman writes, "By the 1920's then, Ford and his new system were being widely hailed as the American system. The miracles he had wrought in production and consumption made his name synonymous with American success" (138). The automobile reached iconic status in the early years of the twentieth century as more and more Americans identified it as the marker of a uniquely American ideology, an ideology simultaneously characterized by increasingly efficient production and increased consumption.

But America's relationship with the automobile was complex. While the machines were, on one hand, a symbol of seemingly boundless freedom and mobility, this mobility was afforded to a select few in the early days of the automotive era. Susman notes that in the first decade of the twentieth century, "the famous public fancy was increasingly captured by the possibilities of the automobile. . . . although obviously most cars remained too expensive for the wide and hungering middle-class" (132). The average American was without the financial means to purchase and maintain an automobile, and consequently, the increased sense of mobility also resulted in a growing chasm between social classes. As a way of combating this inequality, and as a strategy

for increasing his profits, no doubt, Ford proposed an unprecedented method of production:

I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one – and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God’s great open.

(qtd. in Susman 136)

Implicit in Ford’s statement is an appeal to the practicality of Americans who were members of an increasingly industrialized society. The automobile’s low cost and “simple design” spoke to the great masses, and Ford’s promise that every man would be able to afford one of his machines spoke to the democratic spirit of the country. In order to achieve the productive innovation he envisioned, the automotive magnate refined and implemented the assembly line in his factory, and the results were astounding. James Flink describes production in the Ford plant:

. . . manufacturing and assembling operations began to be arranged sequentially, so that components traveled to completion over the shortest route possible with no unnecessary handling. Magnetos, motors, and transmissions were assembled on moving lines by the summer of 1913. After production from these subassembly lines threatened to flood the final assembly line, a moving chassis-assembly line was installed. It reduced the time of chassis assembly from twelve and half hours in

October to two hours and forty minutes by December 30, 1913. Moving lines were quickly established for assembling the dash, the front axle, and the body. . . . By the summer of 1914 productivity in assembling magnetos had more than doubled, and chassis assembly took under two hours, about one sixth the time required with artisanal production methods. (*The Automobile Age* 48)

According to Flink, Ford noted with great pride that “‘Every piece of work in the shop moves’” (qtd. in *The Automobile Age* 48). And while Ford did indeed see “the production of [his] fifteen-millionth automobile” by the late 1920’s (Susman 187), indicating that he was in large part able to fulfill the automotive prophesy he had articulated some twenty years earlier, the equality he sought for his customers was not as absolute as he had predicted, and many Americans were still left hungering for the automobility he had promised, particularly in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930’s, an economic event Ford could never have foreseen.

Ford’s production numbers are evidence that America did indeed embrace the automobile because of its practicality, but Americans fell in love with the machine because of the power it offered to those who were fortunate enough to own one:

Although the motor vehicle undoubtedly never would have been adopted in the United States had it not appeared to offer substantial practical advantages over other types of transportation [privacy, flexibility, convenience], nonutilitarian motives greatly enhanced the attractiveness of the innovation to Americans. To begin with, motoring

had a hedonistic appeal rooted in basic human drives. (Flink, *America Adopts the Automobile* 100)

One such “drive” was the desire to separate oneself from the masses, and in the 1920’s and 30’s this was achieved through material means. A person’s ability to own an automobile indicated a degree of financial success that, despite Ford’s staggering numbers, was still denied to many Americans. Consequently, “the automobile became simultaneously an item of unprecedented mass consumption as well as the most important symbol of status in American society” (103). But as the automobile became increasingly identified with social standing, it also disintegrated into a physical manifestation of “the conspicuous consumption of America’s growing bourgeoisie” (Casey 7). Susman notes that by the late 1930’s, “most Americans thought that the Depression from which they suffered was the consequence of the development of modern technology” (268), and Flink contends that “the automobile boom was short-lived and illusory. . . . It sowed the seeds of its own demise and was shattered with the saturation for new cars after 1925 and the onset of technological stagnation in the automobile industry” (*The Automobile Age* 189). Furthermore, while “it would be simplistic to say that market saturation and technological stagnation ‘caused’ the Great Depression . . . mass motorization played a key role in creating the most important necessary conditions underlying the Depression” (189). And so it seemed that America’s favorite machine, the most recognizable manifestation of American technology, was destined to hover precariously between its role as a symbol of social and financial possibility and its role as the symbol of the abuse and destruction that often accompanies such possibility.

The influence of the automobile on American culture was widespread and profound, and in addition to its effects on American social/economic classes, the advent of the automobile contributed to a paradigmatic shift in the social ideology of gender that reveals a similar oscillation between positive and negative implications. As women spent more and more time in automobiles (as passengers and as drivers), their codified roles underwent a dramatic transformation. Women were no longer relegated to the home because the automobile provided them with a physical means of “escape.”

Deborah Clarke asserts that:

Clearly, the automobile challenged assumptions about the role of domesticity, female responsibility, and even women’s identity. The advent of the automobile touched women across the country, helping to break down barriers between urban and rural life, opening up possibilities, particularly for women, to get out of the house, and in doing so, also eliding the boundaries of class and gender. (103)

Virginia Scharff echoes this argument when she writes that, “The automobile, more than any of the other consumer goods Americans adopted so enthusiastically in the 1920’s, offered women new possibilities for excitement, for leisure, and for sociability” (*Taking the Wheel* 135). Women experienced a degree of literal mobility that was previously unknown to them. This mobility presented new opportunities for social interaction, travel, and time away from home, and it also presented the opportunity for autonomy since women no longer needed to depend on men for the ability to “move.”

When read with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibility, the opportunities that automobiles allowed women in the 1920’s and 30’s were essential to the growing struggle for

emancipation from imposed domesticity. Women were discovering new ways to assert themselves outside of the domestic sphere, and in the process they cultivated a degree of power that was once denied them. The automobile was a mechanical means for women to shed the shroud of submissiveness that hung heavily on their shoulders. But while it is important to understand the profound, positive effect automobiles had on gender with regards to socially-accepted female roles, it is equally important to remember that automobiles were an expensive means of gaining freedom. Furthermore, any analysis would be remiss if it did not mention the overwhelming backlash that occurred as a result of increased feminine mobility. Detractors, both male and female, who still clung to the Victorian ideals of the previous decades, feared that wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters would quickly abandon their morals and responsibilities once they were exposed to the thrill of mobility, and so the vehicles came to represent female emancipation and a threat to the male/female dynamic that was a cornerstone of domestic culture.

While driving became an exciting new means of transportation for women, it was, as I have stated, an excitement that was largely reserved for those who could afford it. Scharff asserts, “The automobile was not only a symbol and a source of independent mobility, but also a badge of status, a tool of leisure, and a very expensive material possession. Each of these automotive attributes held some appeal for affluent women. The driver’s seat tempted many who started out in the tonneau” (*Taking the Wheel* 69). Therefore, while driving certainly allowed women an increased degree of physical mobility, it was one that was quite often enjoyed by wealthy women who already experienced a greater degree of social mobility than many of their counterparts.

Consequently, a large number of American women were initially denied the exhilaration that came with sitting in the driver's seat.

Nevertheless, there was a noticeable increase in women drivers, and this increase signified a break from traditional gender roles. Women were suddenly able to derive satisfaction from something other than being wives or mothers, and the authority that came with controlling a machine such as the automobile betrayed common notions about feminine (and masculine) capabilities. The physical endurance it took to operate a car was supposed to be a distinctly male characteristic due in large part to the association between automobile bodies and women and to the association between "driving" and masculinity. Thus, "By driving, women [were] perceived as taking over the male prerogative of control and power over a body not just feminine but also masculine" (Clarke 117). This threat extended far beyond the automotive realm into the pervading gender ideology as a whole, and as a way of combating women's audacious foray into automobility, men began to craft and perpetuate the image of the "bad" female driver:

As drivers, women have been characterized as antipathetic to automobiles. They have often been depicted as incompetent and flighty behind the wheel, helplessly ignorant in the face of mechanical problems, terrified of the rigors of motoring over mud holes or in storms, and timid (though dangerous) on crowded city streets. (Scharff, *Taking the Wheel* 167)

Just as the automobile elicited conflicting reactions in relation to social class, so too did it elicit contradictions in relation to gender. The automobile was both a symbol of American potential and of American greed and corruption, just as it was both the impetus for gender equality and for a backlash that resulted in increased stereotypes about women.

Representations of the automobile in American literature reveal a similar duality between both positive and negative implications, and several authors of the modernist era challenge the myth of the machine as a literal vehicle of liberty and mobility through a connection between gender and the automobile. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* all feature female characters who are intimately tied to automobiles, as does Billy Wilder's 1944 film noir adaptation of Cain's novel. But these women drivers (or passengers, in Ma Joad's case) reveal through their automobility the barely-concealed fissures in their individual worlds, and the result is an overwhelming picture of the destruction made possible by America's golden machine. Automobiles in *The Great Gatsby* reveal the dark side of a society centered on constant consumption (of alcohol, of wealth, of lovers, of lives) through the moral lack of the novel's wealthy women drivers. *Double Indemnity* unmask the flaws in the "golden land" of Southern California through the relationship between automobiles, criminal activity, and a particularly vicious femme fatale. Finally, *The Grapes of Wrath* employs the automobile as a symbol of the futility of escape from the Depression. While I would argue that Ma Joad succeeds in gaining power through her association with the automobile, we are left to wonder if this power has any real meaning in a California that is completely antithetical to the land of promise the family dreams about. Ultimately, an examination of these texts highlights the authors' use of the relationship between women and automobiles to reveal the tragic flaws of their respective cultures, and we can understand these portrayals as stemming from real anxieties about what might suffer in the wake of technological progress and the increased availability of that technology.

## IMMORALITY AND AUTOMOBILITY IN THE JAZZ AGE

By the 1920's, the automobile had secured a firm place for itself in American culture. It was during this decade that Ford saw the height of his production and that the country experienced an economic upturn that resulted in a new class of nouveau riche Americans with plenty of disposable income. They spent their money on real estate, horses, alcohol, lavish parties, and of course, on automobiles. The wealthy created an atmosphere of constant stimulation and consumption in which they bought and threw "things" away with equal ease, and it was from this atmosphere of abundance and recreation that the "Jazz Age" took shape, an age that is most famously depicted in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," Fitzgerald writes that, "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, it was an age of satire" (14). Alcohol flowed freely, flappers spent their nights in speakeasies and juke joints, and young American men and women discovered the sexual and social possibilities that came with the automobile. Fitzgerald notes that ". . . petting, in its more audacious manifestations, was confined to the wealthier classes" (15), and Scharff writes that ". . . the picture of the flapper as the girl who considered the automobile an ideal place to pet had its basis in fact" (*Taking the Wheel* 139). And so the automobile became associated with a sense of freedom, both sexual and economic. But as American culture is ever marked by contradictions, concern over American morality also reached a fever pitch during the 1920's. Implicit in Fitzgerald's and Scharff's statements is the increasing lack of moral

concern that was a marker of the American upper class during the time, an idea that Fitzgerald further explores in *The Great Gatsby*. And because automobiles were initially the playthings of the upper class, they also became prominent symbols of the increasing immorality of the American bourgeoisie. It is no coincidence then that automobiles, especially Jay Gatsby's prized possession, become the symbolic "vehicles" through which Fitzgerald expresses the concepts of social mobility, the immorality that plagues his wealthy characters, and the impact that both have on the women who people his novel.

For Jordan Baker, Daisy Buchanan, and Myrtle Wilson, the physical mobility afforded by the automobile translates to social mobility, which in turn translates to their ultimate ability to survive. More specifically, because Myrtle *lacks* self-actuated mobility she eventually perishes at the hands of Daisy, who, much like Jordan, is able to survive because she can "drive" herself. But Myrtle's death should not be mistaken as an indictment of her character. Because the automobile represents the careless decadence of Daisy and her "people," and because she and Jordan survive to live in an era that eventually "leaped to a spectacular death" (Fitzgerald, "Echoes of the Jazz Age" 13) because of its "flimsy structure" (21), Fitzgerald's criticism falls strongly on the women he allows to live. Myrtle's attempts to claw her way to higher social status through Tom Buchanan are certainly despicable, but she is a mere tempered version of the novel's women "drivers" who personify all that is contemptibly opulent in Fitzgerald's 1920's America. If we recall Scharff's description of the stereotype of "bad" female drivers, it becomes clear that such a description is highly applicable to the women drivers in *The Great Gatsby*. In Jordan and Daisy, Fitzgerald creates drivers who embody the very worst stereotypes of their gender, and because both are wealthy, their lack of care

“behind the wheel” can easily be extended into a general moral apathy among the entire upper class they represent.

Automobiles occupy a central role in the novel, and none more so than Jay Gatsby’s gleaming Rolls Royce. When Gatsby arrives at Nick Carraway’s door, he notices Nick “looking with admiration at his car” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 68), and Nick offers an appropriately reverent account of its physical beauty:

I’d seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory we started to town.  
(68)

While Nick is careful to note the details of the automobile itself (its color, its length, the windshields), he also notices the additions that Gatsby has made to it, and the numerous boxes serve as receptacles for the products of Gatsby’s wealth, for the many items he could buy with the fortune he’s amassed. While Nick admires the car, “the pragmatist in him recognizes that a car should function as a means for transportation. Gatsby’s, however, is too luxurious and ostentatious for merely practical needs” (Dettelbach 81). Gatsby’s car is stunning, but Nick also perceives something grotesque in its opulence. It is so physically imposing as to be “monstrous,” and an admirer is in danger of getting lost within the maze of mirrors that creates the deceptive appearance of many suns. It is a symbol of Gatsby’s success, but it is at the same time so “swollen” that it becomes something to be feared, something not to be trusted. And so we can understand Gatsby’s

automobile as performing many functions, none of which are for the practical purpose of simple transportation from one place to the next. Driving in Gatsby's car, and in any car in the novel, is always symbolic of something greater, and this something greater is almost always connected to material wealth and its destructive capabilities.

Roger Casey contends that "Gatsby's (and his culture's) narcissism is clearly reflected in the labyrinthine mirrors of his automobile. Like their owners, automobiles such as Gatsby's and those of his cronies are beautiful objects to look at, yet beneath their veneer lies the potential for death and destruction" (51). The novel's drivers, and the cars they drive, are devastatingly deceptive in their beauty. While they are, on the surface, representative of an easy life marked by carefree mobility, both these people and their automobiles present a very real threat to those who "get in their way," and the numerous passages about "bad" driving, especially that performed by women, support the characterization of the automobile as a harbinger of disaster.

Much of Jordan Baker's character revolves around the automobile, and the careless attitude she takes toward cars, and to driving them, at first attracts and then repels Nick. Laurence MacPhee makes the strong argument that Fitzgerald modeled Jordan's name after "two of the best-known trade names in motoring, the Jordan 'Playboy' and Baker 'Fastex' Velvet, a luxury upholstery fabric for automobiles" (208). It is interesting to note that advertising for the Jordan "Playboy" was widely geared toward "the lass whose face is brown with the sun when the day is gone. . . [who steps] into the Playboy when the hour grows dull with things gone dead and stale" (qtd. in MacPhee 208). This description could easily apply to Jordan, whose skin is most certainly bronzed from her time spent outside on a golf course. And the numerous

accounts we get of Jordan's experiences behind the wheel reveal that she is indeed the type of woman to step into a car when things grow "dead and stale."

Nick recalls a party that he and Jordan attend together where "she [leaves] a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then [lies] about it" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 62). This carelessness reminds him of a scandal surrounding Jordan and the "suggestion that she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round" of a golf tournament (62). Nick reveals that, "The incident and the name had remained together in [his] mind" (63). Thus, Jordan's lack of concern as displayed in the incident with an automobile leads directly to an indication of her larger moral deficiency. She embodies a general disregard for people other than herself, which is further exemplified when she and Nick are driving home later that day: "It was on that same house party that we had a curious conversation about driving a car. It started because she passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man's coat" (63). After Nick accuses Jordan of being a "rotten driver" and asks her what she'll do if she encounters someone "just as careless as [her]self," Jordan replies, "I hope I never will . . . I hate careless people" (63). Jordan's characteristic lack of care is often articulated through episodes involving an automobile. As she destroys people's property and almost takes their lives, it becomes increasingly clear that her brand of mobility is innately dangerous, and not at all representative of the mobility that was a positive gain in a feminine struggle for autonomy.

It is also important to note that Fitzgerald portrays Jordan as a particularly masculine woman. Nick can't help but think of the "faint mustache of perspiration" (64) that appears on Jordan's lip when she plays golf, and her lack of sentimentality removes

her from an association with the stereotypically weepy and flighty woman that is personified in Daisy Buchanan. But this masculine version of a woman driver does not subvert the argument that Fitzgerald criticizes the wasteful decadence of the Jazz Age through careless female drivers. On the contrary, his portrayal of Jordan as an atypical woman further solidifies the idea that her mobility is not tied to the social revolution that occurred with other women drivers of the era. Jordan's ties to the moneyed Buchanans place her firmly in the decadent upper class that Fitzgerald so harshly criticizes (although he was a founding member himself), and her experiences as a driver are wholly representative of the moral bankruptcy of the wealthy. Casey argues that "Jordan's final words to Nick continue the conceit [of automobility and the Jazz Age]" (52). When she accuses Nick of operating within the same social circle as herself, she admits to her own conspicuous lack of ethical concerns: "You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn't I?" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 186). Although Jordan accuses Nick of being dishonest, clearly, her "bad driving" is emblematic of the "bad" behavior of her entire wealthy social set.

While MacPhee argues that Jordan is the "focal point of the novel's concern with 'careless drivers'" (207), I would contend that that dubious honor belongs to Daisy Buchanan. Her character is also often associated with both automobiles and social mobility/opportunity, and the highly symbolic scene in which she kills her husband's mistress while driving Gatsby's car solidifies the connection between the act of driving, the moral corruption of the upper class, and the ability to survive in a wasteful and unscrupulous society.

When Jordan describes her memories of Daisy when they were both teenagers, she recalls that, “The largest of the banners and the largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy Fay’s house,” and that Daisy “dressed in white and had a little white roadster” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 79). Interestingly enough, Jordan also remembers happening upon Daisy “sitting in [her white roadster] with a lieutenant [she] had never seen before” (79), who was, of course, Jay Gatsby. Jordan’s recollections establish both Daisy’s position in the upper class with her expansive home and her expansive lawn, as well as the connection between Daisy, Gatsby, and automobiles. Gatsby himself further establishes this connection in his own recollections of their early days together:

. . . he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there – it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp to him. There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of *this year’s shining motor cars* (my emphasis) and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (155-156)

Gatsby’s description of Daisy’s home (and, by extension, of Daisy herself) provides a framework through which we can understand her casual attitude toward wealth and the very subtle but persistent image of Daisy and Gatsby in cars, an image that comes to assume great importance with regards to Myrtle Wilson.

In a scene that is central to the plot of the novel, Gatsby accompanies Nick and Jordan to the Buchanan’s house, and it is at this point that Tom realizes the romantic truth

about Gatsby and Daisy. In fact, Daisy seems intent on unmasking her emotional infidelity when she says to Gatsby several times that, “You always look so cool” (125). Nick articulates the effect this has on unsuspecting Tom: “She had told him that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw. He was astounded. His mouth opened a little and he looked at Gatsby and then back at Daisy as if he had just recognized her as someone he knew a long time ago” (125). While one can hardly fault Daisy for exacting revenge on her husband for his own very public indiscretions, it is clear that any thoughts of the position this “admission” puts Gatsby in never cross her mind. She is swept up in the possibilities of renewed love with Gatsby and with the chance to humiliate her husband at the same time. When Nick and Gatsby get a moment alone after this exchange, Nick describes Daisy’s voice as “indiscreet,” but Gatsby corrects him when he says it “is full of money” (127). Through this discussion, “Nick and Gatsby progressively devitalize Daisy’s symbolic meaning until she exists as a vulgar emblem of the money values which dominate their world” (Person, Jr. 255). Gatsby’s simple statement articulates the foundation of Daisy’s character: she comes from money, has married money, and is, in fact, so full of money that it escapes through her very speech. Simply stated, Daisy Buchanan is money.

While Daisy is described in explicit terms with regards to wealth, it is Tom who establishes the connection between automobiles and the power of mobility in this scene. When the party decides to venture into town, Tom insists on driving Gatsby’s car because, I would argue, he recognizes this as the predominant symbol of Gatsby’s wealth; and in keeping with his own criteria for judging a person’s worth, he assumes that it is Gatsby’s money that attracts his wife. After Tom reveals Gatsby’s rather “unsavory” past to Daisy

and forces her to make an immediate decision between the two men, “whatever intentions, whatever courage she had had” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 142) to leave Tom disappears as quickly as it arises. Once Tom realizes that he has “beaten” Gatsby by reclaiming Daisy, he sends the two off in Gatsby’s car. Since all of Gatsby’s wealth and good intentions have failed to elicit a true commitment from Daisy, this time the gleaming automobile signifies both his diminished social power and her wholesale reentry into a morally lax world. As Daisy and Gatsby drive back after Tom dashes Gatsby’s hopes for love, they near George Wilson’s garage, and the ensuing scene becomes vital in a discussion of automobility and social mobility.

Readers do not get an explicit account of the scene until Gatsby later recalls it for Nick:

You see, when we left New York [Daisy] was very nervous and she thought it would steady her to drive – and this woman [Myrtle Wilson] rushed out at us just as we were passing a car coming the other way. It happened all in a minute but it seemed to me that she wanted to speak to us, thought we were somebody she knew. Well, first Daisy turned away from the woman toward the other car, and then she lost her nerve and turned back. The second my hand reached the wheel I felt the shock – it must have killed her instantly. . . . Anyhow – Daisy stepped on it. I tried to make her stop but she couldn’t so I pulled on the emergency brake.

Then she fell over into my lap and I drove on. (151)

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Daisy knows that Myrtle Wilson is Tom’s mistress, the violent physical exchange between the two women is highly symbolic.

Daisy is behind the wheel of the car although she is admittedly unsettled after the confrontation in New York, which only serves to support the aforementioned description of “bad” women drivers, what Julie Wosk identifies as the “stereotype . . . that women were poor drivers because of their inherent nervousness and their delicate physical and emotional constitutions” (128-29). When Daisy hits Myrtle with Gatsby’s car, it is not only a literal collision but also a metaphorical one in which the “haves” and the “have-nots” converge with disastrous results. Daisy, who has already been established as the textual articulation of literal mobility made possible by her social stature, destroys Myrtle Wilson, whose role as a garage owner’s wife severely limits her mobility. The one major female character in the novel who does not have true access to a car to drive, and therefore does not have actual means to ascend from her meager economic surroundings, is consumed by the major female character who is her social and financial antithesis. Finally, when Daisy lets Gatsby assume responsibility for Myrtle’s death, which results in his own death at the hands of George Wilson, she abandons any hope for redemption. In the end, Daisy succeeds in destroying those who aren’t her social equals – Gatsby because of his “new” money and Myrtle because of her lack of money. Daisy’s “driving,” the very reality of her mobility, is in fact fatal, and as Dettelbach argues, “in the dust and blood of that tragic moment [of the accident], the destructive potential of the beautiful people and their beautiful cars is realized” (83).

While Daisy and Jordan represent varying degrees of the power and moral corruption that comes with both physical and social mobility, Myrtle Wilson is an anomaly in that she falls prey to the mobility afforded to other women. Scharff argues that:

By 1920, the modern woman made her appearance on the American road. Sleek and streamlined, she had slipped the ponderous drapery of Victorian clothing. The hem of her dress no longer trailed on the ground. . . . Some youthful female motorists, sporting the bobbed hair and daring demeanor of the flapper, even abandoned dresses altogether in favor of suits with knickers. . . . Whether a sedate housewife or a high-spirited jazz baby, the woman motorist of the twenties announced with her very clothing that she took mobility for granted. (*Taking the Wheel* 135)

While this description most certainly applies to Daisy and Jordan, Myrtle certainly did not take mobility (actual or metaphorical) for granted. Indeed, her actions reveal the degree to which she understands, perhaps more than any other character, that with physical mobility comes a degree of power to ascend the social ladder.

Throughout the novel, Myrtle's ability to secure her own mobility is prevented by the men in her life. When she, Tom, and Nick travel to the apartment she and Tom use for their trysts, she is forced to sit "discreetly in another [train] car" because of Tom's need to hide her from "those East Eggers who might be on the train" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 31). Not only does she not get to drive to and from the city like Daisy and Jordan, but she is also relegated to sitting alone in a train so as not arouse any suspicion. And when the party arrives in the city, Myrtle picks a "new [taxi], lavender colored with grey upholstery" (31) to drive them. She of course does not get to drive at this point either, but is instead driven. The scene in the apartment in the city gives every indication that Myrtle's lack of self-derived mobility stems from her lack of social stature, for the world she and Tom exist in while in the apartment is a sad parody of Tom's domestic

world, created by his marriage to a woman of much higher social standing, the woman who eventually kills Myrtle by hitting her with a car.

Nick, at first attracted by the vitality he sees in Myrtle, grows a bit disgusted when she transforms herself into the granddame of a seedy apartment filled with seedy, “low class” people. He notices that once in a position of power over her “domain”:

Mrs. Wilson had changed her costume . . . and was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room. With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air. (35)

Myrtle’s transformation indicates that perhaps her access to Tom’s money has succeeded in elevating her socially, but if we pay attention to the description of her “costume” in this scene, we realize that Myrtle displays none of the characteristics of the emancipated woman who experienced true mobility. She does not dress herself in the less-constricting dresses or pants of the female motorist Scharff speaks of, but instead adorns herself in an “elaborate” ensemble that literally restricts her because of its material, but also metaphorically restricts her because of the meaning attached to it. Although Myrtle seems to have risen above her economic situation through Tom, she is still a possession, his possession, to be displayed. When Myrtle disobeys him by screaming Daisy’s name

over and over again, he breaks her nose and she is instantly relegated back to the role of his whore. Tom's money allows her moments of escape from her life with her husband, but because she lacks the power to "drive" herself, she can never really hope to secure a place that is level with Daisy.

Myrtle's relationship with her husband George is as troubled, and troubling, as that with Tom. She despises his lack of ambition and blames him for her station in life: " 'I married him because I thought he was a gentleman,' she said finally. 'I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe'" (39). When George fails to provide Myrtle with upward social mobility, she turns to Tom for financial respite. It is important to note that Tom and George also have a relationship of their own in which both automobiles and Myrtle have become the objects of exchange. George has been desperate to buy an automobile from Tom, and Tom not only prolongs the painful process by "stringing George along," but also steals his wife. As long as Tom owns a car, and "owns" Myrtle, he succeeds in maintaining his elevated position above the "immobile" George. And since Myrtle can only expect to reside at a social level that is dictated by her husband, she finds herself essentially immobile as well. Tom's money is merely a distraction; her real lot in life has been cast with George.

Shortly before Myrtle is hit by Gatsby's car, we learn that George has discovered her affair, although he does not know that it is with Tom. In an attempt to keep her within his grasp, George locks Myrtle in a room until he can secure an automobile for himself; and in an ironic twist, it is Tom's car that George is desperate to buy. Once again, Myrtle's actual mobility has been denied by someone other than herself. By locking her up, George robs her of the ability to move physically from within the walls of

the dingy garage. Symbolically, this prevents her from ascending to a higher social level as well. George secures her place next to him when he prevents her from moving outside the confines of his domain, thus she is rendered both physically and socially immobile. When she escapes and runs out into the road to meet who she thinks is Tom (the figurative vehicle of her quest for social mobility), she is struck down by her one true enemy: Daisy Buchanan, who embodies the freedom of movement in all of its connotations that Myrtle cannot get a hold of. It is truly ironic that George and Myrtle make a living by fueling and fixing other people's cars. They contribute to a mobility that comes as a result of wealth they do not have themselves, and the automobiles they service are constant reminders of their own (figurative) restricted movement. George's desperation to obtain an automobile, and Myrtle's recognition of Gatsby's Rolls Royce as the agent of her escape, reveals the prominence of the automobile in an ideology of consumption represented by Gatsby, Jordan Baker, and the Buchanans, an ideology made possible by the automotive culture created by Henry Ford.

Myrtle is the only major female character who does not drive, and she is also the only one who fails to survive to the end of the novel. But I would contend that this does not signify that her character is the most flawed. In fact, Myrtle's death results in the few true displays of tenderness, guilt, and grief in the novel. Fitzgerald's description of her corpse is almost reverent when he notes that, "The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long" (145). This is perhaps the most favorable image of a female character in the novel. Furthermore, Tom, who remains emotionally unattached to Myrtle, emits a "low husky sob" (149) after he learns of her death, and a distraught George Wilson,

“performs the one exalted, if misguided, act in the novel” (Dettelbach 85-86) when he avenges Myrtle’s death by killing Gatsby, who he thinks was the driver of the “death car” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 144). Myrtle’s death elicits the only truly honest actions and reactions from the men in her life; therefore, her demise, which comes as a result of her immobility, indicates that perhaps Fitzgerald believes she is lucky to have escaped the society represented by Jordan, Daisy, Tom, and, to a degree, Gatsby. Theirs is a society in which countless strangers consume Gatsby’s wealth at party after party, consume his food and his alcohol and the idea of success he represents; a society in which these same hungry strangers don’t care enough about the man whose wealth they enjoyed to attend his funeral; a society that demands a degree of immorality, and perhaps a degree of unhappiness, for survival. Scharff contends that, “We should not mistake female mobility for emancipation” (*Twenty Thousand Roads* 7), and the fates of the remaining female characters offer convincing examples of this idea. In the end, Jordan loses Nick, Daisy returns to an unstable compromise with Tom, and Gatsby gets killed. Neither of the surviving women have much to really live for.

The picture of 1920’s America presented in *The Great Gatsby* foregrounds wealth, excess, glamour, and seemingly eternal festivities. But one need merely scratch the surface to understand that such excess can only sustain itself for so long. Jordan Baker and Daisy Buchanan are the products of wealth. They get to switch gender roles when they sit in the driver’s seats next to male passengers, and this mobility is a direct reflection of their social stature. But as they leave behind a trail of ruined lives, we come to understand that with social mobility comes the possibility of amazing corruption, destruction, and waste. Fitzgerald writes, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy

[and the entire society they represent] – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (*The Great Gatsby* 187-88). That Fitzgerald uses women “drivers” to illustrate this point is no coincidence, for women were often characterized as the embodiments of automotive irresponsibility. And the automotive imagery associated with the idea of “smashing up things” reflects how the automobile came to represent the possibilities and dangers that come with mobility. Does Fitzgerald resort to the rhetoric of women as incapable drivers? Absolutely, but in doing so he also reveals the degree to which progress, be it technological or financial, can quickly turn from a marker of success to a marker of moral irresponsibility.

### FEMININITY, CRIMINAL ACTIVITY, AND AUTOMOBILITY

“‘Women are funny.’ ‘Funny and then some.’ . . . ‘Yeah, women are funny all right. Specially when you get them behind the wheel of a car’” (Cain 48).

So begins a discussion between two strangers, both men, on the observation platform of a train headed north from Los Angeles in James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity*. And while the exchange initially seems of little importance, just one of those instances of conversational “small talk” that so often occur between travelers, the association between women and the automobile comes to occupy a central role in the short novel. In presenting his vision of 1930’s Los Angeles, a vision that is now recognized as classic “noir,” and one that Billy Wilder’s 1944 film adaptation adopts, Cain forms a complex relationship between the novel’s femme fatale, deviant and criminal female behavior, and the automobile. And in situating this relationship within the broader context of Los Angeles culture, Cain subverts what David Fine identifies as “the bloated image of Southern California as the golden land of opportunity and the fresh start” (“Beginning in the Thirties. . .” 44). Furthermore, by inextricably linking the automobile with the pathological Phyllis Nirdlinger, Cain destroys the machine’s potential as both the literal and figurative vehicle by which to conquer this “golden land,” just as Fitzgerald destroys the machine’s potential for freedom in mobility through Daisy and Jordan’s automobility. However, we begin to see a shift in class in *Double Indemnity* in that the characters associated with the automobile are planted firmly in the working middle-class of Los Angeles. Although they try desperately to achieve the wealth enjoyed by Fitzgerald’s

characters, Cain's characters can only parade as members of a social class that they do not belong to.

*Double Indemnity's* central female character, Phyllis Nirdlinger, is an archetypal femme fatale, but the threat she poses to numerous ideological formations is so amplified as to warrant some careful analysis. In her 1997 article "Murder as Social Criticism," Catherine Nickerson characterizes the femme fatale as follows: "the woman with a secret is a volatile mixture of knowledge and deceit. While this woman is always dangerous and sometimes powerful, she is also always defeated" (749). James Maxfield contends that in noir, "The conflict within all the male protagonists is between the desire to adhere to the male code – to the masculine ideal of toughness – and the impulse to give oneself up emotionally, usually for sexual gratification. The 'fatal woman' is fatal chiefly to the man's sense of what he is or should be" (5). And so we can understand the femme fatale as supremely duplicitous, sexually aggressive, morally ambiguous, and "fatal" in her relationship to a masculine order that is threatened by her very presence. Phyllis Nirdlinger is certainly a textual articulation of these rather superficial criteria. She elicits the help of insurance agent Walter Huff to carry out her husband's murder in order to claim the insurance money, she offers herself bodily in order to ensure his participation in her plot, and she hides a murderous past from her partner in crime. In Wilder's film, Phyllis offers an ironic articulation of her own deceitfulness when she says to Walter Neff [the film's version of Huff], "I hope I've got my face on straight," an offhand comment that nevertheless reveals much about the femme fatale's dangerous ability to hide her true self. Finally, as evidence of the male code Maxfield writes of, Phyllis ultimately fails to survive, which allows for the perpetuation of a patriarchal ideology that

is ironically necessary to the femme fatale's existence. But while Phyllis Nirdlinger fulfills the several surface requirements of a classic femme fatale character, Cain creates a woman who is so pathologically "fatal" that she shatters the archetype precisely because she is such an exaggeration of it.

Essential to American masculinity of the 1930's was a feminine deference to male authority which dictated, in part, that women were to serve as wives and mothers who depended entirely on their husbands for financial security. Jack Boozer writes that "It is [Phyllis's] longing for financial independence by way of sexual initiative that makes her so threatening to traditional phallogocentric authority" (21). So, when Phyllis initiates the plan to kill her husband, she violates a most basic and fundamental component of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American thought about gender by attempting not only to exist independently of her husband, but also to abolish him completely. When Phyllis first meets Walter Huff, who is at her home to discuss car insurance, she boldly asks him about accident insurance for her husband. Huff tells us: "But all of a sudden she looked at me, and I felt a chill creep straight up my back and into the roots of my hair. 'Do you handle accident insurance?'" (Cain 6). This simple and seemingly innocent question sets off a series of events that eventually leads to the death of Mr. Nirdlinger, and so Phyllis serves as the catalyst for the murder of a character that represents masculine authority within the confines of her home. Sylvia Harvey argues that "the act of killing the husband serves as the supreme act of violence against family life" (42), and since Phyllis is the aggressor, she strikes at the very heart of the ideology of domesticity.

While part of what constitutes Phyllis' exaggerated role as the femme fatale is her literal and successful attempt to kill her husband, she violates a more basic feminine

quality when she deserts what is often considered as innately female, the maternal instinct, and carries out, both directly and indirectly, violent acts against children. Cain establishes early in the novel that Phyllis is herself childless, and Peter William Evans contends that, “Phyllis’s childlessness represents . . . a terrible affront to the bourgeois order” (169). While she is stepmother to nineteen-year old Lola Nirdlinger, the two exist in a relationship of barely concealed mutual disdain. In fact, Phyllis makes Lola an unwitting pawn in her murderous plot when she uses her as a witness to a discussion between Huff and Mr. Nirdlinger that is to serve as part of an eventual alibi. Huff instructs Phyllis to find a witness, but he is shocked when he discovers that she has chosen her stepdaughter, Mr. Nirdlinger’s own child, to fulfill this role:

But what bothered me wasn’t that. It was the witness that Phyllis brought out. I thought she would have some friend of the family in to dinner, maybe a woman, and just let her stay with us, there in the sitting room, after I showed up around seven thirty. She didn’t. She brought the stepdaughter in, a pretty girl, named Lola. . . . the more I looked at her the less I liked it. Having to sit with her there, knowing all the time what we were going to do to her father, was one of the things I hadn’t bargained for.

(Cain 26)

When Huff confronts Phyllis about her choice, she reacts in a manner that does much to reveal her lack of maternal tendencies: “ ‘Well? You said have a witness.’ ‘Yeah, but I didn’t mean her.’ ‘Isn’t she as good a witness as any other?’ ‘Yeah, but holy smoke there’s a limit. A man’s own daughter, and we’re even using her – for what we’re using her for.’ An awful look came over her face, and her voice got hard as glass. ‘What’s the

matter? Are you getting ready to back out?’” (28). In a near reversal of gender roles, it is Huff, not Phyllis, who understands the particularly disturbing reality of using a daughter as part of the scheme to murder her father for profit. When we later learn that Phyllis is also responsible for the death of Lola’s mother, which she executes while serving as her caretaker, a violation of yet another prescribed feminine role, we realize the degree to which she is a femme fatale in the truest sense. Not only does she murder her own husband, not only is she without children of her own, but she also renders Lola parentless twice in her young life. However, these murders are not the most devastating of acts carried out by Phyllis against an ideology that demands that she be maternal. Cain includes an additional, especially vicious detail about his femme fatale that signifies her complete departure from a patriarchal order, as well as her amplified fulfillment of the femme fatale archetype, when he reveals that she has killed three young children, one in an effort to gain access to an inheritance, and the other two simply to throw the authorities off her scent.

In a discussion between Huff and his boss Keyes, Huff learns the awful truth about the woman he has killed for when Keyes tells him that, “ ‘Just *one* of those children was mixed up with the property.’ ‘How about the other two?’ ‘Nothing. Those two children died just to cover the trail up a little. Think of it, Huff. This woman would even kill two extra children, just to get the one child she wanted, and mix things up so it would look like one of those cases of negligence they sometimes have in those hospitals. I tell you, she’s a pathological case’” (106). Mary Anne Doane writes that “it is appropriate that the femme fatale appear as the antithesis of the maternal – sterile or barren, she produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production” (2). In this instance, the

product in question is children, and not only does Phyllis not engage in this production, she actively destroys it when she murders the very beings she is expected to create.

Wilder underscores this idea of Phyllis's "barrenness" when he sets the discussion between Phyllis and Neff about how to carry out the murder in the baby food section of a small market. As the two conspirators plot to end a life, we see a plump woman walk her plump child down the aisle. She interrupts the "fatal" conversation when she asks Neff to hand her a box of baby food, and we are consequently faced with the physical antithesis to Phyllis's lack of children. And so both Cain and Wilder link Phyllis to death, not to life. She is literally "fatal" because of her inability or unwillingness to contribute to the system of motherhood. She is a consumer in this system of production, just like Fitzgerald's female characters in *The Great Gatsby*, only Phyllis consciously and voraciously consumes human life.

Although Phyllis's dealings with children are decidedly disturbing, the reality of her literal "fatality" becomes most explicit in relation to her sexuality. Claire Bond Potter asserts that in the 1930's and 40's, studies concerning female deviance resulted in a "focus on biological and social causation [that] inevitably linked female criminality to 'perverse' sexualities . . ." among several other factors (46). Both Cain and Wilder go to great lengths to establish Phyllis's hyper-sexualized nature. In the film, Neff first sees Phyllis in nothing more than a towel, and while common notions of propriety would call for her to cover herself up, Phyllis lingers at the top of a staircase in no apparent hurry to hide herself. Furthermore, Neff takes instant notice of Phyllis's anklet, to which he refers several times during their first meeting. He is completely distracted by, "The way that anklet of hers cut into her leg," and he when he gets ready to leave her home after setting

up a future appointment, he asks if she'll be wearing the "same perfume, same anklet." There is something very visceral and sensual in the idea that Phyllis's leg, her body, is being restrained by an anklet that is too small to contain it, and while it is Neff's sexual appetite that is revealed through his preoccupation with the jewelry, it is in reaction to Phyllis's outward sexuality, and so viewers are introduced early on to the idea of this femme fatale as a sexual object.

Phyllis's character in Cain's novel also supports Potter's assertion about "perverse" sexuality when she reveals to Huff, in thinly-veiled sexual terms, that death excites her, and when she serves as the personification of death itself at several points in the novel. In a scene ripe with sexual tension, she tells Huff, ". . . There's something in me, I don't know what. Maybe I'm crazy. But there's something in me that loves Death'" (Cain 18). A few nights later, after the two have agreed to kill Mr. Nirdlinger together, Huff utters for the first time the word "murder." He is at first concerned about the effect the word will have on his accomplice, but she reacts with an animalistic voracity that is a clear indication of her arousal: "The word was out before I knew it. I looked at her quick. I thought she'd wince under it. She didn't. She leaned forward. The firelight was reflected in her eyes like she was some kind of leopard. 'Go on. I'm listening'" (20). Finally, when Phyllis and Huff decide to end their lives at the novel's conclusion, her language is decidedly matrimonial: "'The time has come . . . for me to meet my bridegroom. The only one I ever loved'" (114). And so Phyllis creates a metaphor in which Death is a lover and a husband, a source of passion and of companionship. But there are also moments when Phyllis and her "bridegroom" collapse into a single entity and she identifies herself as Death: "'I think of myself as Death,

sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I'm *so* beautiful then. And sad. And hungry to make the whole world happy, by taking them out where I am, into the night, away from all trouble, all unhappiness'" (18). When the merging of Phyllis and Death reaches its climax, just before she and Huff apparently jump to their deaths in shark-filled waters, she adorns herself in this same scarlet shroud and becomes death in death, becomes a literal femme fatale. But the degree to which Phyllis fulfills this role extends far beyond challenging the masculine order by using her sexuality to get what she wants. She is deceitful, and sexual, and dangerous to masculinity, but she also signifies Death in the literal sense when she appropriates it as her identity, and for this reason she is both the consummate femme fatale and an exaggerated example of the archetype.

As if to further solidify the idea that Phyllis completely violates a "normal" social order, both Cain and Wilder take steps to contrast her with her more "morally sound" partner in crime. In the novel, Huff is truly disturbed at having just committed a murder:

I felt something like a drawstring pull in my throat, and a sob popped out of me. I clapped the phone down. It was getting me. I knew I had to get myself under some kind of control. I swallowed a couple of times. I wanted to make sure of my voice, that I sounded O.K. A dumb idea came to me that maybe if I would sing something, that would make me snap out of it. I started to sing the Isle of Capri. I sang about two notes, and it swallowed into a kind of a wail. (Cain 53)

Huff has what would normally be considered the feminine reaction to the murder, an anomaly that is made all the more apparent by the fact that we don't see the female character display this same degree of emotion. And in the film, Phyllis displays a manic

compulsion to carry out the rest of the plot, even though Neff warns her of the dangers of continuing. He tells her that she should not sue the insurance company for her claim money because they know more about the plot than he is comfortable with, but she frightens him into going forward by threatening to blackmail him: “Nobody’s pulling out. We went in to this together and we’re coming out at the end together.” It’s as if Phyllis and Huff/Neff have switched gender roles. Because she is completely antithetical to a stereotypical (and acceptable) woman, he assumes the “feminine” role, a fact that is made most apparent in his relationship with his boss, Mr. Keyes.

The relationship between the two men is much more prominent in Wilder’s film version than in Cain’s novel. Neff and Keyes enjoy a sarcastic banter that is nonetheless rooted in friendship. Neff constantly lights Keyes’ cigars for him, and Keyes only half-seriously criticizes his protégé, to which Neff often replies with a tongue-in-cheek “I love you, too.” But it is during Neff’s death scene that the true depth of connection between the two is revealed. After being shot by Phyllis, Neff returns to his office to record his confession and Keyes arrives just in time to comfort him in his final moments. Although the rule-bound Keyes calls an ambulance, and therefore reports Neff to the police, he remains close by until the final moments of the film, despite Neff’s criminal acts. The two share a final poignant conversation when Neff says, “You know why you couldn’t figure this one, Keyes? The guy you were looking for was too close. Right across the desk from you,” to which Keyes replies, “Closer than that Walter.” And then Neff responds with one final “I love you, too.” When contrasted to Phyllis’s death, in which she is shot by Neff and left for dead, Neff enjoys a much more peaceful final few moments. And when we examine the film’s death scene against that in the novel, we see

that Wilder makes a conscious choice to separate Neff from Phyllis. Cain concludes his story with Phyllis and Huff jumping to their deaths together, both responsible for the death of Phyllis's husband, but Wilder allows Neff a moment of redemption that is denied to the femme fatale, and so we can understand her as the primary deviant figure in this morally ambiguous world. As Neff says himself in his final meeting with Phyllis: "We're both rotten, only you're a little more rotten."

An understanding of the depths of Phyllis's "fatal" and criminal qualities is essential to a discussion of the relationship between women and automobiles in *Double Indemnity*. Roger N. Casey articulates the influence of the automobile on American culture when he writes that, "The car allows Americans to be on the go, to 'go West' on Whitman's open road, and it allows them to do so at their own pace with Emersonian self-reliance, to remain unconfined by train or bus schedules and limited only by the expanse of highway before them" (3). Implicit in such a statement is the seemingly boundless potential for freedom and mobility that so many American drivers of the 1930's associated with the automobile, but because Cain (and Wilder) so consistently links the machine with a murderous woman, he essentially destroys the myth of the automobile as a vehicle for liberation from the realities of the Depression.

While much scholarship is dedicated to the relationship between masculinity and the automobile in relation to Huff, who is consistently portrayed behind the wheel and is after all in the car insurance business, a careful examination of the text reveals that nearly all of the female criminal activity occurs in a car. Wilder begins the conceit of the automobile and deviant behavior early in the film in an exchange between Neff and Phyllis in which Phyllis responds to Neff's rather forward behavior: "There's a speed

limit in this state, Mr. Neff. 45 miles per hour.” “How fast was I going?” “I’d say around 90.” And so Neff is initially the figure we associate with the automobile. And in Cain’s novel it *is* Huff who decides that the murder must take place in an automobile:

““But we’ve got to have the car. We’ve got to have two cars, yours and mine. Whatever you do, don’t pull any monkey business with the car. The car’s got to run. It’s got to be in perfect shape”” (Cain 36). Clearly, the automobile is essential to a murder plot that calls for Huff to sneak into the backseat, kill Nirdlinger, pose as Nirdlinger on a train to Stanford, and then jump off of the train so that he and Phyllis can discard the body on the train tracks. As Paul Mason Fotsch notes, the automobile “permits a certain amount of privacy within a public space. . . .The car is both public, appearing in a public space, and private, providing a hidden space, which allows the murder to be unobserved” (113).

Phyllis speaks to this idea of automotive privacy in the film when she tells Neff that she drove to his apartment (during the scene in which they decide to murder her husband), instead of taking the bus, because “there was always the chance that someone would see [her] on it.” But it is Phyllis who controls this private, deadly space Fotsch speaks of when, in the novel, she literally drives her husband to his death. Huff describes the scene: “Around the bend from the house is a big tree. There’s no house in sight of it. I slipped behind it and waited. I waited exactly two minutes, but it seemed like an hour. Then I saw the flash of headlights. The car came around the bend. She was at the wheel, and he was beside her” (Cain 42). After Huff jumps into the backseat, he kills Nirdlinger with a pair of crutches, but all the while Phyllis maintains her composure as she sits in the driver’s seat of the deadly automobile. As Neff observes in the film, Phyllis displays “no nerves, not a tear, not even a blink of the eyes.” In fact, the camera never leaves her face,

the music builds as her husband is killed, and she smiles, all while the steering wheel occupies a central position in the frame.

Although Huff and Phyllis plan meticulously, unforeseen complications arise, and once they rid themselves of the body the gravity of what they've committed pits them against each other as if they are enemies and not accomplices in a mutually beneficial plot. Wilder represents this absolute breakdown between the two when the car won't start after they've thrown the body onto the train tracks. It's as if the inanimate object, one that is infused with literal and metaphorical power, fails the murderers, just as it has failed their victim. The technology they depend on falters, if just for a moment, to reveal the immense space that is developing between the two killers. Cain also represents this widening chasm, and once again, Phyllis is at the wheel of the car:

‘I was trying to see where you were. I couldn't see-’ ‘Let me alone, *let me drive!*’ . . . She raved like a lunatic. She raved and she kept on raving about him, about me, about anything that came in her head. Every now and then I'd snap. There we were, after what we had done, snarling at each other like a couple of animals, and neither one of us could stop . . . .

‘Phyllis, cut this out. We've got to talk, and it may be our last chance.’

‘*Are you going to let me drive?*’ (52)

It's as if Phyllis senses that she can regain her criminal composure if she can just gain control of the car, and the resultant feeling is one of constraint and confinement. She must repress the guilt of killing her spouse, repress her feelings as a wife, and the act of driving is her means of doing so. The sense of imprisonment that emerges in this scene is highly antithetical to the popular myth of the automobile as a physical means of freedom.

This automobile, the getaway car in a grisly murder, constrains its occupants rather than liberates them, and it is hardly coincidence that the novel's femme fatale is at the helm of this cage on wheels. Both this driver and this machine are symbolic anomalies, and so they are bound together by the threat they pose to popular ideologies. Huff and Phyllis wrongly subscribe to the widely-held, albeit misguided belief that the automobile is their literal and figurative "getaway," but the opposite occurs when, after the murder, Huff finds himself desperate to escape from within its confines, and when Phyllis is desperate to get him out. She screams at him, " 'Get out! Get out! I'll go insane!,'" and he replies, " 'I can't get out'" (53). This image of automobility clearly fails to substantiate the myth of automotive liberation, and it is Phyllis who propels this automobile.

While Phyllis is indeed a deadly driver, her criminal behavior extends to automobiles in general when she attempts to kill Huff by shooting him. When the two conspirators turn on each other after the murder, Huff realizes that he must kill his partner because she is the one person who can confirm his involvement in the crime. And so he arranges a meeting with who he thinks is an unsuspecting Phyllis in the hills of Griffith Park. As he waits for her in a parked car, he hears a rustling outside:

A twig cracked – off in the bushes. I jumped. Then I wound down the window on the right hand side of the car, and sat there looking off in the bushes to see what it was. I must have stared out there at least a minute. Another twig cracked, closer this time. Then there was a flash, and something hit me in the chest like Jack Dempsey had hauled off and given me all he had. There was a shot. I knew then what happened to me. I wasn't the only one that figured the world wasn't big enough for two

people, when they knew that about each other. I had come there to kill her, but she had beaten me to it. (94)

Once again, someone suffers at the hands of Phyllis Nirdlinger while in an automobile, and the relationship between the femme fatale, criminal activity, and automobility comes full circle. She initially entices Huff when he wants to sell her husband automobile insurance, she commandeers the family automobile as a portable and private murder site, and she finally attempts to destroy Huff in an automobile. As an extra automotive detail, it is Phyllis who writes the check for the automobile insurance in Wilder's film (automobile insurance that serves as a cover up for the accident insurance), and Neff notes that when they first meet, "We were talking about automobile insurance and you were thinking of murder." Because Phyllis's automobility is so often the impetus for death, she shatters the notion of the automobile as a mechanism of freedom and instead presents the dark side of America's "golden" machine.

While Phyllis is the novel's most predominantly criminal female character, Lola Nirdlinger also participates in some uncharacteristically deviant behavior when behind the wheel of an automobile. Throughout the novel, Lola's virginal innocence is presented as the antithesis to her stepmother's disturbing sexual appetite, and in the film Phyllis tells Neff that her husband "thinks a lot more of [Lola] than he does of me." But even Lola violates the picture of femininity she represents when she moves from being a passenger to a driver.

After Huff and Phyllis use Lola as an unsuspecting witness in the aforementioned scene at her home with her father, Huff finds himself driving Lola to the local drugstore. It is in this car ride that she is perhaps at her most innocent in that she represents

everything that Phyllis is not. She is completely unaware of her father's impending murder and she must depend on Huff for her mobility, whereas Phyllis is directly responsible for Nirdlinger's death and she depends on nobody but herself to navigate the streets of Los Angeles. Similarly, after Nirdlinger's death Huff finds himself spending more and more time with the daughter of the man he murdered, and he eventually falls in love with Lola in part because she is so different from Phyllis. In direct contrast to Huff and Phyllis's frantic need to get away from each other after the murder, Huff and Lola "felt easy around each other somehow" (Cain 78), and even though Lola "had got a little car," they "generally went in [Huff's]" (82). Therefore, while Huff perceives Lola as the angelic antithesis to the deadly Phyllis, she remains an automobile passenger whom he squires around the city. It is not until Lola admits to some anomalous behavior that we hear of her as a driver.

After her father's murder, Lola begins to suspect Phyllis's involvement in the crime, but instead of including Huff in her suspicions she wrongly believes that her boyfriend, Nino Sachetti, is also involved. Suddenly, Lola's seemingly naïve façade comes tumbling down when she reveals to Huff that she has spied on Nino and Phyllis: "“You may as well know the truth. I followed them last night. Oh, I've followed them lots of times, I've been insane. Last night, though, was the first time I ever got a chance to hear what they were saying, They went up to the Lookout and parked, and I parked down below, and crept up behind them”" (83). Although Lola's spying pales in comparison to Phyllis's deviant behavior, this is the closest she ever comes to displaying characteristics we might attribute to her stepmother, and this is the first time we hear Lola mention that she has driven an automobile. And while Lola's driving does not represent

the scathing indictment of the automobile Cain reserves for Phyllis, the former's use of the machine to carry out her most deviant act supports the idea that feminine automobility is not synonymous with liberation.

Cain and Wilder both question the myth of opportunity that surrounded the automobile during the Depression through the relationship between women and the machine, but the idea of unmasking the automobile's destructive possibilities is even more complex in that it is carried out in the larger context of Los Angeles culture. David Fine asserts that, "Cain wrote about the end of the American Dream in Southern California, where the myth of the New Eden on the Coast collided head-on with the realities of the Depression" ("James M. Cain . . ." 26), and he chooses the automobile as the most recognizable, and appropriate, symbol of this collision.

We know from the start that Los Angeles, this place, figures prominently in the novel when Huff begins his story by telling us: "I drove out to Glendale" (Cain 3). Fine writes that "Huff drives constantly in the novel. He drives downtown, to Long Beach, to Santa Monica (to park with . . . Lola and watch the moon over the Pacific), to Glendale, to Burbank, Hollywood, and Griffith Park. The novel is a catalog of street names: La Brea, Hollywood Boulevard, Vine Street, Wilshire Boulevard, Los Feliz Avenue, Beechwood Avenue, Riverside Avenue" ("James M. Cain . . ." 32). Wilder makes a similar announcement about the importance of the city in his narrative in the opening scene of the film when we see a flashing sign that reads "Los Angeles Railway Corporation Maintenance Department." There is no mistaking where we are, both in the novel and in the film. But just as soon as we realize that we are deep in the heart of Los Angeles, we are also faced with images of darkness and technological irresponsibility.

Fine notes that “driving from Glendale to Hollywood, almost immediately [Huff] is involved in a murder-for-love-and insurance scheme” (“Beginning in the Thirties” 51), and in the film, just after we see the flashing sign, we see an out-of-control car (which we later learn is driven by an injured Neff) as it runs red lights, swerves into oncoming traffic, and almost causes an accident. This is not an Edenic city, but rather one with a dark underbelly that comes rushing to the surface from the very start of our encounter with it.

Fine argues that 1930’s Los Angeles was mired in a mythology similar to the one attached to the automobile, “the youth-health-glamour-opportunity myth promoted by real estate developers and the movies” (“James M. Cain . . .” 26). Los Angeles was perceived as the consummate “golden land of opportunity” that is so often associated with the West. It was a land of plenty, a land of culture and wealth and movie stars, a metropolis bordered by lush and bountiful groves, a land where a man could arrive with nothing and create great wealth, a land of dreams, and “automobility [had] been at the center of the California dream since the twenties” (26). The automobile could whisk Americans suffering from abject poverty during the Depression to greener pastures, and once there, could propel them to the countless opportunities for wealth and entertainment the city laid at their feet. But what these hopefuls found instead was a city of “violence, greed, deception, and fraud” (26), a city whose “spatial configuration . . . facilitate[d] crime,” a city whose “commuter lifestyle allow[ed] unfamiliarity with neighbors and [made] anonymous crime more feasible” (Fotsch 113). This is a city whose dependence on the automobile allows for a murder such as the one carried out by Phyllis and Huff to

actually occur, and this is precisely the vision of Los Angeles that Cain and Wilder present to us.

We recognize the street names and neighborhoods that are so conspicuously mentioned in both the novel and the film. Lola doesn't just get an apartment; she gets an apartment in Hollywood. Phyllis's husband doesn't just work in the oilfields; he works in the Long Beach oilfields. Huff doesn't just meet Phyllis in a house in some anonymous neighborhood; he meets her in "Hollywoodland" in a "Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California" (Cain 3). Finally, he doesn't just kill her husband on some quiet street; he kills her husband on a Hollywood street, in an automobile. And so we are left with the destruction of the California myth through the simultaneous destruction of the automotive myth. Neither the machine nor the place can live up to the potential so many Americans sought in them; instead they crack and fall apart to reveal that the myths are just that: masks for the destruction that is as much a part of them as the opportunity for freedom is. And as a final nail in the proverbial coffin, Phyllis, the epitome of destruction and deviance, announces in the film that she was "born right here in Los Angeles."

Cain offers a complex, multi-layered deconstruction of the illusions surrounding the automobile in his novel, and it is in this context that we can understand him as linked to Fitzgerald. Indeed, both writers examine automobility and gender through the lens of social class, but *Double Indemnity* signals a departure from *The Great Gatsby* in that the former focuses on a middle-class woman "driver." Although Phyllis tries unsuccessfully to claw her way to an upper-class existence that ultimately proves to be beyond her reach, much like Myrtle Wilson does, Phyllis is often in control of an automobile, a luxury

Myrtle never experiences. Nevertheless, Phyllis catches only a fleeting glimpse of the wealth she so desperately craves, and she eventually dies with her position in the middle class firmly in place. In this instance, automobility does little to secure this female driver higher social status.

Upon his initial visit to the Nirdlinger home, Huff describes it as looking like any other home in California. Although it is “maybe a little more expensive than some” (Cain 4), he also recognizes that the “coat-of-arms tapestry” and the “castle tapestry over the sofa” are “nothing that any department store wouldn’t deliver on one truck, lay out in the morning, and have the credit O.K. ready the same afternoon” (4). The markers of “old money,” the coat-of-arms and the tapestry, are merely store-bought copies of the more expensive originals, and even these copies are purchased on credit. And so we begin to see Phyllis in physical surroundings that are deceptive in their opulence, an image that is also reflected in her own appearance.

Huff describes Phyllis in her “suit of blue house pajamas” as having a “washed-out look” (5), and when he sees her on his next visit she is dressed in “a white sailor suit, with a blouse that pulled tight over her hips, and white shoes and stockings” (10). This description of Phyllis recalls Nick’s description of Myrtle Wilson in the apartment she shares with Tom. Just like Myrtle, Phyllis is dressed in clothes that are just a little too tight, clothes that, when examined closely enough, betray her true social class. Wilder visually articulates this idea when he adorns Phyllis in the aforementioned anklet that draws so much attention from Neff. Although she is dressed in a well-appointed skirt and blouse, there is something “trashy” in the anklet that is too small for her but that she continues to wear. Although Phyllis lives in an expansive, Spanish-style home with a

maid and velvet curtains and a coat-of-arms hanging on the wall, the subtleties in her physical appearance reveal her as a woman well-acquainted with a working-class sensibility.

When Huff meets Phyllis, she is leading a life that allows her to remain in her blue pajamas throughout the day, but we eventually learn that she has had to “work” to get to this position. She was, of course, a nurse for many years, and it is in this capacity that she first meets Mr. Nirdlinger. And while her marriage does provide her with luxuries unavailable to her before, Phyllis is still “stuck” because of her husband’s position within the working middle-class. His work is dirty, dangerous work in the oil fields, and while he does achieve a degree of wealth, he must continue to work in order to maintain it. Phyllis does reap the benefits of his labor, but only peripherally in that, while she lives in store-bought opulence, she is given only a “little allowance of her own” (12). Unlike Daisy Buchanan, Phyllis’s wealth is not her own, and so she must “work” to achieve financial independence by committing murder. While Daisy does commit murder herself, it is as a result of the carelessness that comes from her place in the upper-class. Conversely, Phyllis becomes a murderer in an ill-fated attempt to join that upper-class.

Although we never learn if Phyllis gains the inheritance after murdering the three children, we can assume that she does not since she must go to work as a nurse for the first Mrs. Nirdlinger. And she is so desperate to achieve social mobility that she commits murder a second time in an effort to create her own wealth. It is interesting to note that Phyllis turns to another working-class man for help in her plot. Huff is merely an insurance salesman who lives in a small apartment and who must constantly drive around

the city trying to make a sale. It's as if Phyllis simply cannot escape her ties to working-class men, and this working, middle-class man depends on his car to carry out his middle-class business. Huff's automobility is essential to his working life, the most obvious example of his social stature, just as Phyllis's automobility is tied to her attempts to escape that same social stature. She also uses the automobile to "work," only her work is the vicious murder of an innocent man. Nevertheless, we can still understand her ties to the automobile as representative of a middle-class existence. Although at first glance Phyllis resembles Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker, close examination reveals that this woman driver is destined to live a life like Myrtle Wilson, one in which she must depend on other people's money. Despite experiencing the literal mobility Myrtle never does, Phyllis suffers the same economic fate as her immobile counterpart. Thus, the destruction of the automotive myth is complete in this final detail in that automobility fails to provide Phyllis with the freedom she hopes it will.

Fine argues that, "For Cain the road, with its deceptive promise of mobility and freedom, provides the chief metaphor for the betrayed promise of the West" ("Beginning in the Thirties. . ."45), and Mike Davis writes more specifically of Los Angeles when he contends that the "Depression-crazed middle classes of Southern California became, in one mode or another, the original protagonists of that great anti-myth usually known as *noir*. Beginning in 1934 . . . a succession of through-the-glass-darkly novels . . . repainted the image of Los Angeles as a deracinated urban hell" (37). *Double Indemnity* most certainly operates as one of these "through the glass darkly novels," in part because the city of Los Angeles figures so prominently. But the novel also participates in the repainting Davis speaks of when it attacks head-on ideological notions of gender and the

opportunities presented through transportation. Phyllis is not a loyal wife, a doting mother, or even a “safe” version of the femme fatale. She is pathologically murderous and so literally fatal as to render the term “femme fatale” grossly inadequate. Similarly, automobiles in *Double Indemnity* present none of the liberating, seemingly endless possibilities for adventure and freedom so often associated with the act of driving. These automobiles are deadly, and the paths they weave through Los Angeles streets leave behind murdered victims, destroyed marriages, and parentless daughters. There is no “promise of the West” in Cain’s Los Angeles, no “land of golden opportunity,” but rather a city plagued by darkness and the absolute corruption of a technology inappropriately considered a respite from the bleak realities of the Depression. Furthermore, automobility in *Double Indemnity* signifies an expansion in automotive access in 1930’s America. Car ownership was no longer limited to women like Daisy Buchanan, but middle-class women drivers, as represented by Phyllis Nirdlinger, soon learned that increased automobility did little to ensure social mobility, an idea that becomes one of key importance in a discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

## MA JOAD'S AUTOMOTIVE REBELLION

While the automobile was one of the most recognizable symbols of prosperity in the 1920's, by the 1930's far more Americans enjoyed automotive access, due in part to Ford's advances in production. Flink writes that, "Within a few years [of Ford's utilization of the assembly line] moving assembly lines had been installed by all major American automobile manufacturers" (*The Automobile Age* 50). As a result of the sheer volume of automotive production, prices dropped drastically, which in turn created an increase in automotive consumers. Casey writes that by the 1930's, "the car had become a 'must' in America" (76), and this was especially true for those living in rural areas. According to Flink, "at this time [the late 1920's to early 1930's], the ownership of automobiles by farmers was nearly universal" (*The Automobile Age* 132). No longer was automobility reserved for the likes of wealthy, urban Americans such as Fitzgerald's Buchanans or even middle-class Americans such as Cain's Phyllis Nirdlinger; rural Americans could also lay claim to and make use of the movement afforded by automobiles.

But just as the reality of automobility proved complicated for privileged owners and drivers, so too did automobiles create complexities for their rural counterparts. The same technology that allowed rural Americans access to mobility and efficiency eventually forced them off of their land in favor of mechanized labor, and so the automobile was both a blessing and a curse. This cruel fate, one that befell tens of thousands of Americans, is at the center of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*; and

just as Fitzgerald and Cain subvert the idea of the automobile as a technological savior of sorts, so too does Steinbeck in his tale of the Joad family's difficult journey from the Dust Bowl to California. The automobile (or more specifically, the technology behind it) pushes the Joads off land that has been in their family for generations, and while it does provide them with the means to "escape" to California, the California they find is not the land of plenty they expect. The California the Joads find is one of discrimination, exploitation, and poverty, and they soon realize that they have trekked across the country for a myth, the same myth that is destroyed by Cain in *Double Indemnity*. However, *The Grapes of Wrath* signals a departure from both *The Great Gatsby* and *Double Indemnity* in that Ma Joad gains a level of authority and power over the family in the moveable environment created by the automobile. Steinbeck does not use feminine automobility to dismantle the myth of the automobile in the way Fitzgerald and Cain do (in fact, Ma Joad never actually drives), but instead creates in her association with the automobile the opportunity for her ascension within the family hierarchy. However, we are left to wonder if there is any real meaning in Ma Joad's increased power since she can only exert it in a place that has failed to live up to its promise. She becomes the central figure in a family that is simply falling apart in the wake of the destruction brought on by automotive technology, a family stuck in a place made reachable by the automobile. And so we can understand Steinbeck as participating in the same subversion as Fitzgerald and Cain in that he both articulates and challenges the promise of America's greatest machine.

Cynthia Dettelbach recognizes the automobile as "one of the novel's central images" (75), and it assumes this centrality in the early pages of the text. It is also in the early parts of the novel that Steinbeck begins to establish the automobile's destructive

capabilities through a juxtaposition of mechanized movement and “natural” movement. Readers are presented with an image of a turtle slowly making his way across the arid Oklahoma landscape. He comes to a highway embankment and must ready himself to ascend the barrier and cross the road:

For a moment he stopped, his head held high. He blinked and looked up and down. At last he started to climb the embankment. Front clawed feet reached forward but did not touch. The hind feet kicked his shell along, and it scraped on the grass, and on the gravel. As the embankment grew steeper and steeper, the more frantic were the efforts of the land turtle. . . . Little by little the shell slid up the embankment until at last a parapet cut straight across its line of march, the shoulder of the road, a concrete wall four inches high. . . . higher and higher the hind legs boosted it, until at last the center of balance was reached, the front tipped down, the front legs scratched the pavement, and it was up. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 18-19)

Steinbeck’s painstaking description of the turtle’s struggle creates a sense of movement that is somehow natural in its slowness. This is mobility not created by man, and it is therefore governed by natural law, not by technological advancement. As we struggle along with the turtle in his seemingly monumental fight, we also experience his relief when he finally reaches the road on the other side of the embankment. For a moment, natural mobility seems to have prevailed. But just as quickly, an automobile comes along and threatens both the turtle and the movement he represents: “A sedan driven by a forty-year old woman approached. She saw the turtle and swung to the right, off the

highway. Two wheels lifted for a moment and then settled. The car skidded back onto the road, and went on, but more slowly” (19). While the turtle escapes this encounter with the automobile, he is immediately faced with another automotive threat: “And now a light truck approached, and as it came near, the driver saw the turtle and swerved to hit it. His front wheel struck the edge of the shell, flipped the turtle like a tiddly-wink, spun it like a coin, and rolled it off the highway” (19). While the turtle does survive the attack, we can understand this scene as highly symbolic of the relationship between mobility that occurs naturally and mobility that occurs as a result of technology. The turtle is not entirely destroyed, but it is easy prey for the much more powerful automobile. It is forced off of the road, off the course it has plotted for itself, just as the Joads will be forced off their land by powerful machines they simply cannot contend with.

The Joad’s eventual misfortune is a result of several inextricably woven complications. Casey writes that, “Two factors contribute to the family’s being supplanted from their Oklahoma farm: the ‘Dust Bowl’ drought and the mechanization of the farm, with the latter signifying replacement of sharecropping and small-farm ownership by technologized agri-business” (75). Indeed, the drought is brutal and the Joads and their neighbors are simply overcome by the wind and dust that batters their faces, their eyes, their crops, their land:

. . . the corn fought the wind with its weakened leaves until the roots were freed by the prying wind and then each stalk settled wearily sideways toward the earth and pointed the direction of the wind. . . . Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes. When

the night came again it was black night, but the stars could not pierce the dust to get down, and the window lights could not even spread beyond their own yards. Now the dust was evenly mixed with the air, an emulsion of dust and air. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 6)

The drought is of course a natural occurrence that is beyond the control of any man, but the presence of so much suffocating dust is due in large part to the irresponsible handling of the land by wealthy landowners, what Flink identifies as a “ruinous . . . overproduction of staple crops” that destroys the very soil the sharecroppers must work (*The Automobile Age* 153). And this overproduction is made possible by tractors, by machines that can work faster than any man. The Joads are forced off of their land because they cannot pay their landlords, and they cannot pay their landlords because their land has been decimated by mechanization, the same mechanization that is represented by the automobile.

Steinbeck himself recognizes and makes clear the relationship between the automobile and the Joad’s displacement. When the Joads and countless of their neighbors are notified that they must leave the place that has been theirs for so long, the message comes to them by way of an automobile:

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 sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields. At last the owner men drove into the dooryards and sat in their cars to talk out of the

windows. The tenant men squatted on their hams and found sticks with which to mark the dust. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 34)

Dettelbach asserts that, “Here the automobile is an alien presence, a machine, a monster, a barrier between men” (70). The owners are enclosed within this “alien presence” while the sharecroppers are kept out by the glass and steel barriers of the car’s windows and doors, barriers that separate the wealthy landowners from the natural presence of the land, barriers that are made possible by automotive technology. And while the automobile is perhaps not directly responsible for the plight of the Joads, the technology and production it represents is. Similarly, the automobile is the literal vehicle by which the family receives the news of their forced removal from the land, and so Steinbeck reveals the absolute devastation it is capable of.

Despite their initial distrust of automobiles, and of the wealthy people who drive them, the Joads soon recognize the automobile as absolutely necessary to their ability to leave Oklahoma for “greener pastures,” and in this way Steinbeck comments on the complexities of automobility as it relates to 1930’s rural America. Dettelbach contends that, “If the car is a cold impersonal vehicle come to announce the end of one kind of world, it also the symbol or promise of a new one” (71). Indeed, the Joads realize that it is the automobile that will carry them to the promise of a better life in California, even though the same machine also carries the news that forces them to make this journey in the first place. As the Joads move from one “world” to another, the automobile achieves a position of great stature among the family:

The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the

living principle. The ancient Hudson, with bent and scarred radiator screen, with grease in dusty globules at the worn edges of every moving part, with hub caps gone and caps of red dust in their places – this was the new hearth, the living center of the family; half passenger car and half truck, high-sided and clumsy. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 101-102)

Although the Hudson is “ancient” and is missing parts that would make it aesthetically pleasing, in an ironic twist of fate it is this machine that carries the Joads forth from the land that is no longer theirs.

While still in Oklahoma, and thus while still isolated from life on the road, the Joads are able to place all of their hopes on the automobile. But this absolute faith in the machine is challenged almost immediately once the family leaves familiar surroundings for a harrowing journey on famed Route 66. The roads are littered with car salesman hoping to exploit unsuspecting migrant families who need automobiles in order to survive, and Steinbeck pens an interchapter that is simply a barrage of punctuated dialogue from dishonest men hoping to take advantage of the honest men who wander onto their lots:

“Over there, them two people – no, with the kids. Get ‘em in a car. Start ‘em at two hundred and work down. They look good for one and a quarter. Get ‘em rolling. Get ‘em out in a jalopy. Sock it to ‘em! They took our time. . . . Watch the woman’s face. If the woman likes it we can screw the man. . . . Get ‘em under obligation. Make ‘em take up your time. Don’t let ‘em forget they’re takin’ your time. People are nice mostly. They hate to put you out. Make ‘em put you out, an’ then sock it to ‘em. (*The Grapes of Wrath* 64)

It is the automotive culture that springs up from the displacement of families like the Joads that allows car salesmen to play on people's naiveté and good character. They know they have what the migrants need, and they know they can prey upon them in order to make a profit. It is in this exchange concerning automobiles that we can begin to see the subtle undoing of the illusion the Joads operate under when they leave Oklahoma. The very reality of automobility results in a new threat to the life the family once knew, a fact made evident when a man offers to trade his "Fine big mules" (67) for a car that he cannot pay for otherwise. His offer is met with ridicule when the salesman replies, "*Mules!* Hey, Joe, hear this? This guy wants to trade mules. Didn't nobody tell you this is the machine age? They don't use mules for nothing but glue no more" (66). This is indeed the machine age, and the automobile and its agricultural relative the tractor have rendered the old way of life obsolete, have rendered families like the Joads obsolete.

Once the Joads actually procure an automobile, life on the road presents them with new challenges. They must deal with unforeseen repairs that they can ill afford, they must ration every bite of food due to their meager budget, and their dog is run over by a car that "slowed for a moment and faces looked back, and then it gathered greater speed and disappeared," leaving the dog ". . . a blot of blood and tangled, burst intestines" (131). Once again, the automobile succeeds in destroying what is natural, and it does so anonymously. The Joads never know who kills their dog; they just know what kills their dog, and yet another link to their past is destroyed.

Families like the Joads also encounter drivers who resemble Tom and Daisy Buchanan, women who resemble Phyllis Nirdlinger, people who remind the migrants that there is still indeed a class separation attached to automobiles:

The big cars on the highway. Languid, heat-raddled ladies, small nucleuses about whom revolve a thousand accoutrements: creams, ointments to grease themselves, coloring matter in phials . . . A bag of bottles, syringes, pills, powders, fluids, jellies to make their sexual intercourse safe, odorless, and unproductive. And this apart from clothes. What a hell of a nuisance! (156)

These are the women who refer to people like the Joads as “shitheels” (157), and these are the drivers whose irresponsible driving of their shiny Cadillacs results in an horrific accident that “kill[s] one [migrant] kid” and leaves his father literally speechless in the wake of his destroyed truck and his destroyed family.

The reality of death on the road also strikes the Joads early in their journey when Grampa dies from a stroke, and although he isn't killed by an automobile in the literal sense, it is mechanization in general that destroys the patriarch of the family. After Grampa has passed away, the remaining men discuss the possible cause of his stroke, and it is Casy who realizes that forcing a man like Grampa off of his land is enough to claim his life: “Grampa an' the old place, they was jus' the same thing. . . . You fellas can make some kinda new life, but Grampa, his life was over an' he knowed it. An' Grampa didn' die tonight. He died the minute you took 'im off the place” (147). Grampa doesn't die because of his age or because of his failing health; he dies because he has been forced off the very thing that made him who he was: land that he had worked and that he could take pride in. The reality of machines replacing him is simply too horrible an idea for a man like Grampa to digest, and so he dies as a result of the mechanization that both takes over his land and takes him away from it. And when Granma dies as a result of her grief, we

can also understand her death as a result of automobility. She doesn't want to live without her husband, and he cannot survive mobility as it is represented first by tractors and then by automobiles. It is in this sense that automobility claims the lives of the oldest Joads.

Finally, while life on the road presents the Joads with physical decay, it also provides them their first images of automotive decay when they are forced to visit a junkyard to look for parts. Tom and Al notice, "A great pile of junk; fenders and truck sides, wheels and axles; over the whole lot a spirit of decay, of mold and rust; twisted iron, half-gutted engines, a mass of derelicts" (178). These seemingly "dead" automobiles are the antithesis to the Joad's truck, whose actual movement is what they identify as the only living thing in their lives, and the accumulation of these images (of the dead dog, the wealthy and careless drivers, the dead child, Granma and Grampa, the dead cars) results in an association between the automobile and a sense of destruction, an association that is decidedly devoid of the life the Joads construct for the machine. But despite the devastation that apparently occurs as a result of mechanization and automobility, the Joads cling to the idea of the family truck as a unifying and redemptive force in their lives, perhaps because they realize on some level that if they stop moving they won't survive, and one conspicuous manifestation of the automobile's importance is the way in which they organize the family hierarchy around the truck.

Steinbeck makes known in the early pages of the novel that the Joads, and the many families just like them, are governed by a patriarchal hierarchy while still living on their small farm:

Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand behind their men – to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men’s faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. . . .After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew they were safe and that there was no break. . . . Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole. (*The Grapes of Wrath* 7)

It is the men’s faces, the men’s reactions, which indicate to the women whether or not their families will be able to survive their “misfortunes.” Because the men represent the authoritative figures in the family, the women look to them for clues about how to respond. When the Joads decide to leave Oklahoma for California, they simply transfer this hierarchy to include the truck, but they still maintain the patriarchy.

Steinbeck carefully describes the family dynamic as beginning with Grampa, who is “still the titular head, but he no longer rules. His position was honorary and a matter of custom” (103). The family arranges itself around the truck to discuss their plans:

Pa walked around the truck, looking at it, and then he squatted down in the dust and found a stick to draw with. . . . And Uncle John moved toward him and squatted down beside him. . . . Grampa came out of the house and saw the two squatting together, and he jerked over and sat on the running

board of the truck, facing them. That was the nucleus. Tom and Connie and Noah strolled in and squatted, and the line was a half-circle with Grampa in the opening. And then Ma came out of the house, and Granma with her, and Rose of Sharon behind. . . . They took their places behind the squatting men; they stood up and put their hands on their hips. (102)

Warren Motley asserts that “the patriarchal structure of the Joad family, although shaken, remains intact in the early chapters. . .” (402). Although the men are powerless in the face of the wealthy landowners, they retain power within the family. From their physical positions around the truck, which along with Grampa serves as the “nucleus,” we can understand the roles each member occupies, and it is clear that the men are still at the core. And when the family realizes that they will have to leave their land, we see a noticeable shift in the way they define patriarchy. Motley notes that, “In times of adversity, the farmer patriarch draws his strength from his connection with the land” (402-403), but when the land is no longer theirs, they turn to the automobile as the symbol of both masculinity and of patriarchal hierarchy.

It is not surprising that the male Joads are initially the characters most closely associated with the automobile. The truck becomes a way for them to reassert their masculinity in the absence of the land that once provided the same opportunity. When Tom first returns home and asks about Al, Pa tells him that Al “don’t think of nothin’ but girls and engines” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 84), a preoccupation that ultimately serves the family well. And it is through his knowledge of engines that Al finally finds himself in a position of authority within the family hierarchy and that he finally becomes a “man.” Steinbeck notes that when the entire family first meets around the truck, “This

[is] Al's first participation in the conference. Always he had stood behind with the women before" (102). His participation is purely the result of his knowledge of the truck's inner workings. When the Joads are on the road and run into the Wilsons, both Al and Pa experience a sense of pride that Al can fix the Wilson's car: "Al was very proud and very mature, then. 'I think you got a plugged gas line. I'll blow her out for ya.' And Pa was proud too. 'He's a good hand with a car,' Pa said" (148). As part of the younger generation of Joads, it is through his ability to deal with machines, not through his working of the land, that Al elicits his father's pride.

Although Al is the Joad most connected to the family truck, Steinbeck also comments on the masculinity of the other male characters through the automobile. When Casy and Tom are left behind to tend to the Wilson's car, they engage in some stereotypical male banter about sex that is punctuated with references to the machine they are working on. Casy admits that he is "a-lustin' after the flesh" (172), and Tom recounts his first sexual encounter after being paroled:

'I run me down a girl, a hoor girl, like she was a rabbit. . . . Well, I saved my money anyway, an' I give that girl a run. Thought I was nuts. I should a paid her, but I on'y got five bucks to my name. She said she didn' want no money. Here, roll in under here an' grab a-holt. I'll tap her loose. Then you turn out that bolt an' I turn out my end, an' we let her down easy. Careful that gasket. See, she comes off in one piece.' (172)

Casy's admission of lust and the discussion of Tom's sexual prowess, a marker of his masculinity, are interwoven with their discussion of the automobile. One feeds into the other seamlessly, to the point that it is difficult to note when Tom shifts from talking

about sex to talking about the car. And so we can understand the automobile as intimately linked to the men in the family, an idea that is made all the more evident by the hierarchy that is represented by the position of the men in the automobile once on the road.

Because Al is the one who initially finds the family truck and who is largely responsible for its maintenance, he is most often found in the driver's seat, which represents the prominence he has achieved within the family. Steinbeck writes that "everyone respected him and his responsibility. Even Pa, who was the leader, would hold a wrench and take orders from Al" (99). At times Tom drives the truck, and when not driving, he often sits in the front seat. And Steinbeck offers the most direct articulation of the family hierarchy within the automobile when he reveals Uncle John's thoughts about sitting in the front seat:

Had he not been fifty years old, and so one of the natural rulers of the family, Uncle John would have preferred not to sit in the honor place beside the driver. He would have liked Rose of Sharon to sit there. This was impossible, because she was young and a woman. . . . But there were things he could not escape. Being one of the heads of the family, he had to govern; and now he had to sit on the honor seat beside the driver. (98)

It seems that the relationship between patriarchal hierarchy and position within the automobile is firmly in place, but as the family faces the hardships that befall them while on the road, the family dynamic changes dramatically.

Motley contends "that the Joad family shifts from a patriarchal structure to a predominantly matriarchal one" through the course of the novel (397), and as Ma Joad

gains authority, one can't help but notice that she often occupies the "honor seat" Uncle John identifies as being a place for men. In fact, it is through automobility that Ma gains access to this power. Motley argues that, "The family's dispossession deprives Pa Joad of his traditional agrarian labor, but Ma Joad's work continues and she remains strong" (407). It is the very reality of the family's mobility that creates an environment in which Ma becomes the central figure. While tethered to the land she is tethered to traditional gender roles, but everything changes when the family becomes mobile. The land that gives Pa his power is no longer a governing presence, and so it is in the absence of the land that Ma ascends to a level that rivals Pa's. And while Ma never actually occupies the driver's seat, her transformation is undoubtedly connected to the family truck. Automobility both destroys and carries the family away from the life they once knew, from the family structure they once knew, and as a result, it allows for the possibility of a true matriarch to emerge.

Despite her acceptance of the patriarchy that rules her family, Ma is portrayed as a strong woman from the start. Tom declares that she "ain't nobody you can push around' . . .," and he recalls for Casy the time she "beat the hell out of a tin peddler with a live chicken . . . 'cause he gave her a argument" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 50). She is aware of things in the world that at times surprise her family, such as her fear that life in prison has changed her son: "'You ain't poisoned mad? You don't hate nobody? They didn't do nothing in jail to rot you out with crazy mad?'" (78). Tom is shocked to hear that Ma knows of such possibilities: "He looked sidewise at her, studied her, and his eyes seemed to ask how she could know such things" (78). And Steinbeck's first detailed

description of Ma implies that perhaps she is the true strength of the family, even though she must operate within a family dynamic that looks to the men as its “rulers”:

Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. . . . And from her great and humble position she had taken dignity and a clean, calm beauty. . . . She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone. (76)

Nellie McKay asserts that, “At times [Ma Joad] assumes mythic proportions, but her portraiture is also realistic and she acts with wisdom. Impressionistically, she is firmly planted in the earth, but she is more dependable than the land” (57). And so it is Ma who holds the family together, who knows that their reaction to sadness and pain is wholly dependent on hers, who is the true source of strength despite her “secondary” role as a woman, and who is stronger than the land that the men look to for their identities. Thus readers are prepared for her eventual ascension within the family ranks, and it is wholly appropriate that this ascension is depicted through her relationship with the automobile. While it is the men who initially claim the truck as the new focal point of their authority, life away from the land slowly erodes this authority. And as the power shifts to Ma, so too does her connection with the symbolic stand-in for the farm.

It is important to note that even in the early stages of their cross-country journey, while Pa's authority remains intact, Ma at times occupies the "honor seat." When the family first leaves the farm, Pa tells her, "'Ma, you an' Granma set in with Al for a while. We'll change around' so it's easier, but you start out that way'" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 115). Ma's initial position in the truck foreshadows what will come to pass by the time the family reaches California, and throughout the novel we find her most often seated next to the driver, whether it be Al or Tom (interestingly enough, it is never Pa who drives the truck). But the first explicit statement of Ma's changing role and the ways it is associated with the automobile, comes when Pa wants to leave Tom and Casy to fix the Wilson's car while the rest of the family travel on to California. Ma refuses to break up the family, and she shocks everyone when she openly challenges Pa:

Ma stepped in front of him. 'I ain't a-gonna go.' 'What you mean, you ain't gonna go? You got to go, You got to look after the family.' Pa was amazed at the revolt. Ma stepped to the touring car and reached in on the floor of the back seat. She brought out a jack handle and balanced it in her hand easily. 'I ain't a-gonna go,' she said. 'I tell you, you got to go. We made up our mind.' And now Ma's mouth set hard. She said softly, 'on'y way you gonna get me to go is whup me.' She moved the jack handle gently again. 'An' I'll shame you, Pa. I won't take no whuppin', cryin' an' a-beggin'. I'll light into you. An' you ain't so sure you can whup me anyways.' (169)

Pa's complete surprise at Ma's refusal to accept his decision is significant for several reasons. It illustrates how absolute the family patriarchy was, and it signifies how

uncharacteristic Ma's insubordination is. And one cannot ignore the symbolism attached to Ma's preferred tool of revolt. She reaches for a jack handle, an automotive tool. Thus, her first true act of rebellion is accompanied by her use of an object associated with the machine.

This exchange is essential in understanding the shift in power that occurs from Pa to Ma, for it is this first rebellion that signals to the rest of the family that Ma is now at the head. In fact, the family can identify the exact moment when Pa relinquishes his position within the hierarchy: "The whole group watched the revolt. They watched Pa, waiting for him to break in to fury. They watched his lax hands to see the fists form. And Pa's anger did not rise, and his hands hung limply at his sides. And in a moment the group knew that Ma had won. And Ma knew it too" (170). The shift is sudden and absolute, and everyone accepts it almost immediately: "The eyes of the whole family shifted back to Ma. She was the power. She had taken control" (170). And so it is in this single moment of rebellion, one that is enacted with the aid of a piece of automotive equipment, that the family dynamic shifts from a patriarchy to a matriarchy. And as the family faces ever-increasing hardship while living on the road, Steinbeck offers example after example of Ma's strength, her increased authority, and Pa's realization of his own loss of that authority.

Although the family is astonished at Ma's initial "mutiny," their continued journey in the family truck presents them with countless opportunities to discover the depths of her fortitude. When Granma dies before they reach California, Ma hides the death from the rest of the family to make sure they can cross the state border without any trouble. She spends hour after harrowing hour in the back of the truck with Granma's

lifeless body, masking her pain for the sake of her family's well-being, and when they learn of this, "The family looked at Ma with a little terror at her strength" (228). Casy is simply awe-struck at the woman who has accepted him into her family: ". . . there's a woman so great with love – she scares me" (229). The family's mobility allows for them to learn things about their mother they never suspected, and it is through their mobility that Ma is able to care for them in a way she never could while still living on the farm. Their priority has shifted from working the land to completing their journey, and it is this shift in focus that calls for Ma to secure her family's mobility at all costs. She does not work the land when the Joads still live in Oklahoma, thus she does not hold the power. But when their lives become centered around the family truck, she is presented with the opportunity to provide for her family in ways none of them ever expected, in ways Pa never could. And while Pa seems to acknowledge his diminished role within the family, he does not accept it without some struggle, and he voices his discontent at several places in the novel.

Once the family reaches the government camp at Weedpatch, they "temporarily find sanctuary from the brutalities of the road" (Motley 409). But they are also faced with an absence of available work, and so they must decide between staying at the camp that is a welcome respite from their constant need to keep moving or leaving in search of some work, any work, any where. It is Ma who first broaches the subject with the male members of the family, and she does so in a manner that shames them into action. She looks at her sleeping children, plagued by constant hunger and an unhealthy pallor, and she says to Pa, "'We got to do somepin'" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 350). And when he tells her that it "'Puts weight on ya. Goin' out lookin' for somepin you know

you ain't gonna find,'" she fires back that he "ain't got the right to get discouraged. This here fambly's goin' under. You jus' ain't got the right'" (350). And so the family decides to leave in favor of work, but they do so at the behest of Ma, who declares, " 'We'll go in the mornin'" (352). While Pa realizes that this is their only real option, it is clear that he recalls longingly for the time when he would have been the one to make the decision: "Pa sniffled. 'Seems like times is changed,' he said sarcastically. 'Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like women is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick'" (352). But we know that he won't "get out a stick." We know, just as he does, that Ma is the one the family looks to for answers and guidance. And as they leave their safe haven, Ma sits in the front seat next to Tom, just as she should as the head of the Joads.

Soon after leaving Weedpatch the family finds work at Hooper Ranch, but after Tom beats the deputy who killed Casy with a club, the family must leave to protect him. Once again, it is Ma who orchestrates their departure, and once again, Pa makes a futile attempt to reassert himself: " 'Seems like the man ain't got no say no more. She's jus' a heller. Come time we get settled down, I'm a-gonna smack her'" (400). When Ma replies " 'Come that time, you can'" (400), we know that that time will never come. The family will never be settled the way they were in Oklahoma, and Pa will never have the chance to "smack" his wife. When Al invites Ma to sit in front with him as they escape with a hidden Tom, we can see once again how complete the transformation is within the family. And finally, just a few pages later, Pa admits it himself when he says to Ma, " 'I ain't no good any more. Spen' all my time thinkin' of home, an' I ain't never gonna see it no more'" (422). Motley contends that "the road confronts Pa with an image of time

slipping by without the reassuring cyclical pattern of farm life to give him a sense of progress or permanence” (409). He spends all of his time “thinkin’ of home,” thinking of the past, because he has nothing to look to as a marker of his future, nothing he can count on as absolute. And so he finally accepts Ma as the new head of the family because it is Ma who controls the family’s movement forward. At the end of the novel, when Pa says to Ma, “ ‘ You know ever’thing’ ” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 443), he does so without a trace of anger or resistance. Instead, he is resigned to the reality of her authority, and we can understand this authority as made possible by the family’s (auto)mobility. Life on the road truly transforms Ma Joad, and this life is both necessitated and made possible by the automobile and the technology it symbolizes. But while one can trace and perhaps relish Ma’s emancipation from secondary status within the Joad clan, one must also consider whether her new role has any real meaning once the family reaches California. The Joads find themselves in a land that presents them with conditions as brutal and demeaning as the ones they leave behind in Oklahoma, and while Ma’s authority may be absolute within the family, hers is a family that quickly falls apart in the face of ever-increasing hardship.

In the early pages of the novel, Steinbeck offers us hints that California may not be the land of milk and honey the family hopes it will be. Although Grampa can’t wait to “ ‘pick a wash-tub full a grapes, an’ . . . set in ‘em, an’ scrooge aroun’ an’ let the juice run down [his] pants’ ” (95), when it comes time to leave his family must ply him with alcohol to get him on the truck. The one family member who is the most vocal about all that California has to offer somehow foresees that it will not fulfill its promise. And Ma confides to Tom that the picture of California painted by the handbills, “ ‘Seems too nice,

kinda” (92). She senses what turns out to be the truth about their ultimate destination: “I’m scared of stuff so nice. I ain’t got faith. I’m scared somepin ain’t so nice about it”(92). Ma’s fears are confirmed before the family even crosses into California when they meet a man in a camp who is on his way back to the Dust Bowl. He tells them about the exploitative practices of the growers in order to ensure they have enough labor: “It don’t make no sense. This fella wants eight hundred men. So he prints up five thousand of them things an’ maybe twenty thousan’ people sees ‘em. An’ maybe two-three thousan’ folks get movin’ on account a this here han’bill. Folks that’s crazy with worry” (190). Despite such news, the Joads must stay the course they’ve set for themselves because they have no other choice. There is nothing for them in Oklahoma, and all they know how to do is work the land, so they continue on to California with the false hope that the man in the camp is an anomaly and that they will meet a different fate.

But the Joad’s first glimpse of California doesn’t provide them with much hope. They arrive in Needles and Tom describes the barren landscape as “murder country” (204). When Pa tells his family that California will be different, that it will be “nice country” (204), Tom has to shatter his delusion: “ ‘Jesus Christ! This here *is* California” (204). And so the Joads are faced with a reality they aren’t prepared for, but one that perhaps Ma and Grampa were subconsciously aware of. The physical landscape is as empty as the one they left, and when they encounter a family headed in the opposite direction, they learn that the economic situation is not much different either.

The father of the returning family tells the Joads that they will eventually see beautiful, lush land, but that they won’t be able to claim any as their own: “. . . you’ll pass lan’ flat an’ fine with water thirty feet down, and that lan’s layin fallow. But you

can't have none of that lan'. That's a Lan' and Cattle Company. And if they don't want ta work her, she ain't gonna get worked. You go in there an' plant you a little corn, an you'll go to jail!" (205). The Joads finally do come upon a beautiful panorama of California and see "The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, greenland beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses" (227). But these are not for them. These belong to the wealthy landowners who control the landscape, and the Joads quickly learn that "California's riches did exist, but they dangled beyond the migrants' reach" (Teisch 153). Steinbeck powerfully depicts just how painful life in California is for migrants like the Joads, families with children to feed who have no money and no possessions save the dilapidated cars that have carried them there:

And a homeless hungry man, driving the roads with his wife beside him and his thin children in the back seat, could look at the fallow fields which might produce food but not profit, and that man could know how a fallow field is a sin and the unused land a crime against the thin children. And such a man drove along the roads and knew temptation at every field, and knew the lust to take these fields and make them grow strength for his children and a little comfort for his wife. (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 234)

Families like the Joads, thousands of them, must instead push the unused land out of their heads while they work for pennies on someone else's land and face the constant threat of starvation. In reality, the sheer number of the displaced was staggering. In a series of articles about the migration Steinbeck wrote for *The San Francisco News*, he reports that, "From 1935 to 1938, between 300,000 and 500,000 Okies arrived in California" (*The*

*Harvest Gypsies* xi). These hundreds of thousands of migrants arrived in California to find that the orchards and farms and vineyards were already controlled by a wealthy class of landowners who both needed and despised the “Okies.”

Ma first hears the derogatory term when the family pulls over on the side of the road just inside the California border. A deputy stops and demands that they move on immediately because Californians didn’t “want no goddamn Okies settlin’ down” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 214). And in one of the interchapters Steinbeck further elucidates reaction to the mass of migrants moving into the state:

In the West there was panic when the migrants multiplied on the highways. Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns . . . gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders were bad. . . . They said, These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything. (282)

The migrant families are seen as the enemy, and so Ma experiences for the first time the prejudice directed at those coming from the Dust Bowl.

This fear and distrust of the “invaders” results in a “corralling” of migrants into squatters’ camps that Steinbeck describes in the following manner: “From the distance it looks like a city dump, and well it may, for the city dumps are the sources for the material of which it is built. You can see a litter of dirty rags and scrap iron, of houses built of

weeds, of flattened cans or of paper. It is only on close approach that it can be seen that these are homes" (*The Harvest Gypsies* 26). This is the world the Joads enter when they finally reach California, a world in which "California's extreme fertility is juxtaposed with the migrants living amid simultaneous squalor and wealth" (Teisch 154).

Californian landowners need the labor represented by the migrants because, "if the migration of the 2000 [workers needed to harvest a crop] should not occur, if it should be delayed even a week, the crop will rot and be lost" (Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies* 20). But Steinbeck notes that "in California we find a curious attitude toward a group that makes our agriculture successful. The migrants are needed, and they are hated" (20). He quotes a young boy in a squatters' camp who expresses this dichotomy with surprising clarity: "When they need us they call us migrants, and when we've picked their crop, we're bums and we got to get out" (23-24). This is the California the Joads find themselves in, a land that both needs them and reviles them, a land that ultimately tears them apart, and this is where Ma is left to exert the authority she has gained on the road. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the family, the forum in which Ma has become the central figure, is no longer a family. Noah and Tom have left, Al is soon to depart, and a final, devastating catastrophe destroys the remaining symbol of Ma's power.

As the novel reaches its conclusion we find the Joads in an environment that is antithetical to the one that they began in, but one that is just as destructive. California is besieged by rain that destroys the crops by drowning them and that threatens to push the Joads out of the boxcar they have made their home. Steinbeck writes that, "the rain pattered relentlessly down, and the streams broke their banks and spread out over the country" (*The Grapes of Wrath* 434). As the rains create puddles that turn into floods,

the Joads are forced to create higher ground within the confines of their boxcar, and all they have available to them to do so are the sideboards of the truck. And so they begin to dismantle the vehicle of Ma's authority in order to build a platform. As the water rises and consumes the automobile, destroys its engine, and robs it of its ability to move, the Joads rip it apart piece by piece to use the scraps. Pa "chop[s] out part of the inner wall of the car" to build a fire, and finally, the family abandons the automobile "that has served them so faithfully" (Casey 81) when they leave the boxcar to look for higher ground, a mere shadow of the group they once were. Casey notes that, "Seemingly as the car is torn apart, so is the family. Finally, the family leaves the flooded automobile and for the first time sets out on foot in search for higher ground. [However,] we are left wondering as to their chances of survival . . ." (87). Although we do not know how the Joads fare without the family truck, we do realize in these final scenes that the family Ma has fought so hard to keep together simply cannot withstand the hardships that face them in California. The land that fails to provide the Joads with the means of survival they hoped for instead tears them apart. California conquers the family, and we must not forget that it is mechanization that forces them to make the journey. And although it is through the culture created by the automobile that Ma Joad achieves increased authority, we discover that her power has little value in a fragmented, displaced family stuck in a state that does not want them. And so Steinbeck gives voice to the potential of automobility while simultaneously bringing to light its absolute ability to destroy – to destroy land, to destroy families, to destroy an entire way of life.

## CONCLUSION

The years of the Modernist era in literature mark an incredibly rich time in American history and culture. The transition from the Jazz Age of the 1920's to the bleak conditions of the Great Depression in the 1930's to the early years of World War II in the 1940's reflects the country's cultural complexities when we realize that within the span of thirty years, Americans experienced the heights of luxury and decadence, the depths of abject poverty and the often dehumanizing affects of westward migration, and the establishment of a unified national front against the foreign threats presented by World War II. And throughout these extreme highs and lows in American history, the automobile remained a constant and complicated presence. Henry Ford's innovative methods of automotive production forged a sense of national pride, so much so that Susman contends that "whatever one's interpretation of *Fordismus* it was undeniably a part of what came to be called Americanism" (82). But the automobile was also a constant reminder of class and gender inequality, and the same technology Ford was praised for was in part responsible for conditions that contributed to the Great Depression. Consequently, the automobile was consistently held up as both a symbol of American potential and a symbol of American corruption and greed, and a study of works produced during the Modernist era such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals that this automotive duality found its way into American literature. Fitzgerald, Cain, and Steinbeck use the machine to reveal the failings of the various cultures depicted in their respective works, and each text also reflects the anxieties

associated with the automobile in that they rely on feminine automobility to reflect the dangers of such innovation.

Fitzgerald is perhaps the most guilty of resorting to stereotypes about women drivers when he employs them to comment on the flaws of the Jazz Age and its wealthy revelers. Jordan Baker is morally ambiguous in nearly all aspects of her life: her golf career, her love life, and her access to automobiles. She lies about leaving a borrowed car out in the rain and is such a careless driver that she nearly strikes a man on the street when she's behind the wheel. But the negative implications of Jordan's automobility pale in comparison to Daisy's. This woman driver kills her husband's mistress by running her over. Instead of stopping, she simply drives on in a panic and eventually lets Gatsby die for her crime. And yet her wealth (as symbolized by her automotive access), allows her to escape unscathed from the disaster she creates while behind the wheel. And so Fitzgerald sheds light on the moral lack of the Jazz Age through his connection between women, wealth, and the automobile.

Cain also uses the automobile to comment on the immorality of the wealthy class, but he adds an additional layer when he also deflates the myth of Los Angeles as a thriving metropolis of opportunity. Cain's woman driver of choice is Phyllis Nirdlinger, a femme fatale who is so destructive that she must ultimately be destroyed in order for justice to prevail. Although Phyllis does not reflect the same automotive carelessness as displayed by Jordan and Daisy, she does make use of the automobile to carry out her most heinous acts, and it in this respect that we can recognize Cain as connected to Fitzgerald. Just as Fitzgerald makes use of the automobile to comment on the Jazz Age,

so too does Cain employ the machine as a symbol of the grand illusion that surrounds Los Angeles and those who live there.

Steinbeck is a bit of an anomaly when studied in relation to Fitzgerald and Cain in that he creates in automobility the opportunity for Ma Joad's realization of her authority. It is in response to the family's automotive journey that Ma must assume power over her brood, and Steinbeck consistently links her increasing self-awareness to the family truck. But Steinbeck never lets us forget that it is also the idea of automobility, of mechanization, that forces the Joads off of their land and away from the life they have always known. Furthermore, the value of Ma's power is called into question by the end of the novel when the truck must be destroyed for the family to survive, a family that only barely resembles its former self. And Steinbeck's depiction of California (the discrimination, the poverty, the exploitation) reminds us that the automobile has carried the family to a place no better than the one they leave behind.

Dettelbach asserts that authors such as Fitzgerald and Steinbeck (and I would add Cain to this list) "Each in his own way flays the myth of success and scrutinizes its complex realities; each uses the car as a way of illustrating the promise and then the perversion of the original dream" (67). Indeed, within the pages of *The Great Gatsby*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* we see numerous instances in which the automobile represents the possibilities that come with mobility only later to serve as a symbol of the destruction that accompanies such possibility. In this way, the three authors reflect the actual reactions of Americans to the "golden" machine. And the fact that the automobile serves as both the literal and metaphorical vehicle through which we learn of the benefits and the fears created by technology reveals the degree to which

Ford's products had become embedded in American culture. Fitzgerald, Cain, and Steinbeck are all intimately engaged in the project of uncovering the flaws lurking just under the surface of the various American cultures portrayed in their works, and that they use a connection between women and the automobile to do so signals to us that, while automobility was indeed welcomed by countless Americans, it was, nevertheless, a complicated innovation. As made evident in *The Great Gatsby*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the automobile was simultaneously a symbol of American potential and the impetus for increased inequality, and so the machine and the technology that so many Americans embraced also signified an increasing divide that was devastating to those unfortunate enough to fall on the wrong side of the gendered economic line.

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