

SMOAK, SHELBY, Ph.D. Framing the Automobile in Twentieth Century American Literature: A Spatial Approach. (2007)  
Co-Directed by Dr. Nancy Myers and Dr. Scott Romine, 241 pp.

This study examines fictional representations of the automobile in American literature and argues that the American novel subverts a favorable perception of the car. While other approaches have engaged the automobile in critical discussion, I apply Joseph Frank's spatial theory to propose the automobile as a framed site that recurs throughout texts; this approach allows for a stricter focus on the material automobile in the text and encourages an investigation of the relationship between cars and American culture. The automobile in literature, however, is not a static site, but is dynamic, much in the same manner Roland Barthes theorizes when he argues for opening a text. To highlight the dynamic quality of the textual automobile site, this study focuses on how characters and cars interact in works of American fiction. Specifically, I argue for cars as experiences of violence, sacredness, and consumption. Cars represented as sites of violence involve instances of car fatalities, of premeditated murder, and of a general antagonism toward car technology; cars represented as sites of sacredness involve instances when cars are places of escape and freedom, and where cars are sites of religious idolatry; cars represented as sites of consumption involve instances of when cars are traded, or where cars are places for consuming other goods such as food and beverages. Moreover, particular paradigms predominate in specific periods of American literature, so that in the early decades of the twentieth century, fiction predominantly represents cars as sites of violence; in the middle decades, fiction predominantly represents cars as sites of sacredness; and at the century's end, fiction predominantly

represents cars as sites of sacredness. The American novel employs the paradigms of violence, sacredness, and consumption to subvert a perception that cars are good for American culture. Ultimately, I hope my work will yield new ways of examining literary representations of cultural objects. Additionally, I wish for my work to express the indelible mark the car has left, and is still leaving, upon American culture, especially the American novel.

FRAMING THE AUTOMOBILE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE: A SPATIAL APPROACH

by

Shelby Smoak

A Dissertation Submitted to  
The Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirement for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2007

Approved by

Nancy Myers  
Committee Co-Chair

Scott Romine  
Committee Co-Chair

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To my wife, Kathleen,  
for all her love and support.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following Committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair Nancy Myers

Committee Co-Chair Scott Romine

Member Keith Cushman

10 May 2007  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

10 May 2007  
Date of Final Oral Exam

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the help and support of the following persons in writing the following work: Nancy Myers, Scott Romine, and Keith Cushman.

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## INTRODUCTION

In American life, the car is everywhere, and everywhere Americans value cars. When Charles E. and J. Frank Dummer introduced their gasoline-powered automobile in 1893, it was already a valuable commodity. They gave the world a motorized chariot which could individually transport humans endless distances with no burden to themselves, a feat usually only relegated to angels and other characters of fantasy. When Henry Ford conceived and introduced the Model T in 1908, the automobile's value increased as the American lower and especially middle-class population now had affordable access to this vehicle, making manifest man's technological prowess.

Still today, roadways flash in an endless flow of motorized metal, and American homeowners enlarge garages and widen driveways to accommodate this mufflerized deity, the car. The automobile stands as an icon of American genius and ingenuity, an image of freedom and individuality, and an object evidencing man's Promethean conquest of fire and metal. It is myth made tangible and is an image manifestly valuable. Perhaps no other invention has had a greater social, economic, and cultural effect on Americans than the automobile. Focusing on its economic impact alone, James J. Flink writes in "Automobile," "The American economy in the twentieth century has been shaped to an amazing degree by the automobile and the automobile industry" (1168).

By the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci recognized the automobile's role in the evolving world, and he questioned the mark that American society and its "mechanical attitudes" would impress upon European culture and economy ("Americanism and Fordism" 302).

Gramsci's choice of "Americanism and Fordism" as his title speaks to Ford's celebrity status and his influence in the business world. Gramsci's title also recognizes the primacy of the automobile (and its main mass distributor) in the changing world economy of the early 1930s. In the first half of the twentieth century, the automobile was America's prized product. In 1926 alone, automobile manufacturers calculated their product's value at over \$3 billion with consumers spending an estimated additional \$10 billion on travel (Flink *Car Culture* 148). Effectively, the car "drove" America to the forefront as a national economic power, and, informed by its unparalleled economic success, this object in literature became representative of something beyond "a self-propelled vehicle" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Today, Americans still love their automobiles, and while not as sure a market bet as in the early decades of the twentieth century, the car's economic power has not abated. According to the 2005 findings of Plunkett Research, Ltd.—a think tank specializing in industry statistics, trends, and in-depth analysis of top companies—consumers bought over eight million automobiles in the United States, earning companies estimated revenue of \$714 billion and increasing the number of cars in operation to 238 million. Another source adds that within a year Americans drive approximately 2.5 trillion miles between work and travel (*Historical Statistics* 5:836), a fact that helps explain the placement of three oil and gas companies in the top ten of Forbes' list of "The World's 2000 Largest Publicly Owned Companies" (Plunkett). Based on Forbes data, combined sales revenues

of Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch/Shell Group, and BP tabulate to over \$885 billion.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, two car-affiliated companies are among the top twenty of Forbes' "America's Largest Private Companies": Enterprise Rent-A-Car and JM Family Enterprises (a company that principally distributes Toyota and Lexus models throughout the Southeast).

Across the twentieth century, the automobile has been a potent consumer object. It is an infectious icon both culturally and textually. From its beginnings, the car has been a staple in the American literary text. From Claire's Gomez-Don in Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919) to Eric Packer's stretched limousine in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), authors have appropriated the automobile for their fiction and have played on readers' cultural and personal relationships with cars. This study proposes a material-culture approach to the automobile in literature so that a better understanding of the automobile's role in culture may be revealed. Specifically, this study positions literary representations of the automobile against cultural perceptions and argues that the main effect of literary representations of the automobile is subversive. Culture perceives the automobile as an exceptional object, one that, despite its everyday use, disrupts the everyday and makes the banal disappear. Certainly, the automobile occupies a unique position in American culture, for it is an object of deep complexity and of rich meaning—power, wealth, freedom, escape, and American success, for example—and when Americans purchase cars, they aim for (buy at) these ideals. They purchase something beyond the utilitarian object; they buy luxury, glamour, identity, freedom, escape, and so

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<sup>1</sup> Exxon Mobil reports sales revenue of \$328 billion, Royal Dutch/Shell Group of \$307 billion, and BP of \$250 billion. Figures are rounded. (forbes.com/lists)

on. A moment in Langston Hughes's "Declaration" perfectly captures this nuance, for the poem's speaker proposes to *buy* something outside the car as a material object:

If I was a rich boy  
I'd buy myself a car,  
Fill it up with gas  
And drive so far, so far.  
Yes!  
I would drive  
So far. (8-14)

Indeed, in this poem, the car promises escape, so that, in buying the car, the speaker also assumes to be buying a certain freedom. American fiction, however, disrupts cultural perceptions of the car. Instead, American fiction questions what Americans really buy when they purchase cars. Ultimately, twentieth century American fiction subverts cultural perceptions of the automobile and questions its value within American culture.

To illuminate my point, I seek to isolate the object (the automobile) within narrative. The investigation of the automobile as narrative object begins with understanding literature, as material culture critic Christopher Tilley does, as its own "communicative 'text'" (65). I ask: "What does the car as text 'communicate'?" To answer, I apply spatial theory in order to frame the narrative space that contains the textual automobile. The textual automobile is a produced space, so according to Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, the space "can be decoded, can be *read*" (17). "When we evoke space," Lefebvre writes, "we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so" (12). Thus, more questions follow: How does the

automobile occupy that space? And what meaning is the space (not simply the object itself) “communicating”?

The American novel subverts cultural perceptions of the automobile by highlighting problems with and raising questions about the value of the automobile to American culture. I further argue for the emergence of three subversive patterns or paradigms which reflect representations of the automobile in American literature. In these recurring patterns, authors communicate a viewpoint of the automobile as either a site of violence, of sacredness, or of consumption. This site, however, is not static like a typical material object site, but is, instead, dynamic. That is, automobiles as sites of violence, sacredness, and consumption are ways that American owners perceive and experience their cars. Authors subvert this cultural experience by offering via fiction the unfavorable effects of these experiences. While culture may inherently understand the car as a site of violence (a space of injury or death), of sacredness (a space of freedom and escape), or of consumption (a space of buying and selling), the American novel foregrounds these features and calls attention to their negative and/or ironic effects. This foregrounding questions (subverts) the automobile’s role in culture.

The automobile as a site of violence is perhaps the most pervasive and most memorable paradigm. Examples of this abound inside (and outside) the American novel. To demonstrate how I understand the paradigm, I will focus on examples from Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), John O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), and William Carlos Williams’ “The Young Housewife” (1938). While prevalent in works written throughout the twentieth century—for example, Joyce Carol Oates’ *Black*

*Water* (1992) and Andre Dubus's "A Father's Story" (1988) contain instances of car crashes and car fatalities—the car as a site of violence predominates in fiction of the early decades of the twentieth century. Within these decades, the car as a site of violence is more concentrated than within other periods of American literature. For example, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, both published in 1925, contain prominent scenes of automotive violence. Both canonical novels use car wrecks as an important narrative element, thus demonstrating a certain fascination with the automobile as a site of violence in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The noir fiction cycle of the 1920s and 1930s especially illustrates my point. The car appears as a site of violence in novels by Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler. Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), for example, focuses on the automobile as an object that invades or penetrates an adversary's territory. While violent in itself, this penetration also provokes further violence via gunfights that make the car, again, a site of violence. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), James M. Cain's love-killers, Frank and Cora, murder Cora's husband Nick while he sits in the car's front seat.<sup>2</sup> Once Nick is dead, they push the car and the body over a ravine in order to give the false impression that Nick died in a car crash. Moreover, Cain's novel concludes with Cora's violent death when the speeding car runs into a culvert wall (103). Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) shows the car as site of violence in scenes of

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<sup>2</sup> Eudora Welty's "The Hitch-Hikers" (1940) contains a similar scene of violence. After a dispute, a character murders another while sitting inside the car. Describing the car interior, Welty writes, "With blood streaming from his broken head, he was slumped down upon his guitar, his legs bowed around it, his arms at either side, his whole body limp in the posture of a bareback rider" (81).

car tails, car chases, and car gunfights, and in a pivotal scene, the car contains the body of the murdered chauffeur Owen Taylor, thus making the car a veritable “coffin”—an object with undeniable violent connotations as Carmen Sternwood submerges Taylor’s black sedan in the ocean off the Lido pier in order to cover up the murder.<sup>3</sup> These American novels highlight the early fascination authors exhibited concerning the car’s propensity for violence, and they establish the paradigm of the car as a site of violence.

Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* chronicles Clyde Griffith’s decline, which culminates with the murder of Roberta Alder. The dominant automobile scene, found in Book I, employs the now-familiar and oft-used trope of the car accident. The single event incorporates two automotive accidents; the first results in a fatality and the latter in injury. Clyde and his friends, including his girlfriend Hortense, return to Kansas City after an automobile outing—an event whose felicity contrasts with the coming accident(s). Immediately, they encounter a traffic jam that slows their progress and causes the day-trippers to lose “all sense of the delight of the trip” (155). Before the accidents, Dreiser’s verbal clues reinforce the scene’s violence. Clyde and his friends find “an unexpected crush” of cars blocking their travel; between stops, their car “would tear on” to the next one; and Dreiser writes that the driver has “crowded” other cars, thus suggesting agitation and engagement (156). At this point, the driver runs over the nine-

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<sup>3</sup> Film adopts this same motif of the car as “coffin.” One example is, of course, the film version of *The Big Sleep* (1946). Another is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) in which Norman Bates attempts to cover up his murder of Marion Crane (actress Janet Leigh) by submerging the car and the body in the swamp adjacent to The Bates Motel. More recently, TV crime dramas have capitalized on the buried car motif. One example is an episode of *Bones* (2006), “Aliens in a Spaceship,” in which two of the show’s main characters are inside a car that is buried beneath six feet of earth. The difference in this drama, however, is that the victims are buried alive, thus making the car a site of even further violence as the psychological effects of their burial are dramatized. Yet *Bones* softens this violence by having the main characters saved, so that, arguably, the car as a site of violence also becomes a site of rebirth, but a violent one indeed.

year-old girl, who is “dragged a number of feet before the machine could be halted” (157). The witnesses, Dreiser writes, predictably respond with “piercing screams” and shouts.

This scene fictionalizes a growing American concern: the inherent danger of this new technology. Dreiser’s word-choice the machine distances the automobile from human emotion *and* responsibility, and the text subtly suggest that Sparsen, the driver, is less to blame for the fatality than the uncontrollable machine. The reader understands that, left to his own devices, Sparsen would not have killed such an innocent girl, yet, compelled by the machine, he has done it. Dreiser’s scene plays upon the “new” fear which the automobile introduced into American consciousness: an innocent driver takes the life of an innocent victim.

Understandably, the scene erupts into hysteria, and this action propels Sparsen into more acts of violence, beginning with another popular automobile trope—the car getaway. Sparsen hits the gas and speeds away at, today, the almost laughable speed of “almost forty miles an hour” (159). This results in Sparsen’s collision with several other vehicles and concludes with his crash into the lumber pile, throwing the car “completely over onto its left side.” The occupants are “dashed against the windshield and roof and knocked senseless,” which leaves them “cut and bruised” (160). With the cops in pursuit, the friends scatter. This event eventually forces Clyde to flee Kansas City for upstate New York, where he seemingly leaves his past behind. But as the narrative later reveals, the incident returns to haunt Clyde at his trial and contributes to the court’s judgment of Clyde as a murderer with a general violent disposition.

In terms of narrative space, the ten pages which this violent automobile occupies in an almost thousand-page novel may seem inconsequential, yet the automobile's importance to Dreiser's plot and to his conception of naturalism makes the brief scene essential. The vehicle, which *An American Tragedy* produces, is a foreshadowing plot-device that expresses Dreiser's naturalism in its tendency toward violence. The car accident passage serves as a micro-narrative of the novel's philosophical theme, which as Robert Penn Warren observes, is a novel in which "creatures [are] doomed, for whatever reason, to fail" (101). The automobile wreck hints at the unraveling of Clyde's ambitious dreams, and, with the onset of this scene, Clyde's doomed failure begins to accelerate. In this scene, the car is a dynamic site of violence. Automobiles cause the novel's characters to experience violence—the girl's death, the violent chase, and personal injury in the car crash. The novel questions the role of the car in culture as it dramatizes the manifest problems and casualties related to automobile driving.

John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* is another example of a narrative in which the automobile is a dynamic site of violence. While the novel chronicles the quick demise of socialite Julian English, making *Appointment in Samarra* "a story of *hubris* in a modern setting" as Charles Child Walcott puts it (19), its automobile suicide is a literary first. Today, the notion of committing suicide by exposing oneself to carbon monoxide is a well-known effect of running a car within an unventilated space, but O'Hara's novel is the first literary text to exploit the possibilities of carbon monoxide poisoning. As he explains in a letter, to make sure that the ending of *Appointment in Samarra* was "accurate and sound," O'Hara "boned up on toxicology" and consulted a

Yale professor whose specialty was the physiology of respiration (201). Such research indicates the novelty of the literary suicide and suggests its method was not commonplace knowledge. Interestingly, the text employs the automobile to yield a technology for which it was never intended, that of unassisted and, as the text writes it, painless suicide. Effectively, *Appointment in Samarra* recognizes the car as an agent of suicide and thereby highlights another violent side-effect of the invention.

O'Hara sets up the suicide's believability by making Julian as a car salesman who, as another character reasons, would be "well acquainted with the effects of carbon monoxide" (235). He describes the suicide in precise, short prose that does not to inflate or call unnecessary attention to the suicide's novelty: "[Julian] climbed in the front seat and started the car. It started with a merry, powerful hum, ready to go. [...] There was nothing to do now but wait" (233). O'Hara's upbeat and anthropomorphic language ("merry" and "ready to go") contrasts with the seriousness of the event and creates dramatic irony to intensify the effect of Julian's actions. Additionally, the text suggests that Julian's death is peaceful and painless, an image in conflict with typical fiction of the early twentieth century, such as the previously discussed *An American Tragedy* where death by automobile is narrated as violent and gruesome. For Julian, the prelude to suicide is relaxing and comfortable, and death is akin to falling asleep or passing out from drink: "He smoked a little, hummed for a minute or two, and had three quick drinks and was on his fourth when he lay back and slumped down in the seat" (233). Yet, despite

O'Hara's comforting descriptions, the act is violent, and its site is the automobile.<sup>4</sup> The novel's subversiveness questions the role of the automobile in culture as Julian uses it for an unintended consequence.

Poetry of this period also adopts this paradigm of the car as a site of violence.

William Carlos Williams' "The Young Housewife" (1938) is a prime example. In Williams' poem, the car is a central metaphor that communicates a violence that operates on several levels:

At ten A.M the young housewife  
moves about in negligee behind  
the wooden walls of her husband's house.  
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in  
stray ends of hair, and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

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<sup>4</sup> Film and pop music also use the car as a device for suicide. For example, Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991) depicts the two kindred friends gripping hands and driving their '66 Thunderbird into the Grand Canyon to their death. The Pixies song "Wave of Mutilation" similarly narrates automotive suicide. Recorded on *Doolittle* (a staple of the current alternative music scene), Charles Thompson (a.k.a. Black Francis) sings: "Cease to resist, giving my goodbye / drive my car into the ocean / you'll think I'm dead, but I sail away / on a wave of mutilation" (1-4). In an interview, Thompson acknowledges a 1989 newspaper article as the song's source: "I was reading about Japanese businessmen doing murder-suicides with their families because they'd failed in business, and they were driving off the pier into the ocean. [...]. They're drowning the wife and the kids and the family and they're driving off a pier into the ocean" (qtd. in Sisario 83).

For starters, the speaker's voyeurism—his watching the young housewife from the safety of his car—subtly suggests of the car as a site of violence. Williams deepens this notion by indicating a physical, imaginary, and metaphorical violence being committed. First, the car commits an obvious violence when it crushes the dried leaves beneath its wheels; Williams' choice of "crackling" harshens that action and makes it more palpable. The poem also suggests a metaphorical violence being committed here, for the speaker metaphorically crushes the young housewife whom he has just compared to "a fallen leaf" in the previous stanza. The car becomes the "site" for this violence. The speaker imagines he has accurately judged the young housewife as her husband's possession—in "the wooden walls of her husband's house"—whose life consists of banal daily chores—meeting the ice-man, fish man—and thus, the speaker concludes that her life has ended—like a fallen leaf that will inevitably shrivel and die. The speaker further imagines the enacting of this "death" as he crushes the fallen leaves with his car and is smugly pleased with himself, "smiling" as he passes.

Perhaps, the greatest violence which this poem communicates and for which the car is its site of communication is the one committed by the kind of poetry that separates people instead of bringing them together. While the speaker's car does a metaphorical violence to the young housewife, his language, his poem does a greater violence by pigeonholing her. Further, the speaker's viewpoint facilitates a belief that he is right about her and that there is no need to further discover anything else about her. She is as good as dead and serves no further purpose—a fallen leaf. Williams demonstrates how a self-imagined reality can commit an injustice. Indeed, the housewife's human gestures

indicate her as very much alive—her shyness, tucking her hair behind her ear, for example. Yet, instead of stopping, the speaker drives by, thinking he has properly assessed her. The car becomes the site for this poetic violence as Williams uses it to communicate a physical and a metaphorical violence.

While Williams' poem appropriates the paradigm of violence, early twentieth century American fiction pushes this paradigm to subversive ends, for fiction highlights the car's violence in order to question the car's benefit to American culture. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the automobile wreck and the car as a site of violence wane. Car crashes and their injuries have lost their shock value, and, while the paradigm of the automobile as a site of violence continues, it is less prevalent. A new paradigm develops and begins to predominate the American novel as literature embellishes American idolization of the automobile and represents it as a site of sacredness. In novels employing this paradigm, the automobile presents itself as a dynamic site of hope, of freedom, of escape, or of spiritual awakening, and the car becomes a space (a site) that allows a person to purchase something outside the everyday, the banal. While fiction of this period inscribes sacredness, some novels ultimately subverts this sacred quality through narratives whose sacred cars serve ironic ends. A novel such as Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) includes a car that is made into a church, but when the car fails, so, too, does the church. James Agee creates a car whose fatality ironically provokes a strengthening of faith in *A Death in the Family* (1957).

At this point, I want to again step away from fiction for a moment to look at Stephen Dunn's poem "The Sacred" (1989), for the poem excellently demonstrates this

paradigm. While Dunn's poem falls outside my chronological timeline, my argument for a pattern's dominance during a particular time period is meant to apply more specifically to American fiction. "The Sacred" begins:

After the teacher asked if anyone had  
a sacred place  
and the students fidgeted and shrank

in their chairs, the most serious of them all  
said it was his car (1-5)

While the car is an unlikely answer to the teacher's question and while Dunn's poem intends the moment as ironic, the speaker's tone implies it as otherwise. The speaker's classmates agree with him: "[...]and others knew the truth / had been spoken" (7-8). Moreover, as the class discussion continues, the speaker relates that "the car kept coming up" (10). The passage suggests that the class is unable to reject an idea of the car's sacredness and that, since the idea recurs so often, perhaps it *is* the most sacred place. The only other candidate as a sacred place is the room, but the car wins out. Dunn uses religious imagery to press his point. A student "understood the bright altar of the dashboard" and its ability to "to take him from the need / to speak, or to answer" (13-16). These lines demonstrate the dynamic quality of the automobile as a site. Cars and characters interact, thus making the car site dynamic.

Fiction similarly uses the paradigm. For example, a passage in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) relates that being in the car "is a vacation from being

you” (128). The car is a site of sacredness as it promises an escape from the self. Warren writes,

There is only the flow of the motor under your foot spinning that frail thread of sound out of its metal gut like a spider, that filament, that nexus, which isn't really there, between the you which you have just left in one place and the you which you will be when you get to the other place. (128-29)

While Warren's word-choice nexus connotes a sacred quality of being in the car, the prominent idea is one of escape, for in the car an individual can escape his/her other banal, everyday self.

In Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), the car is a literal and metaphorical “vehicle” for Dean Moriarty's escape from his ordinary New York life. Moriarty hitches a ride and then takes over as the driver. His reflection while driving suggests the car's promise to end his boring existence:

I took over the wheel and [...] drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. Rock Island—railroad tracks, shacks, small downtown section; and over the bridge to Davenport, same kind of town, all smelling of sawdust in the warm Midwest sun. Here the lady had to go on to her Iowa hometown by another route, and I got out. (15)

Significantly, the narrator's viewpoint fixes the scene in the car's interior, yet the interior is made invisible and is a passive window through which Moriarty (and the reader) see America. In this descriptive passage of the iconic Mississippi, the narrator evokes three of the five senses—sight (“dry in the summer haze”), smell (“like the raw body of America”), and sound (“washes”). Moreover, his prose reflects Moriarty's elevated, reflective mood, one that indicates his spiritual awareness. Yet this mood comes to a poignant close when Moriarty exits the car. Kerouac's phrase—“and I got out”—reinforces the finality of the action; it simultaneously concludes the paragraph and the internalized experience with a short, abrupt phrase. Importantly, this passage stresses the novel's appropriation of the automobile as a site of freedom and escape.<sup>5</sup> This nuance of the car as a site of sacredness focuses on the car's interior.

Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* also represents the automobile as a site of sacredness and again uses its interior to achieve this effect. Here, the automobile is a vehicle for spiritual questing, but the novel's existential pessimism differs from the optimistic empowerment of Kerouac's *On the Road*, a novel Omar Swartz claims helps readers “restructure their lives” (5). While both narratives involve automobiles in a character's search for spiritual solace, *The Sheltering Sky* captures a journey that, as Gena Bagel Caponi puts it, “leaves one in a void, surrounded by nothing” (18). The only suggested motive for Port Moresby's determined and ultimately fatal journey is this self-conception of himself as “a traveler” and not a mere tourist (6). His voyage to the self-

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<sup>5</sup> Road narrative pieces often exploit this facet of the automobile. They use automobiles to evoke a sense of freedom and escape from the banal. While it employs motorcycles in its narrative, the movie *Easy Rider* (1969) is a prime example of the paradigm operating in film.

imagined “center” of the Algerian Sahara, a trip that Bowles describes as a “strict, undeviating course inland to the desert,” brings Port to a final ride “in the back of the truck” where, feverish and near death from typhoid, he perceives the “twisting roads of the past weeks” as “alien” (153). Bowles’ language and scene emphasize the pointlessness of Port’s expedition. *The Sheltering Sky* emphasizes this theme as it chronicles the hunt for a fulfillment that neither Port nor Kit—Port’s wife and traveling companion—discovers.

Despite the novel’s suggestion of a futile quest, Bowles’ narrative includes moments of self-discovery and reflection that indicate Port is nearing, or at least coming closer to, a certain spiritual realization. These important moments occur inside automobiles. Within the automobile, Port enjoys moments of spiritual clarity and achieves a higher state of self awareness. “Whenever he was en route from one place to another,” Bowles writes, Port “was able to look at his life with a little more objectivity than usual. It was often on trips that he thought more clearly, and made decisions that he could not reach when he was stationary” (79). Significantly, these thoughts occur within the bus bound for Aïn Krorka; the passage exemplifies Bowles’ appropriation of the automobile as a narrative space of reflection. Moreover, the narrative indicates the physical space of the automobile as a place where an individual can profit spiritually, a point made especially obvious when juxtaposing Chapters 9 and 10.

The novel’s suggests that Chapters 9 and occur simultaneously, which heightens their contrast. The chapters follow the main characters’ separate journeys to Boussif. Initially, the only obvious difference is that Port rides in a Mercedes with the European

travelers Eric and his mother Mrs. Lyles while Kit and Tunner—another traveling companion—make the journey by train. These choices were seemingly based on preferences of comfort, but as the narrative relates, they become indicators of something more deeply significant.

Kit and Tunner's train ride is superficial and hedonistic. They imbibe champagne, glibly toast one another, "Here's to Africa!" (58), and even more hedonistically, they have sex, an event that not only complicates the narrative, but further highlights their interest in the body and sensual pleasures and *not*, as Port's car passage illustrates, the mind. In contrast, Port's journey indicates reflection as his thoughts take "an inward turn" and as his mind's "connections" become "all clear in his head" (54-55). The narrative then relates fragments of Port's developing existential philosophy. Port decides that "in order to deal with relative values" he must deny "all purpose to the phenomenon of existence" (55). Thus, the text espouses a primary tenet of existentialism that, according to Thomas Baldwin, is its emphasis on the "personal dimension of human life" and especially the "subjective" or "existing individual" (257). Moreover, existentialism argues that "the basic goals of our lives cohere around a fundamental project" that must be "unmotivated" (260) and, according to Heidegger, "absurd," much like Port's quest (qtd. in Baldwin 260). The salient point here is that Port's spiritual awareness and his conclusions about existence occur within the narrative space afforded by the automobile. More suggestive of the automobile as a space of spiritual enlightenment, however, is Bowles' employment of the train—such as the one enjoyed by Kit and Tunner—as a metaphor for life: "The train that always went faster was

merely an epitome of life itself” (55). Here, Bowles suggests a parallel between the train’s rapid travel and thoughtlessly; in contrast, the car in *The Sheltering Sky* is slower and is more conducive to reflection and spiritual growth. It is thus a site of sacredness.

By the late decades of the twentieth century, another transition occurs in representations of the automobile in literature and, as I argue, another paradigm develops and predominates. In this paradigm whereby the automobile is a site of consumption, the car is either a direct site of commerce and thus the primary object of consumption<sup>6</sup>, or it is a site for consumption such as cases involving the exchange and use of goods, as in Beattie’s stories below. In some more familiar instances, sex becomes the consumptive act. Here the examples are numerous, such as Humbert Humbert’s consumption of Lolita in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Garp’s unfortunate incident (the disrupted oral sex) in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978), or the sexual intercourse narrated in T. Coraghessen Boyle’s *The Inner Circle* (2004). These works subvert these situations as positive experiences. Garp, for example, loses part of his member while receiving oral sex in the car, and Humbert is imprisoned after his taboo affair with the young Lolita. Acts of consumption that occur in cars have negative results.

Another nuance of this paradigm represents a consumer’s relationship with cars. The criticism of Jean Baudrillard explores the consumer’s bond with objects. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, for example, Baudrillard posits that certain objects enable a second “false ‘self’,” thereby persuading the consumer into imagining a personality empowered by a product (88). Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975)

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<sup>6</sup> The selling of cars in John Updike’s *Rabbit Is Rich* (1982) uses the paradigm in this way.

fictionalizes this critical position and indicates a conflict of self when Charles observes of the car, “You had to live up to such a grand machine, and consequently you were not yourself at the wheel” (36). The moment is subversive; it teases at the effect of car consumption upon identity.

The narrator, Charles Citrine, awakens one morning to discover that his Mercedes 280-SL has been “attacked in the night” (35). Throughout the scene, the text emphasizes the severity of the damage, variously observing the car as “pounded all over,” “mutilated,” and “massacre[d]” (35, 52). While these instances seemingly renew the paradigm of violence, Bellow instead positions the destroyed Mercedes as a centerpiece in a monetary dispute, and the narrative’s focus upon money makes the car a site of consumption (the consuming of money). The episode in *Humboldt’s Gift* makes evident ways in which paradigms overlap, and it also demonstrates how one paradigm dominates another.

The destruction of the Mercedes occurs because Charles owes Rinaldo Cantabile \$450 from an alleged poker game. Charles refuses to pay, so Rinaldo vandalizes Charles’ Mercedes to scare a payment from Charles, to which Charles immediately relinquishes the disputed \$450. The Mercedes then is Rinaldo’s leverage against Charles and is a fulcrum in their heated quarrel. While a focus in this monetary exchange, the Mercedes *is not* the object being exchanged nor consumed. Instead, it owns a proxy relationship to the exchange which suggests the automobile as a object whose consumer value influences trade outside of itself. But the power of the object to exert such influence over this dispute rests in Charles’ strong bond with his Mercedes. He claims, “I had allowed the

car to become an extension of my own self [...], so that an attack on it was an attack on myself” (36). Thus upon discovering the car, Charles claims, “I nearly broke down” and “I felt like swooning,” and “the blood left my heart when I saw what he had done” (36, 40).

Moreover, texts such as *Humboldt’s Gift* often give special attention to the car’s dollar value, thus especially indicating the car as a site of consumption. In fact, Bellow consistently equates the automobile with money by translating it into dollar amounts.<sup>7</sup> While fiction previous to *Humboldt’s Gift* certainly makes use of the car as an object of worth or an icon of wealth—*An American Tragedy* and *the Great Gatsby* to name two examples—*Humboldt’s Gift* differs by attaching specific dollar-value judgments to the automobile. For example, Charles comments that his Mercedes is “an eighteen-thousand-dollar automobile” and that the car “belonged to a time when his income was in excess of a hundred thousand dollars”; additionally, Charles blames the car for attracting “the attention of the IRS” (36). These statements fix the car to a specific economic worth. Moreover, when Charles decides it necessary to file a report on the vehicle’s damage, he reasons it important to do so “if only because of the insurance,” which again reduces the Mercedes to its monetary worth, for, regardless of sentimental or other extraneous “values” given a car, insurance is pegged on a dollar amount (45). Importantly, texts such as *Humboldt’s Gift* increasingly explore the automobile as a consumer object, and they expose the automobile as a tangible consumer object with economic value. Such appropriations of the car emphasize what Americans buy (a Mercedes worth \$18, 000)

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<sup>7</sup> In John Updike’s *Rabbit Is Rich*, Rabbit demonstrates a similar habit; I analyze this below in chapter 4 “The Car as a Site of Consumption.”

and what they buy at (image, luxury, identity). These novels are subversive by undermining or exposing the thing a character supposes to purchase via cars.

This paradigm of the automobile as a site for consumption predominates other novels of the twentieth century's closing decades. The stories of Ann Beattie provide a more recent instance of this paradigm, yet, Beattie's stories take the paradigm in a different direction, one in which the automobile has a domestic and economic value. Moreover, in Beattie's stories, the car becomes a site for the consumption of other goods.

"High School," for example, opens with the main characters conversing within a car, and Beattie punctuates the dialogue with instances of consumption—here, the make-up Liz applies to her face. When Liz stops at a red light, "she outlined her lips with red lip pencil and stroked color below her cheekbones"; then she "flips down the riser and looks at herself," thus consuming her own, made-up image (77). To emphasize the car as a site for consumption, Beattie highlights the car's interior, a move I also observe in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* as related in chapter 4. Beattie's narrator describes the car's interior: "I'm in the back seat, and Hunter, Matt, and Liz's four-month-old, is sprawled across my lap, his head cradled in my arm, my other hand resting on his stomach" (78). Beattie's narration suggests the car is its own room, is the place where family and friends congregate, or, as this scene especially evidences, is a site where a person readies themselves for the public, an act normally relegated to bathrooms and cosmetic tables.

The story "When Can I See You Again?" also calls attention to the automobile's interior as a site for consumption and as a space that replaces the rooms typically designated for domestic activities. The car is domesticated, or to put it another way, is

consumed as a domestic space. For one, the story's main character, Martha, listens (consumes) music in her car. Martha makes "homemade tapes" which "become so familiar" that "she knew this one, which began with the Big Bopper, would be followed by the voice of Ed Sullivan introducing The Beatles, and Emmylou Harris" (60).<sup>8</sup> The text indicates that Martha's consumption of the music is so frequent that she has memorized the songs and their order; by extension, the story then suggests Martha as spending large amounts of time in her vehicle.

As with "High School," "When Can I See You Again?" gives special attention to the car's interior: "the glass swan [...] glued to the dashboard" and the prism of day light which "shot through it and threw colors all over the interior" (61). Moreover, as Beattie relates the office affair of Martha and her co-worker, Arnie, she describes their habit of eating in the car, thus transforming the space into a dining room—a site for the consumption of food. "Sometimes, on their lunch hour," Beattie writes, "Martha and Arnie left the office where he was a paste-up man and she was an editor and sat in his car in the garage eating take-out food" (61). Interestingly, the car also becomes a narrative space for dream-making, for in a driving scene, Arnie tells Martha, "When I get a million, we blow that place we work in and you become my personal stylist" (61). While it is a scene one images especially likely in an open field or underneath a starry sky, as opposed to inside a car, this setting reinforces Arnie's inability to escape his present life;

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<sup>8</sup> T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Greasy Lake" narrates a similar episode. The narrator relates, "I drove, Digby pounded the dashboard and shouted along with Toots & the Maytals" (262). "Greasy Lake" further insinuates the car as a site where its occupants seek (the consumption of) entertainment. The narrator relates how they had "been out till dawn, looking for something [they] never found," and that they had, moreover, "cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in out of every bar and club [they] could think of." In their quest for entertainment, the passengers in Boyle's story also consume the following items: a bucket of chicken, hamburgers, eggs, and gin.

he is shut off from his dream much as the car is closed-off from the world around it.

What Arnie is left with, however, is consuming the fantasy—inside the space of the car.

The subtle shift that Beattie's fiction observes is the car's adoption as a space of domestic functions, many of which involve acts of consumption. Within cars, Beattie details the drama of ordinary American lives. The car is a veritable room, albeit one that moves, but a room nonetheless, and in her fiction, the car's interior replaces the spaces of kitchen, dining room, and/or dressing room.<sup>9</sup> Such moments challenge perceptions of the car as they speak to ways that cars replace domestic spaces. All three paradigms—violence, sacredness, and consumption—subvert cultural perceptions of the automobile because they work within and against everyday life. As Baudrillard presciently notes in *The System of Objects*, the car often becomes “an alternative zone of everyday life” (71), and one guiding premise of this study is that it investigates this *alternative zone of the everyday life*. I argue that fiction undermines the car's promise of an escape from the everyday by highlighting the negative consequences of car ownership.

The importance of this study largely rests on two simple facts: (1) that so many works of fiction contain automobiles, thus opening the way for an analysis of them, and (2) that so few commentaries do exist. Currently, the road narrative genre is the most explored field of study in critical work on the automobile literature. Works like Kris Lackey's *RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative* and Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* investigate road

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<sup>9</sup> Other novels similarly transform the car space. For one, Eric Packer uses his white limousine as an office in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2001), and Philip Marlowe does likewise for his gumshoe detective work in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939).

narratives, a well-established genre of travel narrative. Instead of Tom Jones on foot, these works write of Dean Moriarty in a car, and in doing so they highlight century-old themes and fail to embrace the car as a technology with an undeniable cultural impact. In naming *On the Road* the “prototypical road narrative,” Primeau interprets Kerouac’s novel as a work where “[g]etting away is a chance at a new start” which, of course, is no new theme (1). While the addition of the automobile in the road-narrative genre does generate an interesting approach, it too often fails to highlight the automobile’s direct importance to American literature.

Only two scholarly works analyze the automobile in literature and culture: Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach’s *In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Culture* and Roger N. Casey’s *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature*. These remain the only book-length critiques whereby the automobile is treated as an object of primary pursuit in American literature. Their titles’ striking similarities to one another and to my own should suggest a congruency in our aims.

Dettelbach writes that her intent is “not merely to accumulate car metaphors or specific automotive references” throughout American literature, but to highlight “the car in American life and thought” (4). *In the Driver’s Seat* then proceeds to bring to light texts where the automobile plays a significant role. Works like James Agee’s *A Death in the Family*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* are used in Dettelbach’s examination of the car’s relationship to character. For example, in commenting upon Hubert Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Dettelbach suggests the Cadillac

as an enabler for the character's romantic conquest; the car not only "impresses" the girls, but it also "provide[s] him with a private place to be with her" (66, 59). She then reads the car as a phallic "penis" whereby the male "does the 'driving'" for/to the "passive female" (66). To Dettelbach, the car fronts as a "vehicle" for reading the aggressive male and the supine female. In her examination of *The Great Gatsby*, Dettelbach's focus again remains attached to character, for she reads the car from Nick's viewpoint; she writes that Nick clearly interprets Gatsby's "luxurious and ostentatious" car as an object intended to be symbolic of Gatsby's wealth (81). *In the Driver's Seat* analyzes the automobile as it pertains to the fictional character, but it does not approach the car from a material-object perspective, a position which would more effectively isolate the car within narrative. *In the Driver's Seat* argues for cars as mirror images of characters. Car and character thus inform one another, and the car as an object of study takes a "backseat" to character analysis.

Casey's *Textual Vehicles* provides a more object-centered treatment of the car in literature. In asking how the automobile has affected American texts, Casey examines its impact upon the American psyche and enumerates the various symbolic appropriations of the car in American texts. In taking a "roughly chronological approach" to "representative writers and their texts," Casey states that he is able to "illustrate diverse and changing perceptions and uses of the automobile in American culture" (xii). Thus, to Sinclair Lewis the car is a "vehicle" for critiquing religious practice (48); to Fitzgerald it offers an image to encapsulate American decadence (50); to John Steinbeck the car stands as a symbol of hope and salvation (82); and to William Faulkner it is an image of

the New South (93). While offering a different perspective than Dettelbach's character-based approach, *Textual Vehicles'* examination of the car in literature is yet limited. Its heavy reliance upon specific texts and text-specific themes restricts Casey's applications from other novels and published media.

While vital to the scholarship of the automobile in literature, *In the Driver's Seat* and *Textual Vehicles* choose a perspective that de-centers the automobile in discussion and instead uses it to examine character. While attempting to address the automobile in literature as their primary subject, they relegate it to peripheral status. Moreover, their work fails to offer ways of reading the automobile in other works and genres. This present study attempts to center the automobile in critical discussions of American fiction, and it concludes that fiction's representations of cars are subversive.

Additionally, I intend that several of my observations might apply to works outside the scope of this project. For example, one can perhaps easily imagine instances in films where cars are sites of violence or sacredness or consumption. Where I can, I reference film, poetry, and popular music as a means to suggest this possibility. But, for sake of space and for sake of keeping a tight focus, my discussions in the application chapters largely rest on an analysis of American novels.

Chapter 1 "Subversive Representations of the Automobile in Literature" incorporates a diversity of theoretical approaches in order to spatially frame the automobile in twentieth century American literature. Wolfgang Iser and Roland Barthes indicate the automobile as a virtual text, one that exists in play between author and reader; in this way, I can simultaneously analyze an author's representation of the

automobile as well as suggest the effect of that representation. Joseph Frank's spatial theory provides an isolation of the automobile as a spatially reoccurring motif within a work. And Northrop Frye's articulation of archetypes allows me to assert the automobile as a recurring image within and through several works; thus, I can critique the literary automobile as a pattern across several works, as opposed to isolating the pattern within one particular work, such is the normal practice of spatial theory. I tie spatial theory to three different representational patterns which dominant particular periods of American literature: the car as a site of violence, of sacredness, and of consumption. In addition to commenting upon the effect of this recurrence, I further argue that the American novel's representation of the automobile facilitates a question about how one is to understand the automobile and how one should value the automobile. As these questions go against dominant perceptions of the automobile, I argue for these representations as subversive.

Chapter 2 "The Automobile as a Site of Violence" examines American literature published between 1918 and 1939 and posits a dominant representation of the car as a site of violence. I give careful scrutiny to automobiles in the fiction of Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1929). American literature within this period inflates the violent effects of the automobile, and, by doing so, these works question the automobile's impact upon the individual and upon culture.

Chapter 3 "The Automobile as a Site of Sacredness" engages American literature published between 1939 and 1965 and emphasizes the novel's representation of cars as sites of sacredness. In this chapter, I give close analysis to the following works: John

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), and James Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957). While American literature in this period amplifies a perception of the automobile as sacred, its ultimate goal is to question the automobile's role by calling attention to its disadvantages, many of which relate to psychology and religion.

Chapter 4 "The Automobile as a Site of Consumption" addresses American literature published between 1965 and 2003 and argues for literature's representations of cars sites of consumption. To demonstrate this, I call upon the following works: Harry Crews' *Car* (1972), John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1982), and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003). These works use the car to call into question Americans' unhealthy relationship with cars and their equally troubling habits of consumption.

The concluding chapter synthesizes my argument. While suggesting works that contain examples of all three paradigms, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* for example, the conclusion especially looks at the relationship between cars and work. This relationship is a thread woven throughout the American novel, and it demonstrates the automobile's centrality to work and to earning money. Moreover, American literature frequently suggests the automobile as an indicator of a character's socio-economic status.

Ultimately, however, these moments question the car's value in American life and work.

This study contends that three recurring paradigms dominate representations of the automobile in twentieth century American literature, and that this recurrence in and through a variety of works subverts dominant perceptions of automobile. Ultimately, I

cast the automobile in relief against the backdrop of American literature—that is, frame it within culture.

CHAPTER I  
FRAMING THE AUTOMOBILE

My analysis of the automobile in literature allows me to breakdown the myth that American literature is disinterested in mass culture and that it is powerless in promoting an ideology regarding the automobile. Indeed, American literature teases out particular qualities of the automobile and, through textual dissemination of these ideals, questions the automobile's role in culture. Thus, American literature is subversive in its representation of the car; it undermines the car's cultural image. While according to Marcia Landy in "Culture Politics in the Work of Antonio Gramsci," high culture often thinks of itself as immune to or as "uncorrupted by the 'marketplace'" (64), literature's representations of the automobile suggest an inherent concern with this marketplace commodity.

The concern is that the car *is* America. Indeed in cars, Americans get things done: they travel (Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*); they escape destitution (Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*); they kill (Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*); they preach (O'Connor's *Wise Blood*); they have sex (Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*, John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, T.C. Boyle's *The Inner Circle*) and they especially earn money (Harry Crews's *Car*, John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*). But

American literature does not usually shed a favorable light on these activities. Instead, American literature questions whether this automobile lifestyle is acceptable. Thus, as I argue, the American writers subvert mass perceptions of the automobile as a commodity of value.

While my own analysis does not include such a politically-charged dynamic as Gramscian hegemony, it does politicize authors as a group that manufactures a consensus about the automobile. As I argue, authors mediate between their perceptions of the automobile in the world and, necessarily, its reality. They especially inflate qualities of the automobile—such as its propensity toward violent fatalities—in an effort to question the automobile within American culture. Literature subverts mass perceptions of the automobile by undermining its cultural meaning. For example, Gatsby's Rolls-Royce exudes richness; that is its cultural meaning. F. Scott Fitzgerald's, however, novel undermines that meaning by having the car undo Gatsby, for Myrtle Wilson's death by Gatsby's car sets in motion the unraveling of Gatsby's dream. While Gatsby intends the car as a visual emulation of Tom Buchanan's wealth, the car fails to aid him or his dream in the way he expects.

Antonio Gramsci describes the intellectual (the writer) as “a builder, an organizer” and a person who is “permanently persuasive,” and he further labels the intellectuals as “ ‘officers’ of the ruling class” and asserts their specific function as subtly coercing “spontaneous consent” from the “great masses” (124). The position suggests how the consensus of an intellectually dominant group can “come to be accepted as the interests of society as a whole” (Colebrook 167). Thus, I find, regarding the automobile,

that American literature attempts to persuade mass culture to question their beloved automobiles. I do not argue whether the attempt succeeds, but I simply note that, through subversive images of the car, the attempt is made. As Landy observers, even Gramsci “understood the power of literature, newspapers, film, and radio in the creation of consensus” (59). To give an example of how the American novel is subversive, consider the various narrations of automobile accidents, examples of which are found in work by Booth Tarkington, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, James Agee, Vladimir Nabokov, Flannery O’Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, and Andre Dubus. Together, a consensus of the automobile as a violent commodity emerges. While the public is aware of the car’s propensity to crash and to even kill, American fiction foregrounds this problem, and, moreover, repeats it through several works and across several generations of writing. Bluntly, the repeated image of the car wreck bludgeons the idea of a car’s catastrophic possibilities. This repeated graphic violence—those “smashed, blood-bespattered” cars (Nabokov 174) and those crashed and “engulfed in flame” (Bezzetides 170)—challenges the car’s benefit to American culture. The American novel highlights the car’s negative effects of car ownership.

A few more examples should highlight a concept of the car as subversive. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s concerns with alcohol and driving<sup>1</sup> and Harry Crews’s blatant comment about the automobile’s dominance over the individual<sup>2</sup> subvert a perception of the automobile as luxurious and fulfilling; instead, they highlight the car’s unfavorable

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this are found in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*

<sup>2</sup> *Car* narrates a main character who consumes a car in a futile effort to overcome the car’s dominance.

qualities (fatalities, waste/dominance).<sup>3</sup> Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) finds the car useful as commodity for market speculation, but the results are rather disastrous for the Amberson family. Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) evidences a car whose primary use-value is as a disseminator of evangelicalism, but its main character holds a distorted view and an unnatural dependence upon the automobile. For another, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) demonstrates a car useful for work and for displaying one's socio-economic status, but the protagonist depends heavily upon commodities such as his white stretched limousine as markers of his identity. These authors negatively represent the automobile in order to question the car's role in American society. Their representations are thus subversive. By highlighting a character's confused priorities (Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*), a character's misguided belief that a luxurious automobile will grant him acceptance into the wealthy class (Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*), a character's distorted hope that a car will replace a church (O'Connor's *Wise Blood*), or even, a character's belief that the car is a marker of happiness (John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*)—the American novel undermines the cultural perception that these things are what the luxury of car ownership provides America.

My argument, however, has a further nuance. I argue for the development of three recurring patterns, or paradigms, in American literature's representations of the automobile. I observe the following three patterns: the automobile as a site of violence, of sacredness, and of consumption. I further observe that these patterns originate within and predominate the following historical periods of American literature: 1918-1939

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<sup>3</sup> On these points, I go into greater detail with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in chapter 2 "The Automobile as a Site of Violence" and Crews's *Car* in chapter 4 "The Automobile as a Site of Consumption."

(violence), 1939-1965 (sacredness), and 1965-2003 (consumption). My dates are intended as loose applications, but are meant to recognize the establishment of and the predominance of a particular pattern during these suggested timelines. Furthermore, as I also show, the patterns are not restricted to these periods alone, but can be found in works outside of these time periods. For example, Vladimir Nabokov writes a car as a site of violence in *Lolita* (1955). Obviously this novel fails to fit into my chronological scheme. While I could make the argument that sacredness dominates *Lolita*—consider, for example, how Humbert Humbert deifies Lolita—I believe this kind of move would serve an injustice to my overall point, for I wish to demonstrate these three patterns operating within American literature. I certainly argue for one pattern as dominant within a particular historical period, but I am not implying that *only* that pattern exists during that period. The following position is too restrictive. In fact, the conclusion addresses this very point and demonstrates how multiple paradigms operate within a single work. At the same time, I am not straddling a fence with my argument. I believe and argue that the automobile as a site of violence dominates literature of the early decades of the twentieth century, that the automobile as a site of sacredness dominates literature of mid-twentieth century, and that the automobile as a site of consumption dominates literature of the closing decades of the twentieth century.

While I use site as my controlling term in laying out my paradigms, I wish to emphasize that this type of site is not static or fixed, but is dynamic. Specifically, site is the narrative space that contains linguistic instances of the automobile. Site is the space characters and readers encounter cars, and site is the connection between literary and

material cars. My work observes how the automobile as a site stimulates or incites a character's physical and emotional response to it; hence, it operates in an ever-shifting relationship with a character. For example, Charles Citrine responds to the physical and financial destruction of his car in Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*. Charles's damaged Mercedes provokes a reaction as Charles perceives a change in the automobile and in his relationship to it: "an attack on it was an attack on myself" (36). Moreover, I argue these patterns (this group of sites) repeats within and across works of twentieth century. Additionally, these repeated paradigms highlight problems with the automobile. Their fictional representation conflicts with dominant perceptions of the automobile as beneficial to culture. The juxtaposition of mass perceptions of the automobile against literary representations of the automobile indicates incongruency in what culture thinks cars provide and what American literature documents as the case. American literature is especially critical of the automobile; culture is not.

As I argue, early twentieth century novels (roughly 1918-1939) narrate the automobile as a site of violence; cars in literature of this period are represented as objects that produce violence. Through cars, characters experience violence. In fiction, new car technology antagonizes a wary public, as in Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, or new car technology is publicly destructive, especially via automotive injury and fatality, such as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*. The subversive intent brings awareness to the cultural problems related to the automobile's incipient integration into American society.

Works published mid-century (roughly 1939-1965) narrate the automobile as a site of sacredness. Literature produces an image that the automobile facilitates sacredness by offering a means for escape as in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, or by endowing the automobile with imagined religious associations, such as Mary's prayerful response to Jay's vehicular death in James Agee's *A Death in the Family* or Hazel Motes' car pulpit in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. These works question the high esteem Americans give the automobile as they proliferate and soon dominate the American lifestyle.

Works published towards the end of the twentieth (roughly 1965-2003) narrate the automobile as a site of consumption. Cars are bought and sold such as in John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, or cars facilitate further consumption as in Harry Crews' *Car* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. These novels question the effect of car consumption upon American psychology. Importantly, the consistent image of the car within and across literature of these isolated periods presses an idea of *how* one is to understand and respond to the automobile; thus through cars, characters experience violence, sacredness, and consumption. The predominance and consistency of these paradigms of violence, sacredness, and consumption and their questioning attitude indicates their subversiveness. Individual authors perceive certain qualities and suggest these in order to subvert the mass perception and to raise a questioning awareness of the automobile's effect upon culture.

However, to make this argument, I need to theoretically ground how I frame the automobile within literature and how I then critique that framed space and argue it as

subversive. First, I open with a consideration of Roland Barthes' theory of the text as open and dynamic. It is important that I establish the automobile as a text site, so that I can investigate how that text site operates in culture and literature. Phenomenology also aids my argument's development. I integrate Wolfgang Iser's argument for virtual texts and suggest the automobile as its own virtual text, as a meaningful site existing in play between writer (inside/work) and reader (outside/world). Next, I include the Marxist assertion of the inherent and inseparable relationship between the social/material world and the world of ideas, for this begins to draw connections between the material automobile and its incorporation (reproduction) within literature. I then narrow my work to its object-oriented focus—the automobile. I especially rely upon Wayne C. Booth's arguments about representation in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and show how the American author's attempt to create reality in fiction is yet artifice; as Booth acknowledges, despite a work's appeal to neutrality and verisimilitude, such artifice leaves the author's judgments imprinted upon fiction. I next incorporate the cultural critic's concerns with connections between the material-object world (of which the automobile is one instance) and culture (of which literature is an instance).

I finally arrive at the spatial framing of the automobile in literature. After acknowledging Edmund Husserl and his philosophy of bracketing objects as a way to isolate and properly study them, I necessarily introduce founder Joseph Frank's conception of spatial theory as a means to begin framing [bracketing] the automobile. I then include Northrop Frye's comments on image patterns and their recurrence so that I

might argue for the spatially framed automobile as a recurring image pattern within and across a diversity of American literary works.

Roland Barthes' work importantly defines a text as an open linguistic space that is a site of meaning production. Literary representations, the reader's perception, and the material world interact in this dynamic process. Each plays a part in creating meaning from the car site represented in literature. In "From Work to Text," Roland Barthes asserts that, unlike a work, which Barthes supposes closed, a text is open:

[T]he text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse [...]; or again, *the Text is experienced only in an activity of production* [italics original].  
(1471)

Barthes emphasizes the dynamic quality of a text; the text is an experience and an activity. By treating the car as a text (a site), I am able to investigate *its* activity. Importantly, he adds that a text's "constitutive movement is that of cutting across [...] the work, several works." The car site is a text that achieves exactly this. Cars such as Sinclair Lewis's pre-World War I Gomez-Dep roadster, John Steinbeck's 1930s Hudson, Harry Crews' 1971 Ford Maverick, and John Updike's late-1970s Toyotas do not inherently represent the same object, but an investigation of the car site as a text allows a treatment of these cars *as* similar. Furthermore, interrogation of the car site provides insight into how cars in general influence or reshape perceptions of the material world. Specific makes and models become informative, but are no longer restrictive when

treating the car site as a text. In framing the automobile in literature, I argue for the car as a text site that *moves* within and across “several works.” Moreover, the automobile is a site within the textual activity of producing a response, and what it produces are automotive encounters with violence, sacredness, or consumption.

According to phenomenology, through art (literature), individuals perceive the social and material world. Specifically phenomenology emphasizes the work and the reader’s response to that work as responsible for shaping perceptions of the material world:

Broadly speaking, phenomenology views the work of art as the site for a particularly profound encounter between an individual and both the object-world and, through it, a social world that fashions the object-world and gives it meaning. (Brown 5)

This straight-forward articulation emphasizes the phenomenologist’s conception of literature as a site, a space, which facilitates an individual’s encounter with objects and with the social elements that shape those material-world objects. Pierre Macherey sees literature as a fragmented space. He writes in *A Theory of Literary Production* that one “must [...] realize that the work has no interior, no exterior; or rather its interior is like an exterior, shattered and on display” (96). In contrast, the material depends upon boundaries: the inside of a car, the outside of a house. A car, such as my 2004 Toyota Corolla, exists in a fixed physical space, and it has a clearly demarcated interior and exterior. In literature, that same car does not possess these qualities. While narratives mirror reality and represent Toyota Corollas, such as those Rabbit Angstrom drives in

Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, these cars sites lack the fixed interior/exterior of the cultural object it represents. Updike's Toyota Corolla is a text site "shattered and on display." It demands interpreting. I focus on this "display" of the literary automobile and interrogate how that site is encountered. One question of pursuit thus is: What meaning does an encounter with literary representations of the automobile give its counterpart in the social/material world?

Wolfgang Iser's argument in "Interaction Between Text and Reader" similarly posits literature's influence on the reader's perception of the material world. However, as Iser conceives it, literature is actualized or exists in the borderless space between object (book/writer) and subject (audience/reader): "Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient" (1673). Iser further solicits that "the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to the text" (1673). To stress this important relationship and process, Iser offers his metaphor of a virtual text that exists "between text and reader" and is the result "of an interaction between the two" (1674). For example, readers of *The Great Gatsby* understands Gatsby's car as luxurious and rich. Yet, an interaction with the car site in that novel leads the reader to see Gatsby's ironic relationship with his ostentatious Rolls-Royce, for a reader intuits Gatsby's car as superfluous and understands the car as an attempt to emulate wealth. Reader and text interact, and from that interaction meaning arises. The contradictory images—Gatsby's car as a sign of wealth and its understanding as show—evidence the subversive nature of literature. I explore this interaction between text (inside) and reader (outside). I

primarily focus upon the inside text and examine the meaning given to the automobile within the text, and I then suggest that meaning as projected and necessarily digested by the outside audience. Phenomenology thus allows me to posit meaning as neither emanating from the text nor the reader alone, but rather meaning exists within this interaction.

Marxist theory contradicts the phenomenologist's work because the Marxist believes literature mirrors reality, and Marxism fails to give influential power to literature; instead, it empowers the material world. With this, I disagree. Yet, Marxist theory explicates the material object as a site of activity which *produces* culture, such as literature, and an engagement with Marxism seems necessary in order to explain how or why an object such as the automobile is manipulated in literature. As I argue, the American novel contests the material world's influence by subverting the material world's perception of the car as beneficial to culture. While the automobile is a material object-site that influences the American novel, the material car does not shape its narrative text site. Instead, literature subverts that site's material-world dynamic qualities. Thus, while the American novel may mirror America's love for cars in a novel such as Crews' *Car*, the novel's satire contests the material-world perspective of cars.

Marxism demonstrates the malleable and borderless quality of literature, and it interrogates the production of material goods, such as the automobile, and emphasizes the relationship between material capital production and other modes of production, such as literature. This is an important concepts in a study of the material object—the automobile. For example, understanding the iconic, cultural power of the material-world

Ford Maverick helps explain Herman Mack's desire to eat one in *Car*. Without that influential material-world perspective, the novel would lose its own power; its narrative weight would lessen, or certainly differ. Consider, for example, the kind of novel *Car* would become if Crews substituted a Pinto for the Maverick. The meaning would change. The material-world influences an understanding of the Maverick as Crews represents it.

Regarding this influence, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels posit how the material influences and affects the "production of ideas," which includes literature. In *The German Ideology*, they write,

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior. (768)

Through Marx and Engels, a line of thinking emerges that begins to question the material world's influence upon the world of ideas. In his "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx further clarifies the material's influence upon the immaterial production of ideas such as writing; he asserts, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness" (775). Thus as Marx has it, material is *more* influential upon man's ideas than ideas are upon the material. To grant some validity to this assertion, the novel's subversion has failed to curb America's consumption of cars, so it may seem that

the material stamps a greater mark upon literature than the reverse, for each year, car ownership increases exponentially. Yet, subversion is not meant to necessarily effect change. Subversion simply challenges popular expectations; it reverses and inverts cultural patterns. Hence, in Crews' attempt to demonstrate America's rampant consumption of cars (America's *pattern* of consuming cars), he writes a novel about a man eating—consuming—a car.

While modifying Marx's approach, György Lukács similarly argues for an inherent relationship between the novelist and the material world. In "Realism in the Balance," Lukács asserts his firm belief in the realist novel as a means to unveil the social world. The novelist, Lukács argues, must "grasp [...] reality as it truly is" and represent it in the work so that the world's social and material elements are revealed. He adds,

The profundity of the great realist, the extent and endurance of his success, depends in great measure on how clearly he perceives—as a creative writer—the true significance of whatever phenomenon he depicts. (1037)

Thus according to Lukács, the novelist's digestion of and then representation of the material world in literature mirrors reality, thereby offering a picture of the material and social forces molding that reality. Lukács furthers Marx's belief in the material world as a shaping force upon the author of ideas and posits how the author must necessarily return the material world to it through prose. While I acknowledge the material world as a force in shaping the authors' perception of the automobile, I more importantly argue for the authors' representations of the automobile as owning its own power to subvert

culture's estimation of it. The Marxist perspective fails to grant the author the power that I give. Marxism importantly highlights the bond between material world and literature, but its philosophy is too restrictive and fails to acknowledge literature's own influential power over the material world. For example, although *Car* depends upon the material-world perspective regarding the Ford Maverick and the Cadillac, the novel ultimately overthrows the position that such luxury vehicles provide fulfillment.

At the heart of this study is the problem of *how* the automobile is represented in fiction. This issue of representation dates back to the ancient philosophers and perhaps the first recognized critic, Plato. For Plato, imitation, or mimesis, is the root of representation. As Plato writes in Book X of *The Republic*, the poet "cannot make what *is*, but only some semblance of existence"; he goes on to assert that one "may fairly designate [the poet] as the imitator of what others make" (32). Thus, to apply it to this study, if Henry Ford makes the Model T, then in *A Death in the Family* James Agee is merely imitating through language what Ford has already made. That imitation, as I argue, is a site. Plato's salient point, however, comes a few lines later when he writes that "the imitator is a long way off the truth" (32). My study interrogates this "truth" in literary imitations (representations) of the automobile. It asks exactly how true literary representations of the automobile are, and it discovers that these representations conflict with mass perceptions, particularly as they deal with the social issues of violence, sacredness, and consumption.

Similar to Plato, Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* reminds the reader that fiction is merely the "*illusion of reality*," yet Booth insists that, despite the fact that

“reality is so many things,” “the illusion that genuine life has been presented” should persist in fiction (43-44). Certainly, a line can be seen from Plato’s *mimesis* to Booth’s *illusion*. Both emphasize fiction as language based. Consequently, representations of cars are based in language and are suggestively mimetic and illusive. Language provides the illusion of characters owning real cars, but, ultimately, this language site is, well, an illusion. In fiction, the illusion of reality can be manipulated, while still pretending to maintain fidelity to it. In some cases, the manipulation is subtle—Crews’ Ford Maverick is represented like a real Maverick—or in other cases, the manipulation is more extreme—the Carrara marble that inlays Eric Packer’s white limousine in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* is rather unrealistic. As another example of this manipulation, consider the Hudson in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, meant to imitate the car driven during the 1930s dust-bowl crisis. As I show in chapter 3, Steinbeck manipulates his representation of a 1930s Hudson to suggest the car as sacred to the Joad family. Ultimately, Steinbeck undermines the positive experience of a sacred object and, instead, details the Hudson as a veritable trap from which the Joads cannot escape. While they yearn to find work and establish another home site, the Hudson remains their home throughout the novel.

Booth hardens the problem of reality as illusion by highlighting the author’s influential voice in fiction. He explains the great difficulty in eliminating the author’s voice from fiction, writing, “Everything he *shows* will serve to *tell*; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one” (20). He further explains, “Whatever verisimilitude a work may have always operates within a larger artifice; each

work that succeeds is natural—and artificial—in its own way” (59). Despite its often “natural” representation, the fictionalized automobile is indeed an artificial representation. Booth ultimately concludes that “that author’s voice is never really silenced” and that “the author’s judgement is always present” (60, 20). As I argue, the authors’ voices are critical of the automobile and their judgement is questioning. While appealing to verisimilitude in representations of the automobile, American fiction’s artifice subverts the mass perception.

The cultural turn in critical thinking often offers itself as an extension of Marxist thought, for the cultural critic—of which I include myself—investigates how meaning is made, produced, and/or disseminated by cultural/material objects. Or for a more frank and distilled overview of cultural criticism, John Storey writes, “A primary interest of cultural studies is the investigation of how people make culture from and with the commodities made available by the capitalist industries” (221). Significantly, cultural theory investigates culture as an intersecting and criss-crossing network of systems. Understanding the automobile as an object within a cultural system of exchange and (re)production is necessary in order that I might press how an author’s perception of the automobile informs a cultural understanding of it. Importantly, the automobile is exactly where American culture intersects. Regardless of race or creed, Americans aspire to own cars and more cars. Literature, however, responds to a cultural ideology regarding perceptions of the automobile, but, instead of reinforcing this perception, fiction subverts it.

Stephen Greenblatt's "Culture" opens critical avenues to the "use of culture for the study of literature," and he argues that an "awareness of culture as a complex whole can help us to recover that sense [of the past] by leading us to reconstruct the boundaries upon whose existence the works were predicated" (478). More importantly, Greenblatt suggests culture as a "network" of various "systems" which are linked to produce a "culture's narrative" (480-81). He further argues for the "great writers" as "specialists in cultural exchange" (481). "They take symbolic materials from one zone of culture," he writes, "and move them to another augmenting their emotional force, altering their significance, [...and] changing their place in a larger social design" (481). Thus, this study suggests the automobile as a cultural object which writers have altered (through subversion), and it seeks to uncover the changed significance of the automobile site. For example, the Mercedes in Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* means something different from another material-world Mercedes. In *Humboldt's Gift*, the Mercedes means money and prestige, as in the material world, but it also communicates a relationship between two feuding characters. In order to get back at Charles, Rinaldo attacks his Mercedes. This Mercedes is dynamic; the automobile site suggests the Mercedes as a fulcrum in the two's financial relationship. *Humboldt's Gift* is subversive by questioning Charles's bond with the Mercedes and by further suggesting his vulnerability *through* the car.

Regarding material objects in general, many texts present the object as characteristically human, as anthropomorphic. Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* recognizes this fact about objects, for the subtle dynamic of Baudrillard's argument is the emotional and psychological closeness between humans and their possessions.

Suggesting objects as a barometer of human emotion—a position which effectively “anthropomorphizes” the object—Baudrillard writes that humans and objects “are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value—what might be called a ‘presence.’” (14). *The System of Objects* then sets out to delineate the functional value of an object against its aesthetic (read “emotional”) value, and Baudrillard enlists manmade products such as household furniture, antique clocks, and, yes, the automobile. Cars in novels exhibit this emotional value. The example of Charles translating the attack on his car as an attack on him is a case in point.

The material object such as the automobile is a loaded marker which sheds light upon our past, our present, and our future. Arthur Asa Berger, for one, argues for an object’s ability to offer insight into culture and society as well as “human personality and the human psyche”; yet in *Reading Matter: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Material Culture*, Berger admits the difficulty in “reading” objects since they are simultaneously archeological artifacts, indicators of consumer culture, affections of individual tastes and desires (7). However, one way to mediate the problem between various narratives involving differing textual automobiles is to adopt a concept of Edmund Husserl’s, a twentieth century philosopher whose work one admiring critic describes as “perhaps the single most influential philosophical approach in the continent of Europe today [1964], with significant ramifications in practically all intellectual and cognitive disciplines” (Koestumbaum ix). I find Husserl’s idea of bracketing objects insightful and useful for my own application. It offers a way of *framing* the automobile in literature, hence my work’s title, *The Framing of the Automobile in American Literature*. Although Husserl

implemented bracketing as a way to isolate objects and thereby investigate consciousness and the process of perceiving, I extend the concept and suggest the term framing so that I might entirely surround the object and then interrogate that space contained within the frame; it is a space which necessarily also frames or houses the automobile. The approach is spatial and importantly shifts the viewpoint of the car from an object that contains space—the position which previous studies such as Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach's *In the Driver's Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Culture* and Roger N. Casey's *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature* choose—to an object that is contained within space, my site of analysis.

Ultimately, spatial theory (re)focuses the car as a contained material object instead of treating the object as its own container. The question then becomes, “What is the car doing *in* the text?” as opposed to, “What is the car doing *to* the text?” It is a subtle but important shift in perspective. In “Spatial Form and Modern Literature,” Joseph Frank suggests the concept of “word-groups”—an idea he derives from Ezra Pound's imagism—to explain the repetition of patterns and images which recycle in narrative. The “word-groups,” Frank writes, “must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously because their meaning is not temporal” (14); they serve to unify “disparate ideas and emotions” that are “presented spatially in an instant of time” (11). This study argues for the representation of the automobile as its own framed image or “word-group.” It extends Frank's argument and applies spatial concepts to a body of work—twentieth century American literature—and to a single image—the automobile. To clarify the parameters of the textual automobile as a word-group, this study includes

instances where the automobile is textualized as horseless carriage, automobile, car, motor-car, truck, or in some fewer cases bus. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, for example, contains references to cars, trucks, and buses, and each I consider an instance of the framed automobile, for I treat each as a recurring image or pattern.

Significantly, in addition to Frank's concept of spatial theory, my approach also borrows from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* whose concept of archetypes as recurring patterns in literature is spatial. Frye comments that recurrence is a thing that "seems to be fundamental to all works of art" and that it can be spoken of as patterns "when it is spread in space" (79). While Frank's concept of spatial form assumes the image static and confined to a single text, much as an image in a poem, such a restriction frustrates an explanation of the different representations of the automobile in texts of varying chronology. Therefore, combining Frye's concept of recurrence with Frank's concept of "word-groups" offers a means to understand the automobile in literature as its own whole, instead of as individual instances from text to text. While this treatment requires framing particular instances of the automobile in specific texts, it yet emphasizes their developing meaning through time and through various works, and furthermore, it retains a fidelity to common and repeated appropriations of the textual and spatialized automobile. In this way, conclusions about the automobile as a word-group image can be drawn.

To explain, authors writing the automobile may not seem to *mean* the same automobile, nor may they seem to appropriate the automobile to the same ends in their texts, but I find that a congruency emerges in their representations of the car. For

example, while the stretched limousine in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* may not seem to mean the same thing as the 1971 Ford Mustang in Harry Crew's *Car*, as I argue, each fictional representation uses the car as a site of consumption: Eric Packer consumes goods, while Herman Mack consumes an actual car. Furthermore, these representations of the car are subversive as they *subvert* the mass perception of the car and raise questions about the automobile's importance to American culture. Taken as a whole, the body of twentieth century American literature presses a consensus that questions the car's value to American society.

Another way to perhaps consider the spatial automobile is to consider Jerome Klinkowitz's approach to scene in "The Novel as Artifact: Spatial Form in Contemporary Fiction." Klinkowitz isolates setting as "one of the key ingredients in spatial form fiction," and he favors setting because of its limited temporal restraints and especially because, in most fiction, setting repeats (42). So, too, the automobile as narrative scene also repeats. In his argument, Klinkowitz treats the house in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* as a symbolic space. He contends, "Characterization is secondary to the house's pervasive influence," and he describes the action as "recurrent," remarking that because the setting is continuous and occurs "within such strictly limited bounds" the effect is "spatial" with characters coming and going, to and from the same scene (42). Similarly, Tami Olson examines "the room" in the writing of Henry David Thoreau, E. E. Cummings, and John Barth. She posits the authors' transformation of "these containers" into open and spiritually free spaces (18). Importantly, Klinkowitz and Olsen maintain a focus on the house and room as material objects contained in narrative space. Likewise, I

argue from the viewpoint of the motor vehicle as framed in narrative space. As I indicate above, I find this space to be dynamic. Encounters with this space (this site) are necessarily encounters with violence, sacredness, and/or consumption.

Another reason for the creation of these paradigms is the simple fact that the problem of reading the car in American literature (or any object, for that matter) is a thorny one. Making the situation of reading the object even more complex, the automobile is endlessly complicated, and the difficulty of interpreting the automobile in literature increases as one shifts historical periods or acknowledges the different makes and models authors reference. This study addresses this problem and demonstrates how the car is represented with a certain consistency in the American novel. Furthermore, I offer a non-restrictive method for investigating representations of the automobile in other forms of media. It is important to study the car because cars predominate in American life. If Jay Gatsby, Herman Mack, and Rabbit Angstrom do not who they are without cars, what comment is made regarding America's relationship to cars? By highlighting literature's representations of the car, perhaps an understanding of its complex influence upon culture can begin.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AUTOMOBILE AS A SITE OF VIOLENCE

#### 2.1: Introduction

In this first application chapter of the spatial study of the automobile in literature, I examine the automobile in the beginning the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, the car was an occasionally visible curiosity, but by the eve of World War II, it had become an object of almost complete cultural saturation. John B. Rae, in his study *The Road and the Car in American Life*, testifies to the dramatic proliferation of the car between the years 1900-1940. In 1900, the ratio of cars to people was one car for every 9,500 persons; by 1940, one car was registered for every 4.8 persons (50).

Furthermore, the automobile industry employed less than a thousand persons in 1900 while by 1940, more than 205,000 were involved in automobile production (*Historical Statistics* 2:244). The American novel reflected America's increasing use of cars by representing them in fiction. In some cases, the novel was even about the car, Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919) and its depiction of Claire driving cross-country, for example.

The novels I include in this section represent the two decades between the wars. Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) provide a rich and nuanced examination of the car as a site of violence. Each novel does not represent this violence in the same manner, for the type of violence differs in degree and approach within each

novel. By demonstrating the effect within these works, I intend to suggest how other works work may similarly represent the car. For example, parallels exist in Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) as both show an ambivalence to the automobile's intrusion into the rural setting. Likewise, a line of similarity can be drawn between the car accident in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) and the several accidents in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Even restricting examples to the same author reveals similarities in representations of the car. For example in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, the novels' characters consider the car as a luxury object that promises an escape from their hard-scrabble tenant farmer lifestyle; also, in both novels, the car transports the rural misfits to the urban city where comic misfortune befalls them. Yet, the automobile in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tobacco Road* is more central to the narrative than in *Main Street*, *An American Tragedy*, or *God's Little Acre*, and, in consequence, the chosen novels are more ripe for comment and demonstration. In fact, I choose *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tobacco Road* because the automobile is central to their storylines. These novels provoke a nuanced discussion of the ways that cars are sites of violence in American fiction.

Following the automobile's introduction into American society, ambivalence followed. The literature of this period reflects this uncertain spirit. Thus, a novel such as Lewis's *Free Air* (1919) narrates the benefits of travel that the car allowed,<sup>1</sup> while other

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<sup>1</sup> *Free Air*, however, fails to paint a completely positive portrait of the automobile as the car continually breaks down on the cross-country journey. In addition to being critical of the general mechanical defects of the new automotive technology, *Free Air* also makes an equally critical comment upon the poor road conditions and an inability to keep up with the automobile's proliferation.

works like Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* seize upon the inherent problems that accompanied the automobile's new technology. Yet, the image that Tarkington's and Fitzgerald's fiction produces dominates. In fiction between 1918-1939, cars are represented as violent. Cars antagonize, crash, wreck, and kill; cars also confuse a person's financial judgment. By being so violent, American fiction subverts a dominant, more favorable perception of the automobile. American fiction recognizes cars as sites of violence, and cars facilitate violent experiences. American literature inflates the violent tendencies of the car in order to be critical of its growth within culture.

Of course, this word violence is a loaded term. Sociologist H. G. Haupt acknowledges the thorny nature of defining violence, for the author states, "The definitions of violence are as varied as its manifestations" (24:16197). The American novel communicates an automobile whose violence is psychological, physical, and metaphorical. Psychological violence permeates Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* as George Amberson resists the automobile; physical violence exists in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* via the several car wrecks narrated; and physical, as well as, metaphorical violence is found in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, for the novel contains car crashes and car fatalities, and, additionally, the characters' relationships to the automobile highlight problems in the American socio-economic structure, hence a metaphorical communication of violence. In each novel, however, the violence serves different ends. For example, in *The Magnificent Ambersons* the car and its violence highlight George's resistance to change; *The Great Gatsby* employs violence to display

the characters' decadence and their carelessness; and *Tobacco Road* uses violence to illuminate the characters' extreme destitution.

Yet, the common ground in these novels is that, in each novel, this violence is presented as public spectacle. Automobile encounters and automobile collisions occur in publicly accessible spaces—streets, driveways, roadways, highways, and front yards. In *Tobacco Road*, for example, the young daughter Ellie May witnesses family members fighting over a car, and the argument results in the unfortunate death of her grandmother. While the automobile is indeed a privately owned property, it penetrates into public space. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the American novel softened the positive benefits of automobile ownership and instead dramatized the violent consequences of this new technology. In preying upon a public's willingness (and secret desire) to watch the automobile's display of violence, the American novel shows cars that chase characters down, run them over, and kill them. These actions are sites of violence. These sites of violence, ultimately, question the automobile's effect upon culture.

## **2.2: The Automobile as a Symbol of Change in Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons***

Although Booth Tarkington may be, as Keith J. Fennimore claims in his book-length study of the author, "the subject of deep silence among academicians" (7), two features of his *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) make Tarkington a satisfying beginning for this analysis: (1) he is a realist and (2) this realist novel effectively chronicles the automobile from its early invention to its proliferation in American city

life. Perhaps even his steadfast devotion to “Howellsian realism” in a time when modernism flourished, which Fennimore blames for his slide from critical attention (8), is that feature which makes Tarkington ideally suited for a literary examination of the automobile in narrative. While a primary tenet of realism is to produce an “accurate, unromanticized observation of life and nature,” Howells’ realism necessitated that a writer’s dramatic narration be especially mimetic and neutral (Sundquist 502, 504). Furthermore, the realist novel required an author’s voice to be “muted in the interests of the reader’s more direct engagement with the story,” and the realist movement stipulated that an author should “withdraw from overt manipulation and interpretation of the story” so that “the events and characters appeared to be objectively ‘shown’ to the reader” (Baldick 161).

Tarkington’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* with its depiction of the dawning days of the automobile industry does not aim to revise that narrative history, but it instead intends to provide an accurate and mimetic depiction of it. *The Magnificent Ambersons* offers a novel in which cultural and literary history are meant to be nearly synonymous terms. *The Magnificent Ambersons* depicts the American society’s hesitation in adopting the automobile and, conversely, that new technology’s quick proliferation and integration into the American world. Thus *The Magnificent Ambersons* suggests itself as a transparent lens that views the automobile in its incipient moment at the turn of the twentieth century. It produces a polarized narrative that simultaneously dramatizes one man’s belief in automotive technology and another’s resistance to it. Yet, despite Tarkington’s appeal to those who support the automobile, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is

not elusive about where its ideology rests; Tarkington is especially suspicious and critical of the automobile. The dominant representation of the automobile in *The Magnificent Ambersons* is violent and subversive.

Of course, by narrating from the perspective of George Amberson—a hostile opponent to the automobile—the novel necessarily produces a violent automobile, one that serves as antagonist to the protagonist. I take my application of the term violence from James R. Giles comments in his literary study *The Spaces of Violence*, in which he claims that violence can be a “concept of behavior” that is “conscious or unconscious” (4). Tarkington does not reveal whether George’s reaction to the automobile is conscious or unconscious, but his violence is behavioral, for the novel highlights George’s resistance to the automobile and the change it represents.

The violence this creates is not overt or even especially physical. It is subtle and psychological; it is a hostile force that endlessly nettles and disturbs the novel’s main character. Unlike the observable violence such as evidenced by car wreck scenes in *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby*, the automobile in *The Magnificent Ambersons* induces a mental violence. The automobile in *The Magnificent Ambersons* recognizes the psychological struggle (the mental violence) that turn-of-the twentieth century America endured in embracing new automotive technology. Some people, like Lucy and Eugene Morgan, immediately adopted the automobile, while others, like George, resisted until its dominance had been made evident, or perhaps inevitable. Or, as Fennimore states in his commentary on the novel: “To one, [change] may come as a welcome step toward a brighter future; to another, as an alarming threat to comfortable security” (59).

The automobile as object-antagonist thus is a conceit throughout the novel. I argue that its appearance creates a tension that results in George's violent behavior. Tarkington recycles this motif such that it can be mapped along a narrative design that begins with George's first encounter with the automobile, which then follows through several other violent engagements with this antagonist, and which closes with the antagonist literally and figuratively running over its adversary, George Amberson. The paragraphs below illuminate the automobile as a site of violence in Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, they further argue for this violence as an indicator of, or a reaction against, the change that the automobile engenders. I begin by looking at George's strong predilection for horses and argue for these images as a binary contrast to the growing presence of automobiles. I next trace the automobile as an antagonistic motif throughout the novel and suggest the automobile and its inventor, Eugene Morgan, as antagonists to George Amberson and the horse-driven vehicles he prefers. Specifically, as the central object of conflict, the automobile is accompanied by tension, quarrels, and dramatic discord—all of which highlight the cultural change the automobile brought to America.

Before moving forward in outlining the automobile as a violent narrative mechanism, I wish to momentarily pause and comment upon the novel's use of horseless carriage, as opposed to the now more customary automobile, for Tarkington's novel makes use of this outdated phrase. The two words alone locate the narrative's opening setting to the turn of the twentieth century when horseless carriage was then a preferred term for the new invention. In fact, America's first exclusive automotive magazine was

titled *The Horseless Age*. Beginning publication in 1895—ironically the same year in which Patricia W. Lipski locates the earliest known application of the term automobile (176)—the magazine finally folded in 1918, thereby effectively sentencing the phrase horseless carriage to certain obsolescence. Americans instead adopted the preferred automobile, which, in its fusion of auto and mobile, emphasizes it as, unlike the horse, a vehicle of self-propelled movement.

Tarkington's novel chronicles America's formal adoption of the term automobile, for Aunt Fanny writes a letter to George and states that Eugene Morgan "will soon begin to build his factory here for the manufacture of *automobiles*, which he says is a term he prefers to 'horseless carriages'" (75). Tarkington italicizes automobiles in order to highlight Aunt Fanny's emphasis upon the word's novelty and acceptance, while her letter points to the inventors, such as Eugene, as reason for the word's eventual integration into the American lexicon.

The horseless carriage/automobile is first mentioned in the opening ballroom sequence where George meets Lucy Morgan, Eugene Morgan's fetching daughter. Here George also confronts the visible cue for the changing social tradition—the horseless carriage. As George and Lucy grow acquainted, George inquires about her father's occupation. Lucy answers, "He's an inventor," adding that lately "he's been working on a new kind of horseless carriage" (45). Of course, the novel depicts Eugene and his horseless carriage as representatives of the shifting social traditions against which George struggles; thus, George's interest in and desire for Lucy is consistently checked as she, too, is an antagonistic delegate of the coming age of the horseless carriage. This scene

effectively condenses this motif, for George's reaction to Lucy solidifies his staunch opposition to the horseless carriage—"Well. I'm sorry for him [...]. Those things are never going to amount to anything." The tension created by his unforgiving opinion is lightened by Lucy's sarcastic reply: "Papa'd be so grateful [...] if he could have your advice" (45).

Consistently, George positions himself against the automobile and its inventor, Eugene Morgan. In establishing George and Eugene's opposition, Tarkington highlights George's strong preference for horses and horse-driven transportation. For example, in his first outing with Lucy, George necessarily commands a "fast cutter" while Lucy rides astride, looking "so charming" in her "rich little hat" and her black coat and muff (53). In this same outing, the couple passes George's grandfather's farm, and George oddly criticizes his grandfather for his aged horses which have become a "disgrace, all shaggy—not ever clipped" (54). The comment especially highlights George's belief that spending more money and time in grooming younger horses a wiser investment than anything else; in fact, George doesn't even acknowledge the automobile as an alternative for replacing aging horses.

As the novel progresses, George continues to express his predilection for horses and his contempt for automobiles. In one scene, he vocalizes his keen desire "to extend his proficiency" in learning "to drive a four-in-hand," but the Major quickly dismisses George's request, deeming the tandem too "dangerous to drive" and too much responsibility for young Georgie, as the Major calls him (124-25). Tarkington increases the antagonism in the scene by having his mother suggest an automobile as a

replacement: “Instead of a tandem,” Isabel says, “wouldn’t it interest you to get one of Eugene’s automobiles?” (126). George, of course, vehemently objects and calls the automobiles “dirty little things” that constantly break down and require “always lying down on your back in the mud” to repair them. While this scene emphasizes George’s distaste for the automobile, the argument that it precipitates also highlights George’s resistance to change, a point that he admits when he says, “I suppose I’m a little old-fashioned and fastidious, but I’m afraid being a sort of engine driver never will appeal to me” (127).

Invariably, scenes of George and his horses are interrupted by Eugene and his horseless carriage. The novel presents several encounters where protagonist and antagonistic object clash in acts of subtle violence, and each functions to portray George’s resistance to change. In one scene, George tours Lucy around on his horse-driven sleigh, and the couple encounters Lucy’s father and his horseless carriage. George challenges Eugene Morgan and the horseless carriage by demonstrating to Lucy the quick agility of his horse and sleigh. Lucy, however, grows concerned at their excessive speed of “almost twenty miles an hour,” but instead of slowing down, George flaunts their hasty clip, stating, “That’s nothing [...]. He can trot under three minutes, all right”; George further chides, “I suppose your father thinks he can build a horseless carriage to go that fast” (52). Taking issue with George’s opinion, Lucy defends, “They go that fast already, sometimes,” but not to be outdone, George counters, “Yes, [...] they do—for about a hundred feet! Then they give a yell and burn up” (52-53). At this point, Lucy decides “not to defend her father’s faith in horseless carriages” and, allowing the argument to die,

the two ride along in silence (53). Importantly, Tarkington fills this quiet with a descriptive passage that relates a wintertime image of playful peace where boys and girls dart around on their sleighs, chasing one another with their “soggy mittens” and snow-doused coats (53). Tarkington’s presentation of a bucolic countryside conveys an image that is calm and pacific; the scene reflects of George’s belief in such a landscape, one significantly untainted by the horseless carriage. To George, the scenery is the very thing that the automobile threatens to upset.

Of course the pastoral tranquility is soon violated by the “panting and chugging” of a horseless carriage. Destined to “spoil all their sleigh-time merriment” (53), a violent tension accompanies the automobile’s appearance.<sup>2</sup> In this scene Tarkington is especially critical of the automobile. Writing from George’s viewpoint, he describes the horseless carriage as “cumbrous with unwholesome excrescences fore and aft” that soil the pristine white snow, while the several belts spinning underneath the carriage noisily “whirred and howled” (53). Children taunt the vehicle and its driver (necessarily Eugene Morgan) crying—“Git a hoss! Git a hoss! [...] Mister, why don’t you git a hoss?” George especially displays his disdain for Eugene and the horseless carriage by not only rebuking Eugene’s cheerful countenance, but by also parading his sleigh’s capacity to outrun the horseless carriage, which is only able to go a rough “twelve miles an hour” (53). The scene’s observable violence, however, occurs when George overturns his trotter, an event that tosses George and Lucy “together in a bank of snow” (59).

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<sup>2</sup> Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) presents a similar scene, but it favors the automobile over rural snow games. Lewis writes, “It was so rich-looking to sit and drive—and so easy. Skiing and sliding were ‘stupid’ and ‘old-fashioned’ (92).

Importantly, Tarkington suggests the accident as caused by the automobile's appearance, for the automobile incites George to behave irrationally. He urges his horses to gallop too quickly and thus uncontrollably past the now broken-down automobile, which as Tarkington cleverly puts it "had decided to need a horse" (59). More importantly, the passage foreshadows the horse-driven vehicle eventually being "overturned" by the horseless carriage. While the accident does not result in a permanent injury, the scene yet suggests the automobile as a harbinger of change, one that is "upsetting" to those who resist it such as George. In his study of Booth Tarkington, Fennimore puts it succinctly when, in describing George's reaction to the automobile, he writes, "Change is always hardest for the established" (68).

It is, however, Tarkington's language that especially suggests the horse-powered vehicles as a peaceful contrast to the particularly devilish automobiles. Consider Tarkington's style in his description of the night landscape:

A rising moon was bright upon the tops of the shade trees, where their branches met overhead [...]; and through this darkness flashed the firefly lights of silent bicycles gliding by in pairs and trios—or sometimes a dozen at a time might come, [...] striking their bells [...]. Surreys rumbled lightly by, with the plod-plod of honest old horses, and frequently there was the glitter of whizzing spokes from a runabout or a sporting buggy, and the sharp, decisive hoof-beats of a trotter. (136)

The scene connotes the naturalistic, untroubled, and undisturbed quality of the cityscape scene; additionally, Tarkington infuses the scene with various non-motorized vehicles. In addition to the bicycles with their "little bells," Tarkington also includes surreys,

runabouts, buggies, and trotters that are driven by their “honest old horses.” Certainly, the connotation is positive and favorable. In contrast, Tarkington narrates the arrival of an automobile as follows:

Then, like a cowboy shooting up a peaceful camp, a frantic devil would hurtle out of the distance, bellowing, exhaust racketing like a machine gun gone amok—and at these horrid sounds the surreys and buggies would hug the curbstone, and the bicycles scatter to cover, cursing; while children rushed from the sidewalks to drag pet dogs from street. The thing would roar by, leaving a long wake of turbulence; then the indignant street would quiet down for a few minutes—til another came. (136)

Forgiving his mixed metaphors (cowboys and gangsters), the image provided is indeed one of violence, for in personifying the automobile, Tarkington suggests the peaceful town and its “natives” as under attack from an unwelcome, gun-wielding intruder—the automobile. Importantly, the automobile itself, the object inherent, is *not* necessarily violent, but the author narrates it as so. Furthermore, Tarkington’s juxtaposition of the contrasting passages (the quiet, bucolic cityscape against the rambunctious automobile attack) additionally suggests the automobile’s presence as unwanted and undesired.

However, it is not until the novel’s concluding scene that the narrative finally witnesses the automobile winning out over George Amberson, who has gone from riches to rags. As Tarkington writes, “Fate had reserved for him the final insult of riding him down under the wheels of one of those juggernauts at which he had once shouted ‘Git a hoss!’” (254). Even more insulting is that George is not run down by “a big and swift and momentous car such as Eugene manufactured,” but instead by “a specimen of the

hustling little type that was flooding the country, the cheapest, commonest, hardiest little car ever made” (254). I infer that Tarkington intends a Ford here, for it was the cheapest car with the greatest mass distribution. The accident effectively ends the back-and-forth antagonism that persists throughout the novel, and as the most observably violent act within *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the accident demonstrates the automobile’s triumph over the nay-sayer George Amberson. That George is run down by America’s most popular automobile further highlights his futile resistance to it. Although George lives through the event, the point prevails that the battle between horse and horseless is over; change is inevitable. Even more telling in teasing out this observation is that George is run down as a pedestrian; indeed, for the first time in the novel, he, too, is horseless. This novel’s final violence implies George’s failure in opposing the automobile and his inability to resist inevitable change.

George’s reaction to the automobile was not an uncommon one for those living in the early twentieth century, for many Americans initially resisted automobiles. In a 1908 newspaper editorial, for example, Frederick Dwight complains to law officials about automobiles. He writes, “High-powered cars might with greater logic be regarded as morphine and cocaine are,” and Dwight argues that “cars capable of a harmful speed should not be allowed except under special conditions—as, for example, upon highways devoted to them exclusively as are railway tracks to trains” (304). Citizens like Dwight viewed the automobile as an antagonist to their horse-driven way of life, and they wished that it were banned from the city streets and relegated to single-purpose thoroughfares. Yet, this did not happen. Contrary to George’s opinion in the novel that the car would

never amount to anything, even by 1918, when Tarkington published *The Magnificent Ambersons*, it *had* amounted to something.

### **2.3: A Novel of Careless Drivers: The Automobile in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby***

In his article “The Dream Machine: Fitzgerald and the Automobile,” Kenneth G. Johnston’s scholarship illuminates exactly how prevalent automobiles are in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s oeuvre. In addition to spotting their use in three of his five major novels—*This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender is the Night* (1934)—Johnston finds cars an intricate part of several of Fitzgerald’s short stories as well. Thus, Fitzgerald rightly makes for a good fit in this spatial study of the literary automobile. While cars assume an especially prominent role in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald amplifies their propensity toward violence ends, making his narrative especially critical of their effect upon culture. He appeals to the dominant perception of the automobile’s glamour, but subverts that perspective by displaying its adverse effects, especially regarding vehicular fatality.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work, I observe several similar trends between his and Tarkington’s use of automobiles. Perhaps the most obvious is the use of the car accident—a narrative appropriation that, as noted above, gives a violent timbre to the work. Interestingly, both Tarkington in *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) write the violent car crash as their respective novel’s climactic turning point; narrative tension and exposition precedes the event, while falling action

and denouement follows it. I can only conclude that both writers saw something inherently powerful in this trope. Another motif that Fitzgerald adopts in *The Great Gatsby* and that Tarkington similarly uses in *The Magnificent Ambersons* is the tension created by opposing automobiles with horses. I need not retrace Tarkington's effective use of this device, but Fitzgerald's is an oft-overlooked element to the intricately wrought design of *The Great Gatsby*. Just as George Amberson and his care of horses is set against Eugene Morgan and his automobile, so Tom Buchanan's equestrian hobby contrasts Jay Gatsby and his readily identifiable cream-colored Rolls-Royce.

Regarding Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, I propose establishing the following arguments: (1) that the automobile wreck as a literary device, while making an early appearance in *This Side of Paradise*, returns to be a dominant motif within *The Great Gatsby*; (2) that Fitzgerald counterpoises Tom and Gatsby by associating Tom with horses while identifying Gatsby with his automobile; and (3) that the novel incorporates "bad drivers" as a metaphor for interpreting the novel's "careless" characters (187). I further argue that the violence in these situations highlights the characters' decadence. In this way, Fitzgerald subverts the dominant perception by being critical of the automobile.

The car crash motif as it occurs in Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, informs its similar narration in *The Great Gatsby*. The automotive violence in *The Side of Paradise* likewise highlights the carelessness and decadence of that novel's character. Moreover, both novels posit alcohol as the accident's cause. The automobile accident motif enters *This Side of Paradise* rather early, for after only a few pages into the novel, the main character—Amory Blaine—creates a fictitious accident to explain his tardiness

to the waiting Miss Myra. After Myra expresses her agitation at being forced to wait—“Well—you *got* here, *anyways*”—the quick-witted Amory defends, “Well—I’ll tell you. I guess you don’t know about the auto accident” (11). Amory’s ruse certainly works, for Myra concernedly questions, “Was any one *killed*?” to which Amory responds, “Oh, no—just a horse—a sorta gray horse” (12). In addition to the episode’s function as a foreshadowing device for the upcoming accident where, indeed, someone *is* killed, the exchange recognizes two points important to grasp for this study of the automobile as a site of violence.

First, by *This Side of Paradise*’s 1920 publication, the horse was a commodity in deep decline. Statistical evidence supports this conclusion, for by 1920 consumers were spending only fourteen million dollars on horse-drawn vehicles while automobiles accounted for more than a billion and half dollars of consumer spending (*Historical Statistics* 3:270). Second, the automobile exhibits a great propensity for accidents and, necessarily, violence. Indeed, the Department of Commerce in 1925, the publication year of *The Great Gatsby*, tabulates 17,427 automobile related fatalities (418). More importantly, this violence is not private, but is public. Thus, Fitzgerald’s inclusion of automobile crashes in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby* reflect the public visibility of automobile accidents, an event that even a decade previously was not considered as commonplace as it had become by the 1920s.

The tragic and violent accident that *This Side of Paradise* relates occurs later in the novel when Amory, now a young scholar at Princeton, witnesses the death of his friend Dick Humbrid. While Fitzgerald may seemingly suggest the randomness of the

event (its *accidental* nature), Dick's inebriation should not be overlooked. Additionally, by reading this episode in tandem with *The Great Gatsby* a trend emerges in Fitzgerald's fiction whereby alcohol is often indicted as the accident's root cause. Thus, the novel suggests the tragedy as less accidental and more an inevitable result of careless and decadent indulgence, a point that *The Great Gatsby* especially presses.

As for the accident in *The Side of Paradise*, the novel omits details of the wreck in much the same manner as Fitzgerald depicts in *The Great Gatsby*. In fact, as if Fitzgerald were testing the waters in *This Side of Paradise* and then later implemented the scenario with greater intensity in *The Great Gatsby*, the two narratives mirror one another: both accidents occur at night, both involve drinking, both are related second-hand; and in both, the main characters (Amory in *This Side of Paradise* and Nick in *The Great Gatsby*) happen upon the scene in separate cars. In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald describes the scene as follows: "Under the full light of a roadside arc-light lay a form, face downward in a widening circle of blood"; "Amory," Fitzgerald continues, "thought of the back of that head—that hair—that hair...and then they turned the form over" (78). After moving Dick into a nearby house, Amory notes that Dick's "brow was cold" and reflects that "it was all so horrible and unaristocratic and close to the earth," and he likens Dick's death to the unsettling image "of a cat that had lain horribly mangled in some alley of his childhood" (79). Because the accident immediately follows a day of drinking and college partying, the violence highlights Dick's decadence as especially represented by his indulgence of alcohol.

In *The Great Gatsby*, however, Fitzgerald increases the automotive violence with the inclusion of more sensational imagery. Nick Carraway describes Myrtle Wilson's death:

Michaelis and this man reached her first but when they had torn open her shirtwaist still damp with perspiration they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. 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)

In addition to heightening the traumatic visibility of the accident, *The Great Gatsby* further increases the narrative violence. For the remainder of the novel, the automobile is simply referred to as "the death car," a label that promotes an image of darkest violence.

While this is the most violent scene in *The Great Gatsby* and while the other accidents in the novel, in serving different ends, are more restrained in their overt presentation of violence, each incident displays the automobile as a site of violence. The novel includes five vehicular accidents. *The Great Gatsby's* first episode of automotive violence occurs when a coupe runs into a ditch outside Gatsby's house. Fitzgerald's narration of the crash employs language that underscores the accident's violence. I quote at length so that Fitzgerald's language effectively conveys the violent context intended:

Fifty feet from the door a dozen headlights illuminated a bizarre and tumultuous scene. In the ditch beside the road, right side up but violently shorn of one wheel, rested a new coupe which had left Gatsby's drive not two minutes before. The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel which was now getting considerable attention from half a

dozen curious chauffeurs. However, as they had left their cars blocking the road a harsh discordant din from those in the rear had been audible for some time and added to the already violent confusion of the scene. (58)

Fitzgerald's two separate uses of "violent" stand out in such a short passage while other vocabulary choices such as "shorn," "sharp jut," and "harsh discordant din" further connote an image of violence. The curious chauffeurs point to the car accident's attraction for voyeurs—readers included—thereby recognizing the moment as public spectacle. Moreover, the accident casts a subtle shadow over Gatsby and his splendidly extravagant lifestyle as it is caused by one of his departing party-goers; also, it must be noted that Daisy's vehicular manslaughter occurs under similar conditions. In order to suggest a trend of automotive violence, *The Great Gatsby* also includes another, similar, incident. Upon departing Gatsby's, Mrs. Ulysses Sweet's automobile runs over the right hand of the heavily intoxicated Ripley Snells (66). Fitzgerald again implies the certain violent consequences of such a decadent lifestyle.

Of the five crashes that the novel recounts, two serve to reveal (and end) Tom's extramarital affairs. The more memorable of these is, of course, Myrtle Wilson's automotive fatality—of which Gatsby's car is its site. No question there: the relationship is indeed over, and violently so. The other episode occurs earlier in the novel, and in this scene, Tom runs "into a wagon" and rips "a front wheel off his car," while his mistress—"one of the chamber maids in the Santa Barbara Hotel" where Tom and Daisy honeymoon—breaks her arm. This results in a newspaper article, which is how Daisy discovers Tom's infidelity (82). That Fitzgerald includes newspaper coverage of the

accident especially recognizes the media's exploitation (and promotion) of automotive violence. Indeed, media coverage can be largely blamed for shaping public perception of automobiles as a site of violence. But for Tom, these automotive disasters figure as his antagonists, thus making the violence done twofold: (1) an observable, physical damage—the chambermaid's broken arm, Myrtle Wilson's death—and (2) a real injury done to Tom's playboy lifestyle—his character is marred, his relationships ended. In this latter observation, Tom's decadence is especially pronounced.

To increase Tom's antagonistic relationship to automobiles, the novel intimates his comfort with and preference for horses. For example, Nick (and the reader) first glimpse Tom "in his riding clothes [...] standing with legs apart on the front porch" (11). Moreover, Nick's description of Tom is curiously suggestive of a horse:

Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage. (11)

Tom and Nick's first conversation concerns stables, for Tom entreats Nick to tour them: "If it's light enough after dinner I want to take you down to the stables" (20). The stables are such a source of pride to Tom that he later brags about them to Gatsby, "I've heard of making a garage out of a stable, [...] but I'm the first man who ever made a stable out of a garage" (125). Gatsby especially plays at their differences when, introducing Tom at a

party, Gatsby calls Tom “the polo player,” a label that clearly offends Tom (111). “I’d rather not be the polo player,” Tom says later in the evening (112). The label, however, further suggests their opposition and, as Gatsby is the owner of a new Rolls-Royce, the division suggests Tom’s outdated horsey-quality.

While Fitzgerald juxtaposes Tom’s predilection for the equestrian with Gatsby and his automobile, Fitzgerald creates other dualisms that reinforce the two characters’ division: Tom is from old money, Gatsby is nouveau rich; Tom marries Daisy, Gatsby does not; Tom goes by his first name, Gatsby by his last—and so on and so forth. As with George Amberson and Eugene Morgan in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the opposition of horse and auto creates a subtle tension. Unlike in Tarkington’s novel, however, the car in *The Great Gatsby* highlights the characters’ decadence. This is most apparent in the novel’s infamous car-switch passages where Tom, in his non-chalant manner, takes command of Gatsby’s car. Here, the understated violence between the two begins erupting, and the car is a surrogate object that they battle over—Daisy being their actual object of dispute. These events precipitate the novel’s ultimate statement of decay and decadence as they conclude with Myrtle’s death.

When Tom first suggests the switch, the idea is, necessarily, immediately “distasteful to Gatsby,” and yet even despite his attempt to prevent the switch—his illogical plea “I don’t think there’s much gas”—Tom still takes command of Gatsby’s “circus wagon” (127-28). As readers of the novel understand, the car switch is an essential plot element; few have questioned its plausibility but have instead accepted the exchange as the fulfillment of Tom’s dominance over Gatsby. After the car switch,

Gatsby never regains control of his Rolls-Royce—a marker of his identity. In fact, even in the impending accident, Gatsby is made subservient to Daisy as the driver.

Similar to Dick Humbrid's fatality in *This Side of Paradise*, this final car crash episode in *The Great Gatsby* suggests a connection between alcohol and automobile smash-ups, for Gatsby and Daisy imbibe alcoholic beverages before departing the Manhattan hotel room and driving toward West Egg. Yet *The Great Gatsby* goes to greater lengths than *This Side of Paradise* to implicate the human element in these automobile accidents. In fact, the novel suggests the "careless driver," a phrase coined by Nick to describe Tom and Daisy, as an over-arching metaphor for interpreting the novel's violence and its characters' decadence.

The idea of the careless driver originates in a conversation between Nick and Jordan Baker, one that necessarily follows Jordan's own automotive accident. As Nick relates it, this conversation begins after Jordan "passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man's coat" (63). Nick accuses Jordan, "You're a rotten driver [...]. Either you ought to be more careful or you oughtn't to drive at all." While Jordan argues that other people will be more careful and "will keep out of [her] way," she more presciently adds, "It takes two people to make an accident." This line lays a subtle judgment upon Tom and Daisy.

The concept of the bad driver returns when, in their Nick and Jordan's final conversation. Jordan inquires, "Oh, and do you remember—[...] a conversation we had once about driving a car?"; "You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? [...] Well, I met another bad driver, didn't I? I mean it was careless of me to

make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person” (186). Drawing out a similar point, Johnston writes that Jordan “sees her relationship with Nick in automotive terms and likens their breakup to a collision between two careless drivers” (48). Jordan obviously intends the conversation as a metaphor, one that, as I contend, Fitzgerald extends to become the novel’s macro-metaphor. Importantly, only a few passages later, Nick makes his memorable critique of Tom and Daisy, one that borrows heavily from his conversations with Jordan and their automotive rhetoric:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—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. (187-88)

Fitzgerald again conjures up the automobile as a violent object—especially considering the connotation “smashed up” provokes—and he applies it as metaphor to describe his main characters. Laurence E. MacPhee further suggests that the automobile metaphor applies aptly to a general interpretation of the 1920s: “Fitzgerald employs the automobile as part of a pattern of images embodying the disorder of the Twenties and, particularly, the chaotic lives of the central characters” (207). While the car is a site of violence in the novel, it especially captures the spirit of *The Great Gatsby*’s careless and decadent characters. Fitzgerald thus uses the car to dual ends: to criticize the automobile’s propensity for violence and to criticize their owner’s careless nature.

The automobile returns at the novel’s conclusion. This time, however, it is damaged and hidden from public view—suggesting a strong link between Gatsby and his

deflated dream. Before entering the pool, Gatsby gives his butler strict instructions that the “open car wasn’t to be taken out under any circumstances.” He then stops in his garage for a “pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests” and observes the “death car” and its front right fender that “needed repair” (169). The image is a visible manifestation of Gatsby’s ride from the wealthy entrepreneur to the desolate and beat-up society cast away. Like Gatsby, his car’s pristine value is marred and defaced. It is also refused safe passage on the city streets, as it will immediately indict Gatsby as complicit in Myrtle’s murder. Wilson’s occupation as a garage mechanic certainly is the deep ironic undertone of these pages as Wilson intends to “repair” the wrong done to Myrtle. Gatsby’s desire to emulate Tom’s wealth and his use of the Rolls-Royce to effect that end turns on him at the novel’s end. The car’s presence in Gatsby’s garage reminds the reader of its prominence in the novel’s violent climax, while Fitzgerald’s graceful touch again teases out the leit-motif of *The Great Gatsby* as a novel whose characters are, indeed, bad drivers.

#### **2.4: Their Only Possession: The Automobile in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road***

In Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1932), the automobile is again a site of violence. However, the violence in *Tobacco Road* is more nuanced, for the automobile is a site of metaphorical and physical violence. The effect is perhaps very similar to that in William Carlos Williams’s “The Young Housewife” (1917), which I analyzed in my introduction. As in “The Young Housewife,” the automobile in *Tobacco Road* communicates a generalized statement about violence—here the violence of being a

destitute tenant farmer in the 1920s—while the work also narrates the automobile as a site of physical violence as, in addition to several crashes, the automobile runs over and kills two characters in the novel.

In Caldwell's attempt "to present the utterly hopeless life of tenant farmers on worn-out soil," as Malcolm Cowley explains, the automobile is a prime symbol of the tenant farmer's extreme destitution. A society's "upper class indifference and blindness" to the tenant farmer's destitution is made apparent in automobile ownership, or, as J.H. Marion, Jr. puts it, the automobile is a "corrupt and degrading influence" upon "the entire social order" (177). This sentiment plays out especially in the scene in which Sister Bessie buys her eight hundred dollar automobile. The salient point, however, is to recognize the automobile as a symbolic site where the divide between upper and lower class is articulated. This clash is, of course, one of subtle, but real violence, as the destitute characters in *Tobacco Road* demonstrate.

Moreover, I argue for Caldwell's representation of the automobile as subversive since it depicts an auto that confuses the characters' priorities and values. Jeeter Lester, for example, thinks that, once fixed, his automobile will provide money and food by allowing him to haul and sell wood. Lester's son, Dude, is also confused by the automobile, for he is persuaded to marry an older, unattractive woman solely because she can afford a new automobile. Further, Sister Bessie blows her meager savings on a car that is quickly destroyed and thus stripped of its worth. Caldwell's grotesque irony implies that the same money could have been applied to feeding the starving family; instead, it is wasted on the purchase of a new automobile. The novel subverts the mass

perception of the automobile and instead questions the automobile's value to America by highlighting its negative effect upon the psychology of destitute individuals. The novel shows characters who think that owning a brand new automobile will save them from poverty, but *Tobacco Road* indicates that this is not so.

Joseph Warren Beach observes that, "In *Tobacco Road* a large part of the story is made up of misadventures with an automobile" (187). Indeed, within the novel, an automobile is bought, driven, wrecked (on several occasions), taken on a road trip that ends disastrously, and then finally, the automobile, almost utterly destroyed, precipitates a family brawl that results in the grandmother's accidental automotive death. These are "misadventures" indeed, and the car is central to them.

Caldwell introduces the automobile early in the novel as a symbol of the Southern tenant farmer's dire poverty. The reader first encounters Jeeter Lester's rusted and broken-down automobile—his yard car—as an image that communicates Lester's extreme poverty. Interestingly, Caldwell's description of Jeeter's house and of his automobile are strikingly similar. Both house and car are in a state of similar disrepair. Jeeter's three-room house:

sat precariously on stacks of lime chips that had been placed under the four corners. [...]. The centre of the building sagged beneath the sills; the front porch had sagged loose from the house, and was now a foot or more lower than it originally was; and the roof sagged in the center where the supporting rafters had been carelessly put together. (7).

Likewise, the car is in a desperate state:

The inner tube Jeeter was attempting to patch again was on the verge of falling into pieces. The tires themselves were in a condition even more rotten. And the Ford car, fourteen years old that year, appeared as if it would never stand together long enough for Jeeter to put the tire back on the wheel [...]. The touring-car's top had been missing for seven or eight years, and the one remaining fender was linked to the body with a piece of baling wire. All the springs and horsehair had disappeared from the upholstery [...].

The appearance of the automobile had not been improved by the dropping off of the radiator in the road [...], and a rusty lard-can with a hole punched in the bottom was wired to the water pipe on top of the engine in its place. [...]. Chickens had roosted on it, [...] and it was speckled like a guinea-hen. (20-21)

While Caldwell's imagery certainly conveys the almost worthless state of the automobile, the subtle irony of his narrative is Jeeter's actions. In the paragraph that immediately follows Caldwell's equally desperate portrait of Jeeter's house, Jeeter attempts to repair the automobile. That is: instead of addressing the myriad repairs required to his home, a possession that one would assume is of greater importance than the automobile, Jeeter spends his time patching the car's tires: "Jeeter was trying to patch a rotten inner tube" (7). Caldwell's image of the dilapidated house followed by the image of Jeeter patching the rotten inner-tube is not without narrative purpose, for their juxtaposition indicates Jeeter's confused and misplaced values. *Tobacco Road* suggests the automobile as to blame for Jeeter's confused priorities. Caldwell subverts a favorable representation of the automobile by not simply showing an undesirable portrait of one, but by also demonstrating how the automobile interferes with recovery from destitution. Instead of

painting the house, repairing rotten floor boards, or even planting food to satiate hunger, Jeeter patches an automobile tire, and, as the novel shows, the act is ultimately futile.

Caldwell especially indicates Jeeter's repair as futile when he relates that the car is even worthless as junk; it "had been turned down at the junk yard" (12). He also adds that the inner-tube is "falling into pieces" (20). Additionally, even if the tires are repaired, the rusty pump hose is bent and cracked and would require "a week to pump thirty pounds of air into the tire," while Jeeter "could have put more air into the tires if he had attempted to blow them up with his mouth" (28). Combined, these images suggest the futility of Jeeter's repair. The automobile side-tracks Jeeter from doing any productive and useful work that may alleviate his and his family's destitution.

Ostensibly, Jeeter rationalizes the tire repair as follows: "He had said that if could ever get all the tires on the old automobile standing up at the same time again, he would haul a load of wood to Augusta and sell it" (7). In fact, this sentiment—Jeeter hauling wood to sell in Augusta—is the novel's sub-narrative, so that perhaps instead of thinking of *Tobacco Road* as a novel of car misadventures as Crowley does, one could say that the novel is more about a destitute tenant farmer's quest to acquire an operating automobile within which he can haul and sell wood. Selling wood would provide Jeeter with money and with food, so Jeeter assumes. The novel emphasizes this motif by returning to it a few passages later: "He was trying now to patch the inner-tube so he could haul a load of [wood] to Augusta next week" (12). However, *Tobacco Road* ultimately suggests Jeeter's logic as confused and his high esteem of the automobile as misplaced, for Jeeter acquires a functioning automobile (Sister Bessie's), and with it, he harvests a load of

wood and hauls it to Augusta to sell; his dream is realized. Yet, the outcome contradicts Jeeter's expectations, and the only thing Jeeter actually sells in Augusta is the new automobile's spare tire (142). The moment fails to provide food or money, but instead, it leaves the characters, especially Jeeter, in a state of greater destitution.

With the appearance of Sister Bessie and with her promise of buying an automobile—if Dude agrees to marry her, of course—the encounters with the automobile become more violent. Physical violence co-exists with the novel's over-arching metaphorical violence. Caldwell, again, subverts the perception of the automobile by highlighting the characters' misguided beliefs that the automobile is a guaranteed escape from their destitution. The characters' responses to the automobile—especially Dude's and Jeeter's—indicate a confusion of values, for they suppose they are buying at something other than simply buying a car. Dude treats the new automobile like a toy, one that provides playful happiness, while Jeeter considers that the new automobile will solve his money woes.

When Sister Bessie arrives and declares her divinely delivered message—"Me and Dude is going to get married [...]. The Lord told me to do it"—Dude's initial response is "I couldn't do that" (81). However, Jeeter, Ada (Jeeter's wife), and Sister Bessie try and persuade Dude of the merits of marrying Sister Bessie, but Dude does not hedge, especially given that he is "afraid of Bessie" (82). Dude also dislikes Sister Bessie's appearance. Her nose, which lacks a central bone for support, appears to Dude as "two cavernous nostrils" that when stared at give the effect of "looking down a double-barrel shotgun" (84). Yet when Sister Bessie announces, "I'm going to buy me a

new automobile!,” “Dude’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes glistened” (82-83). Dude then asks Bessie, “Can I drive it?” to which Bessie answers, “That’s what I’m buying it for, Dude. I’m getting it for you to drive us around in when we take a notion to go somewhere” (83). Here, ideas of marriage and of the automobile become intermingled and confused, especially for Dude. Even Jeeter calls attention to this confusion when he asks, “Is you going to get married before or after [the automobile purchase]?” (83). Jeeter’s question further implies the two actions (marriage and automobile purchase) as existing on a same tier; neither is prioritized over the other. However, Bessie’s response to Jeeter prioritizes the two by showing favoritism to the new automobile: “We’ll walk over to Fuller right now and buy the new automobile, and then ride up to the courthouse and get married” (83). The automobile comes first. Dude’s reason for getting married is especially troubling, and it represents the car in a subversive manner, for Dude rationalizes, “If she was going to buy a brand-new car, he did not care how she looked” (84). While the automobile allows Sister Bessie to buy at a marriage to Dude, the car is why (or is what) Dude marries. In fact, once the car purchase is finalized, Dude shows great hesitation in fulfilling the bargain. Caldwell writes, “[W]hen they reached the courthouse, Dude got out reluctantly and followed Bessie inside. He wanted to stay in the car and blow the horn, but Bessie said he had to go with her to get the [marriage] license” (93). Yet as ill-advised as the marriage may be, *Tobacco Road* proves the purchase of a new automobile even more devastating.

When Bessie and Dude are in Fuller buying the new automobile, the scene enacts the metaphorical violence that provides a subtext to Caldwell’s novel, for the scene

communicates, as Beach explains, “the criminal waste of money where money is so tragically needed” (187). The passage narrates a member of the upper or middle class (the car salesman) taking advantage of the rather ignorant lower class tenant farmer, for when Sister Bessie arrives at the dealership and announces, “I’ve got enough money to buy a new automobile if it don’t cost more than eight hundred dollars” (88), the unscrupulous salesman shows Bessie a model that costs eight hundred dollars; to seal the deal, he lies about the registration laws in order “to put over a quick sale” (91). This complicates the relationship between car and tenant farmer because, as Beach explains, Bessie nor Dude “have the remotest idea of the values of anything”; in addition to not knowing how to barter for a car’s price without being cheated, Beach also adds, “It does not occur to Sister Bessie that she might spend part of her fortune on a car and keep the rest for incidentals” (187). The salesman does not aid Bessie in her purchase, but instead assures that she spends all of her savings on a new automobile. As Caldwell writes it, the automobile examples the upper class’s response to the tenant farmer’s ignorance and destitution. The example is negative and unfavorable and ultimately questions the value of the automobile in American culture.

Beach further adds that the automobile purchase “becomes a symbol of the childish incompetence of this whole outfit” (187). For one, the purchase resembles a child buying a toy destined to neglect and obsolescence, thus wasting money, and for another, the purchase highlights the characters’ childish responses to the automobile. Dude childishly honks the car horn while Sister Bessie spends all her money, failing to even have the two dollars for the marriage license. Caldwell captures the childish

essence of the car purchase when he describes the newly married couple riding back to the Lester residence in their new automobile:

They got in to ride home. Dude blew the horn several times before he started the motor, and again before he put the car into gear. Then he turned it around in the street and drove it out of Fuller towards the tobacco road.

Bessie sat erect on the back seat, holding the marriage license tight in both hands so the wind would not blow it away. (98-99).

While the passage certainly highlights their childish behavior—Dude playfully honking the horn, Bessie gleefully gripping the license—it especially shows the car as enabling them to buy at completely different things: the car, or the car horn, for Dude; and the marriage for Bessie. Significantly, the newly married couple fail to even share the same seat in the car, further indicating their disconnect. The passage raises questions about *what* Sister Bessie is buying *at* with the automobile purchase, while *Tobacco Road* suggests that, instead of marrying Sister Bessie, Dude marries the car.

The novel's instances of the car as a site of physical violence intensify. Bessie's new automobile is destructive to characters in the novel, and, likewise, the characters are destructive to the car. However, Caldwell's comic portrayal of the dumb-innocents living on tobacco road softens the violence's intensity, so that the car crashes and the car-related fatalities are not as tragic as those represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

These misadventures with the automobile, however, begin immediately, for as Dude attempts to drive the newly purchased automobile off the car lot, he almost runs over the salesmen:

Being unaccustomed to the new model, [Dude] did not know how to gauge the amount of gasoline, and the car jerked off so quickly that it almost lifted itself off the ground. The two men jumped out of the way just in time to keep from being hit by the fender. (93)

When the couple arrives at the Lester home—Dude, of course, announcing their arrival by a ceaseless sounding of the car horn—Dude fails to properly slow down while turning into the yard, and, in consequence, “The car jolted across the ditch, throwing Bessie against the top three or four times in quick succession, and breaking several leaves of the rear spring” (100). Accidents such as this continue, and each one injures characters and further destroys the car, thus highlighting the car as a site of violence.

Their first outing in the new automobile is even more disastrous, more violent. After Dude runs into a wagon, the car fender looks “as if somebody had taken a sledgehammer and tried to see how completely he could maul it”; the accident also knocks off the car’s headlight, leaving “[o]nly a piece of twisted iron and a small strand of insulated wire” remaining (122). Moreover, Dude and Sister Bessie think the crash killed the wagon’s driver. When Jeeter asks if the wagon driver was hurt, Dude answers,

When we drove off again, he was still lying in the ditch. The wagon turned over on him and mashed him. His eyes was wide open all the time, but I couldn’t make him say nothing. He looked like he was dead. (123)

While Dude's narration of the accident demonstrates the automobile as a site of physical violence, Bessie's remarks reiterate the metaphorical violence Caldwell's novel implies, for her statement indicates the automobile's destruction and its decline in value. She says, "It's a shame to get the new car smashed up so soon already though [...]. It was brand new only a short time before noon, and now it's only sundown" (123). Even stocks do not depreciate as quickly as Bessie's eight hundred dollar automobile.

The following morning, the automotive misadventures continue. As Dude and Bessie drive through the cotton rows to meet Jeeter, who plans on loading the car with wood, the car's axle runs against a stump that causes "a jarring crash that stopped the car in its tracks" (131). Neither Dude nor Bessie are immune to the violent effects of this automobile crash. Caldwell writes,

Dude was thrown against the steering-wheel, and Bessie shot forward off the seat and struck her head against the wind-shield. Where her forehead had hit the glass there were a hundred or more cracks, branching out like a wet spider-web in the sunshine. [....]. She did not know what had happened. (131)

While the accident results in misaligned wheels, the optimistic bumpkins consider the car "still almost as good as new" (132). Yet, on the road to Augusta, things worsen when the radiator overheats and the engine begins to make "a great noise, too" (137). After several false starts, they finally pull into a gas station and are informed that the car's oil is depleted and that its bearings are "burned out" (139). The mechanic then bluntly tells

Bessie, “Your new car is ruined, sister.” Thus, in a little more than a day’s time, Bessie has ruined a brand new automobile, wasting her eight hundred dollar savings.

However, the novels’ characters still consider the automobile valuable and worth riding in; in fact, this sentiment precipitates the novel’s concluding scene—the family brawl. When Sister Bessie refuses to let Jeeter ride in her the automobile—“No sir! You ain’t going to ride in my new automobile no more,” Jeeter throws Bessie off of his land, yet Bessie then pleads that she and Dude cannot go to her place because “[t]he roof is all rotted away at my house” (162-163). Jeeter, however, asserts his indifference to the state of Bessie’s home, especially since she refuses to let him ride in her new automobile:

‘That don’t make no difference to me. I don’t care where you go, but you’re going to get off this land. If you ain’t going to let me ride in the new automobile when I wants to, you can’t stay here.’ (163)

A fight ensues. Sister Bessie attacks Jeeter, “scratching his face with her fingernails” (163). Angered, Jeeter’s wife, Ada, runs at Bessie, hitting and kicking her, so that pretty soon, “all three of them [Bessie, Jeeter, and Ada] were striking and scratching one another” (163). Jeeter and Ada then begin striking Bessie with a stick, causing Bessie to scream in pain (163-164). Dude, who has simply been observing the fight from afar, finally decides to join in. Caldwell writes, “His choice lay with Sister Bessie. He liked to drive an automobile too much to let hers get away from him on account of a little scrap like that” (164). Thus, Dude can have what his father cannot—the opportunity to drive the new automobile when he pleases.

The fight over the automobile concludes with the novel's most tragic violence as the car runs over the grandmother, Mother Lester. While Dude rescues Bessie from the fray and while Ada hurls rocks at the departing couple in their new automobile, the car hits Mother Lester, "knocking her down and backing over her" (164). Caldwell narrates Mother Lester on the ground, writing,

Mother Lester tried to turn over so she could get up and go into the house. She could not move either her arms or her legs without unbearable pain, and her head felt as if it had been cracked open. The automobile had struck her with such force that she did not know what had hit her. Both of the left wheels rolled over her, one of them across her back and the other on her head. She had not known what had happened. More than anything else she wanted to get up and lie down on her bed. She struggled with a final effort to raise her head and shoulders from the hard sand, and she managed to turn over. After that she lay motionless. (165)

More importantly, the characters in *Tobacco Road* witness Mother Lester's death, especially Jeeter's younger daughter Ellie May, who as Caldwell writes watches "[f]rom the corner of the house [...] at what had happened" (165). Through the automobile, characters such as Ellie May experience violence. Bessie's brand-new automobile divides the Lester family and makes each angry at the other, and, worse, kills the eldest member.

*Tobacco Road* offers a subversive portrait of the automobile. In addition to being the primary object of a family dispute, the automobile causes several accidents throughout the novel, including two fatalities. Further, the car clouds Bessie's and the Lester family's judgments. They confuse the automobile with some kind of fulfillment,

need, or happiness that each tries to buy at through the automobile. Yet, ultimately no character profits from the automobile. In fact, the result is quite the opposite: the automobile depletes Sister Bessie's savings and breaks the family apart.

## **2.5: Conclusion**

As the twentieth century progressed, novelists found different ends to which the automobile was applied. While between 1918-1939, the dominance of the automobile as a site of violence reflected the cultural attitudes of that uncertain and new technology—the horseless carriage, for example—by 1940, with its acceptance realized, the shock-value assigned to it in the literature written thereafter necessarily decreased. Authors readdressed and re-critiqued this privately-owned object. Instead of finding it a site of violence, the literature presents a polarized paradigm whereby the automobile instead is a site of sacredness. A new subversive paradigm develops as cars become experiences of sacredness instead of violence. Novels show cars as ironic religious experiences. This is the following chapter's argument.

As I leave behind the spatial paradigm of the automobile as a site of violence and examine instead how the American mid-century narrates cars as sites of sacredness, I do not wish to give the false impression that the automobile no longer is a site of violence in literature, or that the automobile as a site of violence is even restricted to fiction. In fact, certain elements of the paradigm continue well into the contemporary novel and into poetry and film. James Dickey's poem "The Scarred Girl" (1992), for example, narrates a girl's survival of a violent automobile accident. Much like Caldwell's "wet-spider web

in the sunshine” which describes the broken windshield after Bessie and Dude crash (131), Dickey also focuses on the cracked windshield of a crashed car, picturing the pastoral world view from such a distorted perspective: “The green meadow lying in fragments / Under the splintered sunlight, / The cattle broken in pieces / By her useless, painful intrusion” (19-22). As the title implies, the automobile leaves the girl scarred, and “Her beauty gone,” she is left to stare at “her odd face in the mirror” (50, 42). In “The Scarred Girl,” the car is, indeed, a dynamic site of violence.

Novels outside of my suggested time period and also outside of American work evidence the paradigm of the car a site of violence. For example, the British novelist J.G. Ballard writes the violent car crash as his character’s primary fetishism in his aptly titled, *Crash* (1973). American author A. I. Bezzerides’ *Thieves’ Market* (1949), for example, ends with a fatal car crash that kills that novel’s main character. In the novel’s climactic scene, the truck’s brakes give out and it runs amok; after careening down a steep ravine and spilling its harvest of fresh apples, the truck catches fire and incinerates its driver. The scene of the crash and the charred body is grizzly and, yes, violent<sup>3</sup>. Harry Crews’ *Car* (1972) also narrates a violent accident. When Junell Mack pulls up to an accident, Crews describes the scene as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> So prevalent are car crashes in film and television that examples are not difficult to come by. In fact, the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster often depends upon cars that explode, crash, careen down mountainsides, or fly off cliffs and steep ravines. For example in *The Terminator* (1984) with Arnold Schwarzenegger several cars are smashed up in a countless chases through the American streets; in *Déjà vu* (2006) with Denzel Washington, the main character drives a Ford truck off a ferry boat into the San Francisco Bay; or in almost any of the James Bond films, elements of the car as a site of violence are found.

An enormous piece of the chassis driven up through the body of the car had been cut out of the way by the welder and they could plainly see the rest of the family now. There was a body wearing a bloody business suit, but no head. A woman had been ripped open from breastbone downward. Her guts lay in her lap. A small boy hung dead from the windshield, hanging half in and half out of the shattered glass. (360)

Yet the paradigm of the automobile as a site of violence does not predominate this later literature as it does between 1918-1939. There is a shift in the author's viewpoint and in their representations of the automobile.

## CHAPTER III

### THE AUTOMOBILE AS A SITE OF SACREDNESS

#### 3.1: Introduction

Mid-century American fiction makes a transition from representing cars as sites of violence to cars as sites of sacredness. This chapter examines fiction published between 1939 and 1957. In this period, American literature amplifies the sacred qualities of the automobile as a means to question the high esteem given cars; through their cars, characters experience sacredness. The American author, however, subverts the positive qualities of this sacred experience and instead highlights the negative effects of the worship of cars.

This introductory section outlines the chapter's body, historically contextualizes the automobile, offers reason for the paradigmatic shift in literature, and lastly, sets out to define sacredness as I apply it to my spatial paradigm. In this chapter, I begin with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and argue that the Joads' Hudson is a portable family center; the family experiences sacredness as the Hudson binds the family together and highlights their devotion to one another. Steinbeck's novel ultimately questions the automobile as a replacement for a fixed home site, for, once geographically displaced, the Joads have great difficulty finding a home outside their Hudson. Moreover, the novel illuminates the problems of mass migration, which, as *The Grapes of Wrath* narrates, results from the automobile's ability to transport a destitute population. *The Grapes of*

*Wrath* subverts a perception of the automobile as a vehicle for escape. I next examine Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) and argue that Hazel Motes' distorted image of the Essex makes it a site of sacredness, for the car is the central element in his Church Without Christ. However, O'Connor's focalization, which pitches the novel from Haze's viewpoint, reveals Haze as a character of extreme hubris. O'Connor questions the high esteem given the automobile. She suggests the automobile is a church, but the destruction of the car-church undermines its sacred qualities. Throughout the novel, Haze's distorted viewpoint is made manifest through representations of the automobile; he relies too heavily upon it. Ultimately, O'Connor challenges the importance of automobiles by creating a character with a questionable perspective car's importance to religion. I close this chapter with an examination of James Agee's posthumously published memoir-esque novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957). The main characters Mary and Rufus convert an automotive fatality into a sacred experience. The narrative highlights their strengthening of faith: Mary's in Christianity and Rufus's in concepts of design. As with Steinbeck and O'Connor, Agee similarly represents cultural perceptions of the automobile as sacred, but Agee questions this perception by pointing out the fallible design in the Model T—the defective cotter pin. Ultimately, these novels subvert a favorable perception of sacredness and instead question America's faithful devotion to cars.

The transition from cars as sites of violence to sites of sacredness is certainly not as clearly demarcated as my definitive chapter breaks imply. Qualities of the car's sacredness exist in works prior to the 1940s. Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919), for

example, exploits the car's interior as a private and empowering space. Lewis writes that, while driving through a rainstorm, Claire "fancied she was piloting a drowned car in dim spaces under the sea," and that, in the car, Clair "felt like a woman, not like a driver" (3). While cars as sites of violence continues into the contemporary novel,<sup>1</sup> fiction of the 1940s and 1950s represents cars differently. In these years, authors suggest the manifest advantages car ownership. American fiction represents the unrestrained freedoms and possibilities for car ownership. Increasingly, the public grew to depend upon and *to need* their cars in ways that were previously unknown. As the automobile gained a hold in mid-century American society, the necessity of car ownership increased. Consequently, fiction narrates characters with a similar dependence upon automobiles. The Joads' reliance on their rattling jalopy to save them from the Oklahoma dust bowl illustrates this truth, while Hazel Motes' extreme dependence upon his car for his evangelistic Church Without Christ points to another expectation of the automobile. Thus, while not exclusive to it, the car as a site of sacredness predominates mid-twentieth century American fiction.

Moreover, the two terms—violence and sacredness—are very much related, a point that aids in explaining the spatial paradigm shift. René Girard's work *Violence and Sacred* explores this relationship. While Girard focuses upon human sacrifice in drawing out a thread between violence and sacredness, an application of his thinking to the automobile demonstrates a similar trend. According to Girard, in order for a culture to

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2's conclusion demonstrates that the paradigm of the car as a site of violence is found in fiction, poetry, and film outside of the early decades of the twentieth century. Again, my argument in that chapter is that the violent paradigm originates within this period of history and that it predominates the period's fiction.

obtain sacredness, “Violence is not to be denied” (4). In understanding Girard’s theory as it applies to automobiles, a period of violent cars is necessary to arrive at cars that are deemed sacred.

While myriad reasons for this change can be offered, a few more obvious ones seem sufficient to explain the paradigm shift. For one, the sheer proliferation of the automobile during and following World War II bred a familiarity with the vehicle that quelled the shock effect of its potential for violence. Besides a in automobile production, a telling statistic that speaks to a rise in automobile usage is the over two-fold increase in American gasoline use. In 1939 for example, only 1,250 million barrels of crude oil were required to fuel automobiles, but by 1958 that number more than doubled to 2,850 million barrels (*Historical Stats* 4-693). More than simply owning automobiles, Americans drove them, requiring more and more fuel for their travels. Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* testifies to this fact, for it narrates a family traveling through several states along Route 66. In O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, Haze adds miles to his car’s odometer as he drives from show to show preaching his Church Without Christ. Additionally, Agee’s *A Death in the Family* opens with Jay Follett taking an overnight trip to see his dying father. These novels testify to the car as a growing American luxury. Gone are the resistant naysayers such as George Amberson in Booth Tarkington’s *The Magnificent Ambersons*. In the 1940s and 1950s, Americans wholly embraced the automobile.

This period in history witnessed America’s slow economic climb out of The Great Depression of the 1930s. According to historians Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, “America emerged from World War II as the world’s strongest economy” (4:576).

America's economic wealth trickled down. In point of fact, the American payroll went from 12.7 million dollars in 1939 to 46.6 million dollars by 1950, an almost four fold increase (4:579). The automobile was a common item of purchase. So prevalent had the automobile become during this period that American complacency and passivity overtook reactions to its violent effects. A moment in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) captures this spirit, for the car wreck Humbert Humbert and Lolita witness while driving through America is just another event on their journey. Humbert narrates the wreck in a list of the many activities of their travel, suggesting its banality and its everydayness:

But even at our very best moments, when we sat reading on a rainy day [...], or had a quiet hearty meal in a crowded diner, or played a childish game of cards, or went shopping, or silently stared, with other motorists and their children, at some smashed, blood-bespattered car with a young woman's shoe in the ditch [...]; on all those occasions, I seemed to myself as implausible a father as she seemed to be a daughter. (174)

Humbert's narration evokes an indifference to car wrecks; bloody cars are part of traveling. In "Crashworthiness as a Cultural Ideal" (1980), Paul W. Gikus, concerned with escalating automotive fatalities, asserts, "The gravest charge that can be made against a culture is that it is indifferent to human suffering, that it lacks the will to regulate or control the violent elements within itself" (327). America's response to controlling the inherent negative effects of their automobiles was, indeed, indifferent. Despite warnings, American remained blissfully ignorant to the dangers the automobile presented. Consequently, mid-century American is often considered "the heyday of car culture" (Lewis and Goldstein 307). In turn, American literature reflects this "heyday,"

or this “golden age,” as automotive scholar Jeremy Jerome labels it, by producing automobiles whose narrative space is a site of sacredness. Yet, these narratives subvert this positive image by using the sacred qualities of the automobile to ironic ends.

I apply two chief facets of sacredness to the spatial paradigm because these points best explain the nuances that fiction uses when representing cars: (1) the sacred can be found in ordinary objects and (2) the sacred requires humans to remove the object from its typical function. Religious scholar Emile Durkheim advocates the possibility of the sacred being found in everyday objects. In the highly esteemed *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim observes:

By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. (37)

Durkheim further argues that society constantly appropriates ordinary objects to sacred ends figured (Colpe 12:7971). I am suggesting that the automobile is an object that mid-twentieth century America *makes* sacred. During this period, Americans ignored the violent, shocking tendencies of the automobile and developed instead a myopic view of the car as a great benefit to them and their lifestyle.

Moreover, an object is made sacred especially when applied to uses outside of its normally designed function. As religious scholar Carsten Colpe writes, “A thing becomes sacred when humans remove it from ordinary use” (12:7971). American society begins to imagine a multitude of uses for the automobile, which, while perhaps owning a

tangential relationship to its primary function of travel, often completely disregards it.

The transformation of the automobile is observed in literary fiction of the times, namely the Joads and Hazel Motes making their cars into homes, and James Agee using the car to provoke issues of faith and religion.

The establishment of a sacred is dependent upon a person's viewpoint. As Colpe further explains, "Sacred space does not even exclude nonsacred space, for the same place may be both sacred and non-sacred in different respects or circumstances" (12:7978). Colpe adds, "In short, a sacred place comes into being when it is interpreted as a sacred place" (7978). The car possesses this dual image of being sacred and profane. However, American literature teases out the automobile's sacred qualities and represents automobiles as sites of sacredness. Instead of flattering the automobile, the fiction subverts this positive perception.

### **3.2. The Junker Hudson as the New Family Center in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath***

Often regarded as his most well-known work and currently his most widely-published novel,<sup>2</sup> John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* rightly receives ample critical attention, yet critics tend to overlook the prominence of the automobile in this migration narrative and instead focus upon other aspects of the narrative. Roger N. Casey, however, observes the car's centrality to the novel and comments that the automobile is "at the heart of Steinbeck's novel" (74). For Casey, the automobile recognizes a new

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1989, Viking has published two separate editions (1989, 1997), Everyman printed a 1993 edition, and the Library of America included it in a 1996 publication.

kind of poverty, “a mobile one made possible by the car,” and *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the Joads’ attempt to escape from such destitution (75). Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach, on the other hand, finds the car serves a dual role as a “cold-impersonal vehicle come to announce the end of one kind of world” and as a “symbol or promise of a new one,” and she reads the car as a literal and figurative textual image (71). While Casey’s and Dettelbach’s scholarship resituates the automobile in discussions of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a redirection of their thinking seems necessary in order to readdress the importance of the car to this text.

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* differs in its handling of the automobile narrative space, for instead violence predominating images of the automobile, *The Grapes of Wrath* insists upon the automobile as a site of sacredness. This effect is largely a result of the religious nature of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a point several critics take up. Woodburn O. Ross, for one, asserts that the novel’s “basic position is essentially religious,” and he draws textual parallels between the Joads’ escape from the dust-bowl and the Hebrews’ exodus from Canaan (64, 78). Taking a similarly stance, Tamara Rombold claims the novel as an inversion of “the entire scope of the Biblical myths” (146), while Louis Owens examines the biblical imagery and concludes that Steinbeck represents California as an “ironic, fallen Eden” (66). While a few critics dissent to reading *The Grapes of Wrath* in a strictly religious context,<sup>3</sup> a larger critical consensus agrees to the Christian symbolism and Biblical allusion contained in the novel. My argument thus extends from an understanding of the novel as religiously themed.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric W. Carlson, for example, contests the novel’s religious content and argues that while “a few loose Biblical analogies may be identified,” they “are not primary to the structure and theme of the novel” (172).

According to Carsten Colpe, the sacred and sacredness gain definition by their opposition to the profane; the sacred is “either walled off or otherwise set apart” from spaces with profane use (7964). In the novel, this sacredness is made manifest by setting apart the Joad junker Hudson from the rest of the automobile world, which I interpret as indicators of the profane. Thus, on one level, the Joad Hudson is made sacred by its separation from the profane world and the profane world’s objects, such as the red trucks and shiny new autos that appear throughout the novel. However, the car as a site of sacredness is noticed by especially observing its effect upon the Joad family, for the Joads revere the Hudson. For one, it apparently saves them from the dustbowl crisis, and for another, the Hudson is a moving family center that highlights their closeness and devotion to one another. The Hudson is a cloister from the profane, secular world. The problem that Steinbeck teases at, however, is that, while the Hudson indeed appears to save the Joad family, in reality it simply displaces their destitution from one geographical location to another.

The first chapter involving the Joad episode (chapter 2) establishes the red trucks as indicators of the profane. The chapter’s first image of a truck, described as a “huge red transport truck” (215), is much like the ones that reappear throughout the novel. The startling red imagery is one visual cue for this vehicle’s opposition to the migrants while newness is another. Steinbeck emphasizes both in this opening passage: “It was a *new* [italics mine] truck, shining red. [...] Its double tires were new [again], and a brass padlock stood straight out from the hasp on the big black doors” (215). While the scene suggests sharing since the red truck driver aids Tom by giving him a lift, the scene more

importantly reinforces the division between Tom and the truck driver, for it ultimately concludes by narrating a division between them. Even though the driver breaks the truck owner's rule which the driver relates—the owner “don't want us to pick up nobody” (219)—the driver's gesture of friendship is short-lived, and the new automobile as a space accepting of the impoverished Tom unravels.

The moment fails to offer the sacredness that the Hudson later engenders. Specifically, the driver displays no devotion to Tom, and while he indeed performs a favor by giving Tom a lift, the relationship does not last, nor does either character exhibit any feelings of devotion to the other. Initially, Steinbeck highlights their separation by having the driver refuse to take a swig from Tom's whisky bottle—an event that would have especially documented a bond of sharing. But the red truck's division from Tom is especially announced when the two have an argument, an event that marks the space as profane and contrasting to anything sacred. As they talk, Tom's voice is “harsh” and the driver's tight grip turns his hands “white on the wheel” (222), making the moment tense and uncomfortable. Tom senses the driver's disdain for him and his prison past. Tom thus confronts the driver, saying, “You give me a goin'-over when I first got in. I seen you,” and although the driver defends himself, telling Tom, “But it ain't none of my business. I mind my own yard. It ain't nothing to me,” the moment is spoiled (222). The interior of the red truck is hostile and uncomfortable for both, and as such it greatly contrasts future scenes where the Hudson is a zone of comfort and ease, one that, as I argue, is a dynamic site of sacredness.

The chapter's closing sentence indicates Tom's separation from the profane world of red trucks and new automobiles, for as Tom walks the dirt road toward home—an image ripe with its own suggestive image of old technology—his back is already turned toward the truck which “rolled heavily away” (223). Chapter 4 continues the scene and reemphasizes Tom's separation from the shiny red truck and its symbolic implication of the profane. Steinbeck writes, “When Joad heard the truck get under way, he stopped and turned about and watched it until it disappeared. When it was out of sight he still watched the distance and the blue air-shimmer” (227). While the passage indicates Tom's thoughtfulness (“watched the distance”) and while its tone is suggestively wistful and nostalgic (“blue air-shimmer”), the salient image is that of separation and “distance,” for this is the thematic paradigm that *The Grapes of Wrath* repeats. Tom and his family encounter countless red trucks on their journey, and each is an antagonistic image of progress, of new technology, and of the profane. The above scene also witnesses the driver as a stranger and as a person who shows no particular devotion to Tom, a character who, as the novel narrates, demonstrates strong devotion to his own family.

When Grampa dies, Steinbeck reintroduces his recurring image of the big red trucks. “[H]uge freight trucks with red sides,” Steinbeck writes, “rumbled along, putting a little earthquake in the ground,” and “they thundered day and night and the ground shook under their heavy march” (356). The trucks are giant, thunderous machines and their work is endless and unceasing, and the Joads become the innocent bystanders in this machine's operation, so the text suggests. Commenting on these images, Robert J. Griffin and William A. Freedman label the red trucks and fast cars as “evil objects” that

represent “the bigness, the newness, the mobility, the massive efficiency, even the inhumanity [...] and lack of trust” which the Joads encounter (113-114). Importantly, the red trucks are set apart from the Joads and their Hudson.

In another scene, Steinbeck includes a new car as an image of the profane. In chapter 13 as the Joads refuel their barely-running Hudson, a Lincoln Zephyr “silvery and low, whisked by” (346). The Zephyr was Lincoln’s best-selling vehicle in 1936 (a probable date for the novel’s setting) and is attributed to a ninety-one percent increase in sales that year (Auto Editors of Consumer Guide 256). But moreover, the Zephyr’s stream-lined image—one meant to mimic the front grills on fast-moving passenger trains—especially flaunts the contrast between the essential utilitarian function of the Joads’ Hudson (getting the family and their belongings to California) and those whose design ignores function. While the conflicts in design mark another differentiation between the Joads’ Hudson and the new Zephyrs, the Zephyr’s extensive design, of course, translates into a more expensive car, a point Connie calls attention to: “But them,” he says as the Zephyr flies by, “them kind costs as much as a good size home” (346). To emphasize a shift in values between Connie’s family and the Zephyr’s owner, he adds, “I ruther have the house” (346). Rose of Sharon concurs. She says, “I like to have the house *an’* one of them,” but in framing the importance of the house over the Zephyr, she adds: “But ‘course the house would be first” (346). Connie’s and Rose of Sharon’s positions especially highlight their devotion to family, for a house facilitates—indeed “houses”—a family while an expensive two-seater auto cannot provide that same function. Moreover, Rose of Sharon’s pregnancy further shows her devotion to family.

Another episode similarly contrasts the sacred automobile of the migrant against and new profane car models. A scene immediately following the one recounted above shows the Joads' dog unwittingly wandering into oncoming traffic:

A big swift car whisked near, tires squealed. The dog dodged helplessly, and with a shriek, cut off in the middle, went under the wheels. The big car slowed for a moment and faces looked back, and then it gathered greater speed and disappeared. (346)

On the figurative level, Steinbeck's vocabulary choice of "went under the wheels" metaphorizes an image of the fast machine as overpowering the smaller creature; the text also implies the machine and its driver as dehumanized objects without the control to stop for small things (the dog) that may obstruct its ceaseless forward momentum. Steinbeck suggests that the drivers are succumbing to the machine, for in chapter 5, he writes, "The man sitting in the iron [tractor] seat did not look like a man," adding that the driver "could not control it" (246). Steinbeck is especially critical of automotive technology in these passages. Yet while the above scene indicates the destructive force of this technology, the passage, moreover, highlights the new automobile as a disruptor to family, for it kills the dog—a family pet and indeed a member of the family unit. Furthermore, by failing to stop, the speeding new car exhibits no devotion or concern for the dog's owners. In a later passage, Steinbeck especially correlates the new cars like the Zephyr and a lack of devotion to family, for he stresses the Zephyr woman's desire to thwart pregnancy:

The big cars on the highway. Languid, heat-raddled ladies, small nucleuses about whom revolve a thousand accouterments [sic]: [...]. A bag of bottles, syringes, pills, powders, fluids, jellies to make their sexual intercourse safe, odorless, and unproductive. (374)

While he associates these women with the big, new, profane cars, Steinbeck further emphasizes the unproductive intent of their sexual intercourse recognizes, thus suggesting their lack of devotion to family.

In addition to big trucks and fast cars, the text also indicates tractors as an oppositional, profane technology, one which *The Grapes of Wrath* implicitly blames for the great migration. Describing the tractors as “snub-nosed monsters” that cut “the earth with blades” (246), Steinbeck’s anthropomorphic imagery suggests the new technology as especially antagonistic and evil, and he further explicitly names the tractors as causing the migration, claiming that “the tractors [...] throw men out of work” (463) and that these “machines pushed [the migrants] out” onto the highways (510). This sentiment pervades the migrants’ thinking to the extent that they adopt a verb form of the noun to describe this effect: “Til we got *tractored off* [italics mine],” Pa says, “we was people with a farm” (410). These tractors are anathema to the Joads’ Hudson and its sacredness. They are inhuman objects which are insensitive and undevoted to individuals and their families.

Continuously, the novel equates aged and outdated technology (the decade-old Hudson, for example) with the migrants while new cars become textual markers for non-migrants who are necessarily outsiders and antagonists to the migrants. For example,

when a “new Chevrolet coupé” enters one of the migrant camps, Tom judges the car’s owners as outsiders—“Who’s this? They don’t belong here” (488). Specifically, Tom’s assertion especially rests on automotive imagery, for he recognizes the car as new and thus as *not* part of the migrant community. While new cars and their new technology function as oppositional images to the migrants, old cars uniformly become symbolic of the migrant. In a similar line of thinking, critic Christopher J. Salter observes the Hudson as an image synonymous with the Joads and remarks that the jalopy is “the visual signature of the migration depicted by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*” (145). The novel consistently sets apart the migrants and their jalopies from newer and brighter (red) automobile technologies.

My extension of Salter’s observation is that the jalopy is a site of sacredness and that, furthermore, this sacredness highlights the migrant’s devotion to community and family. I rest my assertion by observing the latent binary structure that Steinbeck implements in the novel. His sympathetic portrayal of the Joads depends upon binary opposition. Thus the novel finds the following binarisms in its structure: migrant/non-migrant, old/new, Hudson/Zephyr, jalopy/roadster. A more generalized binarism that *The Grapes of Wrath* instates and that makes the metaphor especially religious is that of the sacred and the profane. The novel suggests the Joads and their ailing Hudson as sacred, while those against this destitute migrant family are, in contrast, profane. The red truck driver who declines in sharing Tom’s whiskey, the car that kills the family pet, and the tractors that run the migrants off their land—these are not sacred objects; yet, in contrast, the jalopies that save the Joads and similar migrant families are. Steinbeck’s third person

focalization provides a sympathetic reading of the Joads' plight. Since the point of view is focused on the Joads' migrant experience, the novel casts big business agriculture and those owners of newer, red vehicles in the role of otherness, a position that reverses the more typical perspective of considering the migrants as "others." Importantly, Steinbeck's subtle position shift translates into a necessarily hostile opinion of those who drive newer models of cars and trucks. Again, this dynamic depends upon Steinbeck's implementation of automobile technology as textual indicators for the two oppositional groups. Teasing out a similar point, Dettelbach observes the dichotomous car image in the novel, for she reads the car as both "a monster, a barrier between men" and "a symbol or promise" of a new world (71).

The automobile's sacredness, however, comes into view when examining the relationship between Joads and their Hudson. For one, the Hudson draws the family together and is the family's focal point—its center. In this way, it functions like a house. Mircea Eliade's work in *The Sacred and the Profane* emphasizes the center as a central element of designating a space as sacred. He writes, "In the homogenous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* [italics in original] can be established, the hierophony [the act of the manifestation of the sacred] reveals an absolute fixed point, a center" (21). The Joads' Hudson is the family center; it draws them together and is their hope for escape from the dust bowl, making it a religiously charged object. Chapter 10 examples the first instance of the automobile as a "new" family center. Pa, Grampa, Noah, and Tom work together to load their goods on the truck bed in hopes of getting money for their journey while soon the extended family

increases as the children Ruthie and Winfield arrive with Rose of Sharon in the emptied truck bed. Having abandoned their home, the truck effectively replaces it and is a displaced, moving center, one that serves as a spiritual safety zone for the family, the function once performed by their house. A key passage highlights this point. Steinbeck writes, “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” (315). Certainly, Steinbeck’s rhetoric implies the truck as a site of sacredness—the living principle—but to further emphasize the jalopy’s sacred quality, Steinbeck describes the truck as illuminated, much like an angel: “The gray dusty truck [...] stood out magically in this light,” he writes (315). Already then, *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests the jalopy as a site of hope, a thing that in itself is sacred.

The automobile’s importance to the Joads cannot be underestimated, for it is their sole hope for escaping the dust bowl drought. In point of fact, even those migrants who lack automobiles depend upon them for their escape. Steinbeck narrates the following episode to highlight the migrant’s dependence upon the automobile:

There was a family of twelve and they were forced off the land. They had no car. They built a trailer out of junk and loaded it with their possessions. They pulled it to the side of 66 and waited. And pretty soon a sedan picked them up. Five of them rode in the sedan and seven on the trailer, and a dog on the trailer. They got to California in two jumps. (338)

Necessarily, the migrants like the Joads show a great reverence for the automobiles, and such scenes highlight the car as a site of sacredness. As example consider inter-chapter

12 where Steinbeck emphasizes the attention given to the automobile's sonic details as indicators of its performance and, by proxy, of the journey's success. He especially involves the character's body in this passage, suggesting their body's "oneness" with the auto. Steinbeck also calls attention to the migrant's palms and feet, body parts that have latent Christian undertones. I quote at length to draw comparison later to the Joads' experience. In chapter 12, Steinbeck writes:

Listen to the motor. Listen to the wheels. Listen with your ears and with your hands on the steering wheel; listen with the palm of your hand on the gear-shift lever; listen with your feet on the floor boards. Listen to the pounding old jalopy with all your senses; for a change of tone, a variation of rhythm may mean—a week here?. That rattle—that's tappets (335).

This passage emphasizes the driver's oneness with the jalopy, a point that resonates with sacred overtones and that Steinbeck again highlights in the following Joad-narrative chapter, chapter 13. Placing Al in a similar context to exemplify the migrant experience which chapter 12 generalizes, Steinbeck describes Al "at the wheel, his face purposeful, his whole body listening to the car. [...] Al was one with his engine" (339). In addition to the passage's emphasis on cosmological "oneness" and the implied sacredness further highlights Al's devotion to his family. He is intent upon their survival, which in turn depends upon the car's own survival. To encourage this, the unnamed narrator in chapter 12 and Al in chapter 13 resort to a sacred devotion—prayer—and the car is the object of their prayer, thus its dynamic site. It is only in clarifying the car's interior as a sacred, devotional space that the external world is then placed in sharp relief.

Moreover, the scene emphasizes the spiritual moment the migrants such as the Joads have in their automobiles. They make this car reverent simply by their own destitution and extreme dependence upon it. The Biblical context of the narrative intensifies the space as one of sacredness, for if this journey is indeed the migrants' equivalent to the Hebrews' Exodus, as Leonard A. Slade Jr. argues in "Biblical Imagery in *The Grapes of Wrath*," the car necessarily is associated with such allusions. The car thus simultaneously unites the general narrative to the Joad story while it further implies the religious overtones of the novel. Several chapters, chapter 7 for example, suggest the aged automobile as the migrants' sole hope for escape from the dust-bowl, and as the novel progresses and the as the Joads' dependent relationship on their old-technology Hudson increases, the automobile adopts a redeeming image, for it becomes a space that is especially a site of sacredness.

As the family accepts the automobile as their new home, they begin to spatially divide the truck much as they would a house—the children in their room at the rear with Pa and Uncle John in the front cab "as befitted heads of the clan" (310). As the novel progresses, the truck is increasingly defined as a domesticated space where the family lives. Steinbeck expresses this sentiment when he describes the family as becoming "settled into a new technique of living" (383), and he later specifically addresses the automobile as the new domestic space, adding that "each member of the family grew into his proper place, grew into his duties, so that each member, old and young, had his place in the car" (418). As Eliade points out in *The Sacred and the Profane*, the house is its own sacred space, for within, he claims that the "ritual function" of the sacred "falls to

the threshold of the human habitation” (25). Thus, bereft of their home with its door (barrier) to the profane world, the jalopy and its truck doors serve a similar purpose.

The idea of the door (the threshold) is an important concept in Steinbeck’s nuanced handling of the automobile, for he differentiates between the exterior and interior automobile space, which, as I argue, is meant to suggest a barrier between the profane (the outside) and the sacred (the inside). While scenes occurring outside the truck test the family’s devotion to one another while scenes cast, the vehicle’s interior serves as a cloister and the space is one of bonding and hopeful dream-making. In these cases, the car’s interior especially is a site of sacredness while the exterior serves as its contrast.

For example, several scenes describe the truck’s exterior as a space where things break apart and require endless repair, reinforcing the car’s external space as an antagonist to the family and their escape. The Wilson’s ’25 Dodge is the first of the traveling vehicles to break down, and when it does, it threatens to split the family. Upon detecting a “little rattle” in the engine, Al forces the car off the road, and the family parks underneath a billboard which casts a suggestive “oblong shadow” over them and their vehicles (386). Realizing the car’s need for a new con-rod bearing and deeming the car’s situation “Purty bad,” Tom suggests the Hudson and the family press on while he and Casy remain behind to repair the broken Dodge. Only Ma Joad’s stern resolve and her threatening grip of the jack handle dissuade the split while her argument that “All we got is the family unbroke” suggests an analogy with the car; for like the car, the family is no good when broken (390). Of all the family members, Ma Joad stands out as the most

devoted. As Mimi Reisel Gladstein writes in “The Indestructible Women: Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon,” in addition to being “a complete and positive characterization of a woman,” Ma Joad also “functions as a nurturing mother to all” (118).

In contrast to the automobile’s exterior, its interior is a site of sacredness. For one, the family’s dialogue inside the Hudson indicates intimacy and bonding. The only meaningful exchanges between Tom and his brother Al occur inside the car. For example, while talking inside the car, Al passes on advice from Ma, saying, “Ma give me a lot a stuff to tell you. She says don’t drink nothin’, an’ don’t get in no argument, an’ don’t fight nobody” (396). In one poignant scene also narrated from inside the car, Tom provides the only glimpse of his prison life. This is one of the few passages that offer an internal perspective of Tom. It begins with Al confronting Tom, asking “When ya killed that fella—did—did ya ever dream about it or anything? Did it worry ya?” to which Tom answers, “Sure. I was sorry ’cause he was dead” (397). But as their truck “bounced noisily along,” Tom is more open and explains to Al about prison:

“Look here, Al, I’ll tell you one thing—the jail house is jus’ a kind a way a drivin’ a guy slowly nuts. See? An’ they go nuts, and you see ‘em an’ hear ‘em, an’ pretty soon you don’ know if you’re nuts or not. When they get to screamin’ in the night sometimes you think it’s you doin’ the screamin’—an’ sometimes it is.” (398)

The passage’s evocation of brotherly bonding is a moment inspired by the intimacy of the car’s interior. Thus, as Steinbeck writes it, dialogue within the car’s interior space is written as personal and meaningful, and, as such, the car’s interior reveals latent sacred

undertones. Furthermore, the moment highlights their devotion to one another as Tom shares intimate details of his life.

The automobile's interior as a site of sacredness especially gains prominence in scenes where the family begins to dream about their future. While the family rides together, Rose of Sharon articulates her hope. Upon arriving in California, she says, "Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fac'try. An' he's gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an' maybe later have his own store" (384). Her additional hope for "a *doctor*" for the baby and for giving birth in the safety of a "hospiddle" highlights Rose of Sharon's devotion to family. Likewise, the other Joads are not immune to such dreaming, especially when they are comfortably inside the sacred space of their jalopy. Al for one displays it on a ride with Tom, and the car interior is again a narrative space engendering hopeful wishes. When he divulges that he owns six dollars and he tries persuade Tom to get "a couple pints an' go down the line," Al extends his dreaming and claims, "I'm gonna ride aroun' much. I'm gonna get married. I'm gonna have me a hell of a time when we get to California" (397). Al's wish for marriage especially highlights his devotion to family.

Set apart from the profane world and its profane objects, the Hudson not only draws the family together, but it also is a space instilling the Joads with hope and comfort. The car is a cloister from the grim, dust-bowl world. This paradigm continues when observing the migrant camps, for these spaces are, like the jalopies' interior, sites of sacredness. The suggested feeling of their shared humanity provides its own subtle spiritual dynamic. The novel's first roadside encampment evidences this and its example

of the migrant community spirit is one which continues throughout the narrative. In this particular scene, the Joads bond with families from Kansas and Arkansas, and the dialogue between them is convivial and accepting: “Well, we’re proud to meet you folks,” one responds, and when they adopt Wilson and his wife, the car is the primary means of keeping the community together as they reason how “that car’ll take six easy” (352). In chapter 17, Steinbeck explicitly describes this community when he writes that “the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all” and that “the twenty were one” (416). For example, Peter Lisca’s “The Dynamics of Community in *The Grapes of Wrath*” argues the novel as a narrative which dramatizes “community experience” (87). His essay, however, neglects the automobile’s role as a facilitator of this community, for it is the Joads’ Hudson which preserves the family and their culture as they move from one culturally distinct geography to another.

The automobile preserves the Joads’ culture as they travel through different geographies and their respective cultures. Essentially, the truck ensures the family’s cultural integrity as it transports the Joads from one geographical space to another. Critic George Henderson approaches *The Grapes of Wrath* from the vantage point of spatial geography in his essay “John Steinbeck’s Spatial Inauguration in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” arguing that “meaning radiates” from “social and geographical relationships” (102). The highway life is a “transitional society” and the novel’s document of this mass migration is “a drama of settlement” (104). Arguing a similar line of thinking in “John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* as a Primer for Cultural Geography,” Christopher J. Salter considers the novel as the characters’ progression through “a variety of distinct physical

and cultural regions” (138). These critics agree that the novel dramatizes the Joads’ passage through (and to) several distinctly separate geographical regions which necessarily are culturally different; and the critics further concur that the jalopy is the sole transport to and through these regions. Importantly, the car is the signature space for the migrant and the migrant camp. It is the migrant family’s center and as such is a site of sacredness.

Yet these scenes especially illuminate Steinbeck’s subversive view of the automobile, for the migrant camps recognize the manifest difficulty of mass migration. For one, scenes indicate the inability of the migrants to find work, and, for another, they highlight employers exploiting this condition. A fellow migrant dispels Pa’s hope for work as, grasping an orange handbill advertising work, the migrant relates the practice of printing more fliers than jobs:

It don’t make no sense. This fella wants eight hundred men. So he prints up five thousand of them things an’ maybe twenty thousand people sees ’em. An maybe two-three thousan’ folks gets movin’ account a this here han’bill. Folks that’s crazy with worry. (412).

In another scene, Steinbeck uses Casy to voice a similar concern and again criticize the automobile’s role in aiding migration. When a gas attendant states, “I jus’ don’t know what the country’s comin’ to,” Casy reponds,

I been walkin’ aroun’ in the country. Ever’body’s askin’ that. What we comin’ to? Seems to me we don’t never come to nothin’. Always on the

way. Always goin' and goin'. Why don't folks think about that? They's movement now. People moving. We know why, an' we know how. (344)

While Casy's portrait emphasizes America's mobility, it yet questions a purpose in that constant movement. Moreover, the automobile specifically facilitates this movement, for as Casy acknowledges, we indeed know *how* people move—via their automobiles.

### **3.3. The Essex as Hazel Motes' Church on Wheels in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood***

The elements of consumerism in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, such *Wise Blood* (1952), anticipate the novels of Harry Crews, John Updike, and Don DeLillo, as discussed in chapter 4. Commenting on *Wise Blood*, Jon Lance Bacon emphasizes O'Connor's commercial themes in "A Fondness for Supermarkets: *Wise Blood* and Consumer Culture," arguing that Hazel Motes is a character defined by materialism who "links his identity with a product of American industry, a car" (34-35). Similarly, Irving Malin comments in "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque," that objects in *Wise Blood* "are more 'alive' than the flat characters who [...] have become 'objective'" (110).

However, close inspection of O'Connor's objects, especially the automobile, ultimately reveals a stronger kinship with the religious-themed works of John Steinbeck (discussed above) and James Agee (discussed below). Despite undertones of consumption, the dominant spatial paradigm in her work presents the car as a site of sacredness. In contrast to Steinbeck and Agee, whose automobiles highlight positive character qualities such as devotion (Steinbeck) and faith (Agee), O'Connor's automobile

reveals her main character's hubris. While she uses the automobile similarly in short stories such as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," hubris is especially pronounced in *Wise Blood*. Hazel Motes presumes himself able to create a church that expresses more spiritual truth than Christianity. As such, O'Connor's novel is especially critical of the American perception of the automobile.

I examine the religious roots of O'Connor's fiction and suggest that *Wise Blood*'s automobile is contained in a heavily religious narrative space. Thus the Essex as Haze's portable Church Without Christ simply extends an already pervasive theme. I then point out the tight, almost simultaneous integration of the car with character to highlight how the automobile as a site of sacredness results from Hazel Motes' own imagined vision for the vehicle. Necessarily his estimation of the car is distorted and misguided, for Haze exhibits an irrational dependence upon a car that is far from reliable, which is further evidence of his peculiar hubris. Then I look at Hoover Shoats, his car, and his self-created Church as contrasting textual images. I argue that Shoats proves Haze's hubris since Haze's religion is so easily mocked and undone by Shoats' appearance.

The heavily religious themes of O'Connor's fiction contribute to the sacred nature of the car in her fiction. Critics have made much of the Christian aspects of her fiction. Frederick J. Hoffman asserts, "In almost all of Miss O'Connor's fiction, the central crisis involves a confrontation with Jesus" (35). Susan Srigley in "Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art" reads O'Connor's fiction through biblical allusion, which she argues recalls images of the South's "collective, religious past" (56). Michael Kreyling's introduction to *New Essays on 'Wise Blood'* recognizes the "Christian tradition" which

gives O'Connor's work "a [...]unity, wholeness, and transcendental authority" (4). I read her fiction along similar lines as Steinbeck's and Agee's, in which the automobile is an object placed in a narrative space saturated with religious overtones. Thus O'Connor's sacred automobile extends the novel's theme.

To start with a general observation, the automobile has a tight synchronicity with the plot. The car and Haze reflect one another. For example, Haze buys the car (exposition), drives it around and uses it for preaching (rising action), employs it to kill another (climax), and finally pushes it over a cliff to its "death" (falling action and denouement). Similarly, Haze's creation of the Church Without Christ importantly parallels his purchase of the Essex; the rise of the Church coincides with the Essex's "running smoothly" (88); Haze's and the Church's decline occurs when he uses the car to kill Hoover Shoats and his mimic-Church Without Christ; and Haze and the Church effectively expire when the car is pushed over the cliff. Srigley similarly argues that "the image of the car he buys, drives, preaches from, and eventually loses, suggest the freedom, movement, and choice of his soul" (71).

The car is more than a structural element, however. It especially highlights Haze's hubris, for in *Wise Blood* Haze infuses the automobile with his self-created religion. Thus the car projects sacredness so that the automobile and the narrative focalization agree with Haze's perception and validation of it. Thus, O'Connor's ironic narrative perspective makes the reader question the legitimacy of Haze's religious beliefs, and the novel questions the pitfalls of confusing the spiritual with the material. Pressing a similar theme, John Desmond reads the car as a "negative image" which Haze "invests

[...] falsely with a spiritual meaning” (qtd. in Srigley 71). While he fails to explicitly state it, Desmond’s viewpoint suggests that O’Connor’s representation of the car is subversive. While it remains unproven that the spiritual investment Haze gives the car is indeed false, *Wise Blood* certainly challenges the effect of the automobile upon Haze’s psychology. A few important scenes demonstrate this effect. The car is ultimately revealed as an object which the main character instills with great but misguided spiritual worth.

Haze borrows the idea of the automobile-church from his grandfather who used a Ford to similar ends. He replicates his grandfather’s behavior:

He was going to be a preacher like his grandfather [...]. His grandfather had traveled three counties in a Ford automobile. Every fourth Saturday he had driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting before he had the car door open. People gathered around his Ford [...]. He would climb up on the nose of it and preach from there and sometimes he would climb onto the top of it and shout down at them. (10)

So influential is Haze’s grandfather’s automotive evangelism that Haze “knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher” (11). His first act in starting his church is, indeed, purchasing a car (37).

Yet in *Wise Blood*’s first automobile passage, Hazel Motes’ imagined perception of the junker Essex indicates that his vision of the car is self-deceiving, for Haze’s valuation of the car and a realistic appraisal of it are in serious conflict. The fact that Haze awakens one morning with the single thought that “he was going to buy a car” and

that he “had never thought of buying a car” before suggests that the action, in Haze’s deluded belief, is without provocation and intimates the divine origins of the idea (37). He returns to the car purchase’s divine origins when Haze later reflects that “his decision to buy a car” had come to him “out of his sleep and without any indication of it beforehand” (105). Yet, once Haze finds the car, the description immediately contradicts an image of perfection, and, as such, it especially indicates Haze’s skewed logic and, as James M. Mellard puts it, his “troubled” mentality (51). The scene witnesses how Haze’s hubris leads him to endow a nominally profane object with sacredness, and since O’Connor’s viewpoint focalizes on Haze, the car necessarily is a site of the sacredness which Haze imagines.

Yet, O’Connor’s careful prose provides a dual image of the car whereby the reader intuits the hubris of Haze’s vision of the car. For instance, when she writes that “one door was tied on with rope and that it had an oval window in the back,” the immediate image suggests a church’s nave, for in a church, this space is normally set apart from the congregation via a rope and is usually lit from behind by a giant window, commonly oval. Yet, the reader infers that the door is barely hanging onto the vehicle and must be secured by the rope. Additionally, when O’Connor states that “the back seat was missing but it had a two-by-four stretched across the seat frame to sit on,” the text suggests the car as owning a pew while, again, the reader envisions a car missing necessary seats. Moreover, her detail of “the two window glasses” which colored Haze “yellow [...] and distorted his shape” implies the effect of stained glass (38), thus amplifying the car’s image of sacredness. And to assure that the reader digests the

religious imagery of the automobile, O'Connor supplies a religious simile; the windshield wipers, she writes, "made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church" (41). Here indeed the automobile is a site of sacredness, for it images a church, perhaps one of the most sacred places designated by man. According to Eliade, the church "shares in an entirely different space from the buildings that surround it" and within it "the profane world is transcended" (25-26). As *Wise Blood* bears out, a church is the exact purpose for which Haze intends for the car; he uses it to front his Church Without Christ. The car, so fused with Haze's psychology, thus is a site of sacredness.

Further scrutiny of O'Connor's details especially reveals the car's image as constructed by Haze's distorted imagination. One cannot assume that a car bought for forty dollars in the post World-War II era an especially desirable vehicle. While the Essex was normally more affordable than other motor vehicles, selling for a low \$425 in its heyday in 1933 (Auto Editors 150), the condition of Haze's Essex indicates that it is an exceptionally poor value. For one, its location at "the back of the lot" displays the car's lack of appeal, for it cannot be relied upon to draw customers into the lot. Even the lot's owner and the boy employee acknowledge insecurity over the car's price, thus indicating a certain unnatural worth which Haze assigns the car. When Haze expresses interest in the car, the boy inquires, "How much do *you* [emphasis mine] think it's worth? [...] Give us a estimate"; the lot's owner seconds the boy's hedging, asking Haze, "Well, what *you* [emphasis mine] want to pay for it?" (38, 40). The great difficulty Haze has in driving the car further indicates the car as a poor investment. When trying to exit the lot, "the car shot backward because the man left it in reverse"; when he finally gets it going,

“he drove off crookedly”; and when driving on the street, Haze “had a hard time holding the car in the road” (41). Yet Haze is oblivious of the car’s various defects—a door that must be secured by rope, the absence of car seats, the misaligned frame, etc.—and he instead imagines the car as a thing with a sacred significance. His over-evaluation of the Essex and his belief that the car can serve as a site for his Church Without Christ reveal his self-inflated hubris. Haze intends to take a junker car and transform it into a sacred artifact.

Indeed, the car hood is Haze’s pulpit. From it, Haze preaches his self-created theology of the Church Without Christ. As Louis D. Rubin notes, Haze buys the Essex “to serve as his temple” (55). The car’s function as a temple necessarily makes the narrative space one of sacredness. However, textual clues reveal that Haze’s car-pulpit is part of a false religion. Haze thinks that his junker Essex and his self-generated religion can persuade people to reject Christ and redemption. One textual clue that suggests Haze’s hubris is the equation of Haze with the marquee lights, thus implying that Haze’s orations are mere theater. When Haze “climbed up on the nose” to preach the “lights around the [cinema] marquee were so bright that the moon moving overhead with a small procession of clouds behind it, looked pale and insignificant” (58). In this passage, O’Connor suggests the ability of man-made or false light (the marquee) to easily “cloud” or block out the natural god-made light (moonlight), while O’Connor also indicates that Haze’s performance is only showmanship and entertaining drama. Haze’s primary spectators are those going to or leaving shows, that is, those people already seeking entertainment and not religious conversion.

Further, *Wise Blood* suggests Haze is an imitator, a point O'Connor presses when narrating parallels between Haze and the blue sky. On a particular drive, O'Connor describes the sky as "just a little lighter blue than [Haze's] suit, clear and even, with only one cloud in it, a large blinding white one with curls and a beard" (66). The anthropomorphic image of the cloud projects a standard conception of God with his white beard and curls, while its significance as the sole cloud in the sky suggests the monotheistic doctrine of Christianity. That Haze's suit is the same color as the sky indicates the relationship between the two, but the novel ultimately reveals Haze is a "dressed-up" version of God. In his first sermon, Haze's position atop the car hood further suggests him (and his preaching) is mere ornamentation, much like a hood ornament whose primary purpose is to sell an image. Again, the car is a site of sacredness, for Haze uses it to preach his Church Without Christ. Yet what *Wise Blood* and its sacred auto reveal is a character of unrestrained hubris.

To emphasize Haze's misaligned perception of the car's sacredness, the text presses Haze's subjective judgment of the Essex as a "good car" is especially suspicious. Haze fuses the material object with sacredness so that in defense of himself (and his Church Without Christ) he proclaims, "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified," as if that settles the dispute (64). Yet, the car continually breaks down. In fact, the novel narrates several scenes where it fails to run, thus reinforcing a reading of the car as a fallible and imperfect object, despite the sacredness which it catalyzes in the text. For one, Haze drives the car from one garage to another seeking a mechanic who can "put the car in the best shape overnight," while at another point when the car breaks down, Haze

expresses doubt when he asks the mechanic underneath the hood, “What’s wrong in there? [...] It’s a good car, ain’t it?” (65, 71). Importantly, these scenes suggest Haze is unqualified to properly front a new religion, especially since his “pulpit” is so undependable.

Further, the text suggests a reason for the breakdown of the car, one that especially reveals Haze’s hubris. O’Connor writes, “There were two instruments on the dashboard with needles that pointed dizzily in first one direction and then another, but they worked on a private system, independent of the whole car” (70). Indeed, the following description diagnoses the problem with Haze’s Church Without Christ, suggesting it is an individual “private system” in conflict with a holistic vision. Moreover, like the car, the Church Without Christ has no clear direction, a point reinforced when considering Haze’s aimless driving from one garage to another. Yet, the car continues to be a site of sacredness, for Haze’s self-confidence does not flag. He remains stubbornly devoted to his car and his dogma of the Church Without Christ. As example, consider the following exchange. While having the car repaired, Haze refuses to recognize the auto’s defects and instead tells the mechanic, “This car’ll get me anywhere I want to go. It may stop here and there but it won’t stop permanent” (72). Haze similarly invests in his self-made religion.

As the novel continues, *Wise Blood* highlights Haze’s hubris by highlighting the flaws in his religion. Indeed, the Church Without Christ is narrated as more problematic than the traditional Christianity which Haze attempts to rebuke. When Haze’s car breaks down (again), Haze refuses to abandon it to a parking lot, and he instead sleeps in

it. When Haze admits concern that “someone would be able to steal it” (90), he implies a loss greater than the simple theft of a material object (90), for stealing the car would bereave Haze of his car *and* his religion, as the two are inter-dependent. The moment questions the actual sacredness of Haze’s car and his religion since both are so vulnerable to theft. O’Connor’s point calls into question the effect of the automobile upon Haze. Specifically, O’Connor makes ironic use of the automobile as a site of sacredness.

The arrival of Shoats and his own “rat-colored” car especially documents Haze’s hubris, for it highlights his religion’s susceptibility to mimicry and additionally indicates his religion’s inauthenticity; indeed it is easily replicated and mocked. As with Haze, the car is also Shoats’ church on wheels, for Shoats’ car serves as a pulpit from which his hired Prophet similarly espouses his own Church Without Christ. Likewise, the car is again a site of sacredness. Yet Shoats especially flaunts the financial advantages of his Church Without Christ, thus emphasizing the questionable motives for preaching an adversarial religion. For example, Shoats hires the Prophet to do the preaching, thus making Shoats less a prophet and more an entrepreneur and manager of a new religion. In proof, O’Connor narrates that on Shoats’ first night, he earns \$15.35, but he only pays the hired Prophet “three dollars [...] for his services and the use of his car” (113).

Not unexpectedly, Shoats’ arrival greatly upsets Haze, and as he schemes of ways to deal with the problem, Haze initially considers geographically transplanting his religion. As Haze reasons through the situation, he considers making “a new start” and transplanting his Church Without Christ to another city. This choice depends entirely on “the advantage of having a car,” for the Essex allows Haze to move “fast, in privacy, to

the place you wanted to be” (105). Yet while Haze imagines his car is the sacred center for his religion, the passage more importantly recognizes his church is unfixed and not owning a center. The sacredness which the Essex represents is false and meant to highlight Haze’s excessive self-confidence. Comparing Haze’s thoughts to Eliade’s remarks on the profane suggests Haze’s Church Without Christ is more profane than sacred. Eliade writes that with the profane a “fixed point” does not exist and that “it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day” (23). In contrast, a sacred space is fixed and necessarily rooted and not as whimsical as Haze’s Church Without Christ. So unsettled is Haze’s Church Without Christ that his first immediate resolve upon Shoats’ appearance is to run off to “some other city” where he can “preach the truth” (107). Again, O’Connor relies upon irony for the effect of sacredness. To Haze, the car *is* a site of sacredness; but to the reader, the moment questions the reality of such an automobile.

Ultimately, Haze reacts violently to Shoats and attacks his Prophet with the Essex. The scene imitates a car chase when Haze runs down and kills Shoats’ hired Prophet. The combat between their similarly-styled religions is born out by their cars, and their cars’ collision indicates the Church Without Christ’s collapse. The sacredness which the cars catalyze is in decline while, in turn, Haze’s hubris is being exposed. As Fredrick J. Hoffman articulates in “The Search for Redemption: Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” Haze “deliberately [...] destroys himself” (38)—a point which Haze’s deliberate car crash specifically enacts. After the Essex runs over the Prophet, the car exhibits serious malfunctions; it is indeed falling apart. To repair it, Haze carries the Essex to a nearby

garage, but the mechanic is skeptical about the car being able to carry Haze very far. He relates a multitude of problems: there “was a leak in the gas tank and two in the radiator” and “the rear tire would probably last twenty miles if he went slow” (116). Yet, Haze holds onto his car until a policeman (a figure of law and order) finally pushes the Essex over the thirty foot cliff. Here, O’Connor images a car completely destroyed: “The car landed on its top, with the three wheels that stayed on, spinning. The motor bounced out and rolled some distance away and various odd pieces scattered this way and that” (118). Importantly, the car is no longer a site of sacredness; the Essex is ruined and by proxy, so too is Haze’s Church Without Christ.

Moreover, the destruction of the car effectively extinguishes Haze’s self-confident hubris. For one, Haze never preaches again. For another, shortly after the car’s “death,” Haze expires. Ironically, when Haze dies in the back seat of the “squad car,” the policemen “didn’t notice and took him on the landlady’s” (131). His uneventful and largely unrecognized death invalidates Haze and provides him less attention than his hubris might have led him to believe he deserved. It certainly checks Haze’s hubris, a thing which Enoch Emory, a secondary character of the novel, points out: “You act like you think you got wiser blood than anybody else,” Enoch accuses, “but you ain’t” (23). While giving definition to O’Connor’s title (*Wise Blood*), Enoch calls attention to Haze’s confused and self-presumptive hubris, a quality which compels Haze to create a car-dependent and reactionary Church Without Christ. Yet throughout the novel, his Church Without Christ only ever has one member—himself. O’Connor writes,

Nothing was working the way Haze had expected it to. He had spent every evening preaching, but the membership of the Church Without Christ was still only one person: himself. (83)

And so the novel ends in the same predicament. While Haze believed that his car and his Church would provide fulfillment, O'Connor indicates the truth is otherwise.

### **3.4. Death by a Model T: Miracle and Divine Intervention in James Agee's *A Death in the Family***

James Agee's novel *A Death in the Family* (1957) recalls the fictional cars which represent violence such as those novels discussed in chapter 2, for *A Death in the Family*'s narrative revolves around a car wreck. The car wreck, in fact, is the novel's central event and all action is subservient to it. Yet, despite the accident resulting in a fatality (a death in the family), Agee refreshes the car-wreck trope so that instead of the typical violent effects of the accident, Agee's narrative produces metaphors of sacredness and religious strengthening. The car in *A Death in the Family* is a site of sacredness, and this sacredness highlights the faith of Mary, Jay's wife, and Rufus, their son. However, Agee ultimately questions the automobile's place in society by writing characters that seem immune to its violent effects. Indeed, Mary and Rufus transform violence *into* sacredness, suggesting René Girard's argument for sacrifice's central relationship to violence. That is, to gain religious understanding, Mary and Rufus understand Jay's death as a sacrifice.

Below, I first examine the autobiographical roots of *A Death in the Family*. I highlight Agee's fictionalized spiritual response to a tragic event (the accidental death of Jay Follett). Especially important in Agee's craft is his decision to omit the car wreck from the novel and to instead reveal the story through dialogue and repetition, which allows an examination of the death's effect upon Mary and Rufus. Thus, instead of being physically present, the car is a ghosted presence in the novel. I next highlight Agee's use of imagery where he contrasts the industrial city with images of nature, which, as I argue, suggests contrasting concepts of the profane and the sacred, respectively. I then engage the story of the car accident which, in addition to several redactions of the event, moreover emphasizes Jay's death as miraculous since he manifests no physical evidence of the tragic accident. In this way, the novel especially produces a car which is a site of sacredness, for it provokes individual spiritual responses from Mary and Rufus; Mary resorts to religious acts of genuflection and prayerful thanks while Rufus comes to understand notions of design and order. Both find their faith strengthened by the car accident and Jay's death. Lastly, by noting its effect upon the rural community, I argue that the car narrative is a device of mythmaking—a point which especially makes the automobile death a particular site of sacredness.

Published posthumously in 1957, the novel's 1916 setting locates the action to the heyday of Henry Ford and his Model T. Moreover, the novel's autobiographical nature especially speaks to it being a work involved in a certain degree of cultural cross-talking, so that we can understand it is a dual-reflection of two separate historical periods: the 1910s (the work's setting) and 1950s (the work's publication). *A Death in the Family's*

central action and the catalyst for Agee's novel of grief and coping—the death of husband/father Jay Follett—implicates the car historically and fictionally, for it is a 1916 Model T which Agee then remembers and (re)produces in his “autobiographical novel,” as Alfred Kazin labels it (3). Writing in the New York Times article “A Wounded Life: A Father ‘Perfect in Death,’” Kazin writes, “Of all the experiences that Agee turned with desperate intensity into publishable works, the deepest and most harrowing, the most ineradicable in its influence on his life, was the death of his father” (3).

The similarities between the novel and Agee's father's death are striking. From his own experience, Agee lifts the father's age (36), name (Jay), and the circumstances of his death, which in both cases is caused by a car's defective cotter pin; even the fictional eight-year-old Rufus borrows Agee's middle name (Kazin 3). Indeed, Agee's changes are slight. He increases Rufus's age by two years and changes the mother's and sister's names, but commenting on this latter point, Kazin notes that their real names were kept “almost to the end of his work” (3). Agee's striving for narrative fidelity and his desire to accurately portray his father's fatality lends the work credence as its own historical memory document. The car wreck's indelible imprint upon young Agee is the one written upon Rufus, and to the fictional Rufus, the car wreck and the father's death will be as Kazin describes its effect upon Agee: “a wound that never healed” (3). As I show below, Rufus especially interprets the design elements of this event, a thing which is manifestly sacred.

However, the work is not entirely autobiographically, especially when we examine the metaphorical ends to which Agee employs the automobile's fatality. Careful

to respect the work as fiction and skeptical of it as complete autobiography, Victor A. Kramer instead calls *A Death in the Family* an “autobiographical remembrance” (111), a phrase which recognizes a certain creative license to the work. Even more adamantly, Agee’s long-time friend and religious advisor Father Flye defends the novel as fiction, but his statement to a literary panel still vexes the issue: “This is fiction,” Father Flye asserts, “and should be responded to as such, but if you want to know, those [the breaking cotter pin and resulting fatal head injury] are the identical circumstances under which James Agee’s father died” (“*Death Panel*” 206). Certainly, these issues complicate my own examination, but while the novel may be based upon a certain historical accuracy, Agee’s fictionalization of the event writes a car wreck that produces sacredness, a thing that is certainly born more of a creative imagination and not a rigid historical recreation. Moreover, as a work of autobiographical fiction, *A Death in the Family* owes much to Agee’s training in non-fiction writing where Agee crafted the art of transforming real life into metaphor. According to Jonathan Morse in “James Agee, Southern Literature, and the Domain of Metaphor,” Agee’s work often assumes this type of division or categorization which Morse describes as “metaphoric in intent” (316). Using Agee’s well-known documentary writing in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Morse isolates the tenant family as an instance indicative of Agee’s technique of metaphoric categorization. Morse argues that Agee molds the tenant family to agree with “a religious tradition whose goal is to help us see by interceding between us and the terrifying unknown of our full reality” (316). According to Morse, Agee’s tenant family ceases being an historical document and instead become religiously iconic. The effect is similar in *A Death in the*

*Family*, where the Folletts are cast in scenes of religious context. The novel's logic suggests rural life is engendering family bonding while the car punctuates the scenes, delivering its unhappy and traumatic news and disrupting the family tranquility. Thus, Agee's car functions similarly to those cars in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* which are intrusive and penetrate various geographical spaces. Yet the family's (especially Mary's) interpretation of the accident and Jay's death is manifestly sacred. Moreover, the effect of their sacred interpretation firms Mary's and Rufus's faith. Southern writers like Agee use history to "moralize the phenomena of life by turning them into metaphors" (Morse 316). *A Death in the Family's* central metaphor, as I argue, is the car fatality. Agee shapes the narrative space of the automobile accident to be a site of sacredness.

Most interesting in Agee's fictionalization of his father's death is his decision to omit the accident scene from the narrative and instead reveal it through a series of dialogue exchanges. This narrative positioning effectively eliminates the car's physical presence, and the car is a ghost or absence around which the narrative revolves. It is a move which is strikingly different from other works such as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. In these works the car is often visually present and physically occupies narrative space. In contrast however, Agee's fiction parallels a narrative device such as those found in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, or more especially, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In both works characters speak around or about an absented object (or person)—for Williams the absent Stephen and for Beckett the never-to-appear Godot. For Agee it is the car which is always invisible.

Rearticulating Maurice Blanchot's theory of the poetic neuter—a conception which best articulates Agee's narrative device—Christopher Bident relates that the poetic neuter is the inherent condition of objects who present “presence as an absence”; the neuter is “a substance without a substance, constantly transforming itself or being transformed” (16, 22). Agee's automobile is specifically made present by its absence. As a material object it does not exist, but it is instead a non-corporeal artifact made important by its structural integration into the novel and its effect upon their characters. Moreover, according to Bident, the poetic neuter “unsettles and unbalances each and every paradigm” (30). The automobile as poetic neuter certainly creates a sacredness which evidences Mary's strengthened faith and Rufus's growing faith in a concept of design.

Despite the consistent absence of the corporeal automobile, one slight anomaly does exist. In an early scene when Jay leaves to check on his ailing father, Jay's automobile and Mary are simultaneously present in the narrative. Yet even in this passage the car is never seen, but is only heard by Mary, who deduces its presence through familiar sounds. Even before Jay enters the car parked in the barn, Mary stands on their porch and metaphorically watches when Jay disappears “into the absolute darkness” (33). While a statement of obvious foreshadowing, the passage also indicates the car is unseen and hidden in the darkened barn-turned-garage. Sound, however, gives presence to the automobile. To replicate the noise of a cranking and departing automobile, Agee strings together syllables that are effective as onomatopoeia, but are ultimately senseless. The passage specifically recognizes how Mary is unable to

understand the car, a point which returns when Mary later attempts to translate or “understand” the automobile fatality. A few lines should illustrate this effect. Here’s the car coming to life: “*Ughh-hy wh yuh: Wheek*” or “*Whughughyhh*” or “*utta wawwwwk/Craawwrk?*” (33-34). While present through sound, the car is yet invisible, shrouded in the symbolically-charged dark night. Thematically, the car’s invisibility is a central tenet of *A Death in the Family*, for it is a novel about the unseen, especially as it relates to sacredness. Importantly, the absent car creates one of the several mysteries which the work prods at.

To emphasize a division between the sacred and the profane, Agee first narrates Jay’s journey through the rural town which teases out themes of darkness and other suggestively profane imagery. For example, the passage which opens chapter 3 strengthens the association between the city and the profane. Described as “faint skeins of steel, blocked shadows, little squares of steam” (35), the railroad yards with their squared constructions and puffs of steam evidence the industrial world, while opposite the yard are further indications of the effects of city life: “dark vacant lots, pull billboards, the darker blocks of small sleeping buildings, an occasional light” (35). The metaphorical intent of Agee’s “occasional light” cannot be missed, for it suggests a city shrouded in darkness where light (which in *A Death in the Family* is symbolically religious) is scarce. Agee’s description highlights the secular urbanity of the industrial city. Pointedly, this world juxtaposes the family home which dominates the novel’s setting. Moreover, as the family setting becomes increasingly spiritual, the city is its primary contrast. In proposing a definition of the sacred, Eliade remarks, “The first

possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*” (10). Thus, while the family and their belief in Jay’s miraculous death presents itself (to them at least) as a sacred act, the city and its industrial steel is, by default, profane.

In addition, the above scene also suggests that nature is another oppositional image to the city and the profane. While the contrast here is rather subtle, nature re-emerges at the novel’s end when Agee plies the notion of the butterfly and the robin to highlight notions of design, thus making the understanding of this passage’s natural imagery significant in retrospect. When Jay leaves the city and boards the river ferry, the scene is ripe with bucolic imagery. Here, Jay notices “the surface of the river” and the “back light which could not as yet be clearly discerned in the sky”; Agee writes that the water “mumbled,” and he uses a pastoral image in a simile to describe the trees: “along both banks the trees which crowded the water like drinking cattle began to take on distinctness to one another” (37). Agee juxtaposes the ferry-boat ride’s natural imagery to the industrial world’s dark and empty descriptions and establishes an obvious contrast. And while these passages suggest that the two worlds (profane city and sacred nature) are incompatible and incongruent, what *A Death in the Family* narrates is the “collision” of them. The novel thus offers simultaneous commentary on death’s *and automotive technology’s* affect upon a family and their rural existence. Coming to a similar realization, Kramer states that the novel “implies how the city, with its trolley and automobiles, was affecting lives” (147). The car is the literal and figurative metaphor for examining its influence and its collision with the rural world. The suggested effect of this collision is spiritual firming (through Mary) and a deeper understanding of design

(through Rufus). Yet, while the characters ignore the negative effects of the automobile accident, Agee makes that loss obvious by having both characters wrestle with Jay's death.

*A Death in the Family's* recursive narration revisits the car accident, and each moment reshapes the accident into a sacred event. When Mary receives the first suggestion of Jay's accident, the vague information—"your husband has been in an accident" (93)—opens the event which dominates the narrative space and which Agee recycles throughout the text, increasingly adding details with each redaction of the accident. In the initial introductory scene, Agee emphasizes the event's unexpected penetration of the family's quiet tranquility by having another city technology, the telephone, deliver the news and likewise disrupt the morning's daily activities. The brief phrase about her husband's accident which Mary receives via the telephone begins the novel's controlling idea, and the story of the car accident and its affect upon Jay's family unfolds. Despite the automobile's invisibility, the car narrative pervades the texts and the automobile is an ever-present object existing in the novel's white space, or as Blanchot would have it, the automobile is the novel's poetic neuter. This poetic neuter catalyzes sacredness as evidenced in the passages which follow Mary's reception of the news, for Mary begins coping with the accident by performing sacred acts such as praying.

First, however, Mary performs distracting domestic chores such as fluffing the pillows in their bedroom, and while the reader cannot account for the automobile in physical terms, they also cannot discount its undeniable presence in these scenes, for the automobile accident yet is perpetually present, lodged in Mary's (and the reader's) minds.

Additionally, its presence manifests itself in religious tones; it is a site for sacredness, especially as evidenced by the passages where Mary confirms her faith. She makes “the sign of the cross again, slowly, deeply, and widely upon herself,” gathering “strength and quiet” from the ritual (97). Importantly, Mary’s unquestioning prayers indicate her ready acceptance of the accident: “ ‘Thy will be done’ ,” she thinks to herself while genuflecting at bedside (97). Immediately, Agee deflates the violent trauma of the accident and instead produces a narrative laden with heavy religious overtones. Thus, instead of writing a car which is a site of violence, Agee produces a narrative space whereby the car is a site of sacredness. It is a move which recognizes what Gayle Whittier describes as Agee’s “lifelong preoccupation with the place of religion in human life” (177). Writing in similar vein, Kazin reasons that the novel reflects Agee’s own “perpetual search for a God he could believe in” after his father’s death (3). While the car is an invisible, absented object in the text, it yet initiates the novel’s controlling idea and is the cause of the religiously-charged narrative, one that especially evidences the firming of Mary’s faith.

While the gathered family awaits news of Jay’s condition, Agee explicitly engages the automobile through dialogue. Here, Agee’s narrative purpose is twofold. For one, the dialogue creates narrative tension and mystery while characters (and readers) await further details to the puzzle of Jay’s accident. For another, the idle and ultimately inconsequential family exchanges speak to the manner in which talk of the automobile accident would offer a more meaningful discussion. To highlight their conversation’s mundane nature, Agee shows Mary working out mathematical probabilities aloud when

she attempts to estimate the time it would take Andrew to arrive at the accident and then report back: “[S]upposing he goes thirty miles an hour, that’s twelve miles in, let’s see,” she guesses (101). Yet while this rather inane discussion covers up the more important trauma of the accident, the automobile is the unwritten event around which the dialogue orbits. The effect is one of spatial simultaneity whereby the automobile occupies the unwritten white space of the “black” text.

While the narrative continues to unfold, Agee begins transposing the car image from a profane and spiritually-dead object to one which is a site of sacredness. For example, when Andrew returns and announces that Jay “was instantly killed” (120), Mary and the grieving family gain solace from the news, reading Jay’s instant death as an indication of God’s mercy. Mary is the first to seize upon this hope, asking for assurance from Andrew: “you say he didn’t have to suffer. *Instantly*, you said” (122). Mary’s sister Hannah reaffirms, “He can’t have suffered, Mary, not even for a fraction of a second” (123). At this point, Mary adds an uncanny acknowledgment of thanks, saying to Andrew, “I needed to realize what you told and I thank God for it” (123). Certainly, this is an atypical response when hearing about a husband’s death. Yet as the novel continues, Mary increasingly gains strength from the event; her faith is, ironically, reaffirmed when more details of Jay’s death arrive.

Even more indicative of the paradigm of automobile’s sacredness is the image Agee provides of a peaceful, instant death and of a body miraculously unmarked, a move which lessens the visual shock that such scenes achieved in previous texts. Andrew relates, “There was just one mark on his body,” adding that it was “[r]ight at the exact

point of the chin, a small bruise” (122). Agee’s narrative choice casts the accident in religious terms, for characters intuit divine intervention in Jay’s instant death; how else is one to explain a car fatality that despite tossing the victim from a crashing vehicle, yet leaves the body perfectly intact? Mary especially emphasizes divinity when she relates the episode to the children, telling Catherine and Rufus that “something happened in the auto, and God took him from us, quickly, without any pain, and took him away to heaven” (225). Mary interprets the miraculous death as a religious sign, a thing that according to Eliade “put[s] an end to the tension and anxiety caused by [...] disorientation” (28). Moreover, a sign, as Eliade asserts, is “fraught with religious meaning” and “suffices to indicate the sacredness of a place” or an event (27). Thus Mary especially infuses the car with sacredness by reading the fatality as a sacred sign.

Rufus, however, relies upon the butterfly for his sign of the accident’s sacredness, for the episode of the often-commented upon butterfly on the coffin especially religiously contextualizes the accident. It also returns the novel’s opening imagery of nature which Agee writes is something sacred and opposed to the industrial and the profane. As Rufus “clearly” imagines the butterfly flying vaguely, but suggestively “upwards,” he is overwhelmed with the feeling “that a special and good thing was happening” and that, more importantly, “it was good for his father” (276). Thus Rufus rationalizes his father’s death is, like the butterfly, “Miraculous. Magnificent” (276). Additionally, Rufus intuits how the accident leads his uncle to “believing in God,” an act which contradicts his uncle’s typical opinion of God. Normally, the uncle talks of God “as if he disliked Him” and “disliked people who believed in Him” (276). The tragically violent event is thus

transformed into a site of sacredness, and additionally, Rufus's faith is strengthened by observing the accident's affect upon his uncle and by also allowing Rufus to conceptualize design in his father's metaphorical "rise" to heaven.

When Andrew finally reveals the cause of the accident, telling the family audience that a cotter pin which holds the steering mechanism together "had worked loose" and "fallen out," the car assumes a suggestively spiritual dynamic. The moment also announces the concept of design which Rufus will soon find faith in. Agee's focus upon the cotter pin indicates the intricate design of the automobile and its function is dependent upon even the smallest part. Agee pushes a concept of design so that the mechanical "design" of the car and its tightly integrated mechanical gears, pins, and parts serve as a textual analogy to natural design, a thing that is necessarily sacred. However, Agee especially points out the fallibility in the car's design; it is a thing that fails and, moreover, its failure causes death. In these passages, Agee's text presses a subversive image of the automobile. Yet for Rufus, the cotterpin is a tangible concept which helps him to understand design. When Rufus relates the significant importance of the cotterpin to a gathered group of schoolboys, the passage not only reemphasizes a concept of design, but it also acknowledges Rufus's own faith in it. Rufus adds that it was "just a chance in a million" to which another "gravely" concurs, "Just a chance in a million" (225). Rufus affirms his faith in design while the moment produces a spiritual quiet among the boys, an event which further evidences the car fatality is a sacred event. Agee suggests the car is an object of intricate and specific design, thereby reinforcing the

similarly “designed” natural world and perpetuating a theme which, in itself, is inherently sacred.

Lastly, the recursive format of the novel indicates the accident is an event more mythological than factual, and the automobile is the sacred object in the sacred story. The effect makes the car iconic. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss in his seminal work *Structural Anthropology*, a function of repetition—which is what Agee’s technique promotes—is “to render the structure of myth apparent” (229). Even more indicative of Jay’s accident is a mythological narrative is the community’s participation in the car-death narrative. When Rufus encounters the schoolboys, they display an awareness of the accident, and one member begins recounting the event to the group. For one, his account is a version transformed through several redactions; he received the story from his father who gleaned the narrative from the local newspaper who in turn necessarily acquired the tale from some other source. Such multiple redactions effectively qualify the narrative as myth. For another, the boy’s narrative exhibits misinformation. He relates that the car ran up “a eight-foot bank and then fell back and turned over and over and landed right on top of him,” and he further intimates that drunkenness is the accident’s cause (222). On the contrary, the car careened *down* an embankment, it did not land “right on top of him,” and Jay was indeed sober. As Lévi-Strauss indicates, however, myth shows a disregard for the facts and often “takes precedence over the *content* of the narrative”; he adds that “even through the worst translation,” the structural value of the myth “is preserved,” for the importance lies in “the *story* which it tells” and less in the story’s accuracy (204, 210). The important point for the boys is that they

participate in this narrative—even if their details are incorrect. This narrative binds them together as they share the experience. The discussion even provokes Rufus into imagining his father’s death, for as Rufus explains the accident to a group of schoolboy friends, they pause and, “In the silence [Rufus] could see the auto upside down with its wheels in the air and his father lying beside it with the little blue mark on his chin and on his lip” (225). The perfect vision of Jay’s death suggests divine intervention, and the car is, again, a site of sacredness. Rufus imagines Jay’s death is a sort of a sacrifice, and, by doing so, he transforms violence into sacredness. Agee’s novel, however, questions the automobile’s effect upon culture by creating characters that refuse to understand that the car facilitates violence. Instead, their sacred perception of the automobile blinds them the trauma of reality.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

By the 1960s, the car as a site of sacredness was in decline, and the novel communicated a perceived shift in automobile purchasing practices when the post-luxury phase of car buying began. Two important cultural changes facilitated the development of a new paradigm. One cultural change was the 1965 publication of Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile*. Nader makes the inherent flaws of automobile design strikingly transparent. Moreover, he shifts blame *away from* drivers and *onto* car manufacturers, thus questioning those sacred objects. Nader opens his work with a shocking statement that is anathema to a car loving culture: “For over half a century the automobile has brought death, injury, and the most

inestimable sorrow and deprivation to millions of people” (vii). He then proceeds to blame automobiles and their manufacturers for a lack of appropriate safety standards, arguing that the fault of automotive fatalities rests with the manufacturers and not with the drivers (42). By shifting blame onto manufacturers and their beloved products, Nader’s work had drastic repercussions on the public perception of automobiles. No longer could they honestly be uncritiqued sacred objects.

Another factor which aided the paradigm shift was the 1970s gas crisis. The crisis centered the public’s focus upon gas consumption and its financial cost. It further promoted the importation of cheaper, more fuel-efficient models made by Toyota, Mazda, and Honda. As foreign companies grabbed shares of the automotive market, the reign of the Big Three—Ford, GM, and Chrysler—ended. Styles that once made the auto so desirable, so sacred—big cars, big engines, and American made—became unsettled. A post-luxury period began when consumers made more financially sound car purchases.

Although the paradigm of sacredness is no longer dominant, it is still observable in American culture; it is found in novels and poetry published outside mid-century, and the paradigm is also a staple of popular music and television. These genres reinforce the dominant perception of cars. Here, I offer a sampling of the paradigm in other works. Obviously more examples exist that one could draw upon. Additionally, I remind that I am not arguing for work outside of fiction to represent cars subversively.

I start with an examples from the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates and Stephen King. Both are subversive. Joyce Carol Oates’ *Black Water* (1992) describes a car as a site of reflection, revelation, and discovery. The novel’s psychological reflection occurs inside a

submerged Toyota, and the car is a sacred space cut off from the world by the symbolically charged *black* river water. In itself, the event is traumatic, yet, the character's hope for salvation and its failure to occur undermine a positive image of the car. In fact, the car sustains a false hope—"He was gone but would come back to save her" (69) until, "the oxygen in this darkness" finally depleted (88), the protagonist eventually succumbs to the river's watery death. Stephen King's *Christine* (1983) is especially subversive in its narrative when an owner's love affair with his car is taken to an extreme. King narrates a car that acts like a jealous lover and strikes out when jealousy of another girl overtakes the car.

In turning to popular music, numerous examples are found of songwriters singing about their love of American cars. Woodie Guthrie's "Riding In My Car" (1954) especially captures the popular view of the automobile, for the song is a playful tune expressing the simple joys of car riding. In the second verse, Guthrie sings:

Take me riding in the car, car;  
Take me riding in the car, car;  
Take you riding in the car, car;  
I'll take you riding in my car. (5-8)

Guthrie's repetition of car throughout the song emphasizes it as a site of joy and happiness. Riding in the car promises an experience that is unique and special and unlike one any other object might provide. The Beach Boys chime in with several songs devoted to car admiration. Themes of the pleasure-giving ability of cars reoccur throughout several tunes, such as their 1960s hits "Little Deuce Coup," "Cherry, Cherry

Coup,” “Little Honda,” “Car Crazy Cutie,” and “Fun, Fun, Fun.” As the Beach Boys sing it, everything is “fun, fun, fun” until “daddy takes the T-bird away” (7-8).

Television especially documents America’s love of cars. Feel-good dramas such as *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-1985) and *Knight Rider* (1982-1986) represent cars that are a great benefit to their owners and to society. Such dramas extend the sacred paradigm. In *The Dukes of Hazzard*, for example, the Duke brothers love their souped up Dodge Charger so much that they name it, the General Lee. Despite the brothers’ constant battle with Hazzard county law officials, such as Boss Hogg and Roscoe P. Coletrane, the brothers usually perform acts of charity and good service while sporting around in the General Lee. *Knight Rider* represents a car, K.I.T.T., whose specific purpose is to help fight crime. The car is lavished with up-to-date technological gizmos that help in its fight against crime, and K.I.T.T even communicates with its driver and other characters on the show. The moment dramatizes a secret American desire to own a car that is virtually indestructible and to also have the car talk.

Lastly, I close this chapter with two poems that evidence a nuanced application of the paradigm: Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “Eight People On a Golf Course and One Bird of Freedom Flying Over” (1978) and Audre Lorde’s “A Poem for a Poet” (1970). Ferlinghetti specifically relates the car’s abilities to empower an individual while driving an automobile. Describing a round of golf, Ferlinghetti narrates a group’s differing viewpoints of the world, and one expresses his sacred perception of the car. Ferlinghetti writes,

A second man raises his head.  
I am King of the Car.  
The ear is my weapon. I drive all before me.  
Ye shall have no other gods.  
Watch out. I'm coming through. (8-12)

A poem of Audre Lorde's, however, shows another nuance of paradigm. Lorde's representation of the automobile resembles the one presented in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* where the automobile's interior is an imagined sacred space. In "A Poem for a Poet" (1970), Lorde writes,

I think of a coffin's quiet  
when I sit in the world of my car  
separate and observing  
with the windows closed and washed clean  
by the rain. I like to sit there  
watching other worlds pass. (1-6)

While the reference to the car as a coffin connotes a certain violence, coffin reinforces the speaker's division from the living world. When sitting in it, the car allows passive and distant voyeurism.

Despite its continued prevalence, the car as a site of sacredness no longer predominates in American novels past mid-century. It is replaced by cars that instead are sites of consumption. Cars in novels in the twentieth century's closing decades are represented in scenes of buying and selling. Fiction also highlights car features such as make, model, color, and accessories. The paradigm of consumption questions the effects of unchecked car consumption. Narrating characters with damaging relationships to cars,

the car as a benign consumer object is subverted, for the consumption paradigm is especially critical of car ownership.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE AUTOMOBILE AS A SITE OF CONSUMPTION

#### 4.1: Introduction

This chapter closes my twentieth century study of the automobile in American literature by examining texts published in the final three decades, specifically 1972-2003. In these years, I argue for the emergence of a final spatial paradigm whereby the automobile is written as a site of consumption. The three novels that I use to demonstrate this paradigm are: Harry Crews' *Car* (1972), John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* (1982), and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003). Through cars, characters consume and enact American habits of consumption. Sometimes their primary good of consumption is the automobile, or other times they consume goods related to the automobile, such as car options like radios or other interior furnishings. While these are not the only works exhibiting this paradigm, in these novels, the car is a dominant image making them excellent examples of the paradigm's nuances. I argue that these novels are subversive because they challenge the cultural perception that Americans form a positive relationship with their automobile(s). *Car*, *Rabbit Is Rich*, and *Cosmopolis* exaggerate the negative effects of car ownership, for characters imagine the self is wasted, judged, or replaced via car consumption.

Harry Crews' *Car* satirizes American consumption by narrating a character who eats (consumes) a car before a live televised audience; due to his failed consumption of

the 1971 Ford Maverick, the main character Herman Mack realizes himself wasted and commits suicide. The novel challenges America's preoccupation with and reliance upon cars. John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* evidences a character whose daily life involves the selling of (the consumption of) cars at Springer Motors. When riding in his Toyota Corolla, Rabbit Angstrom judges himself rich and happy, yet when witnessing his son Nelson's destruction of cars, Rabbit judges him a degenerate son. Updike threatens a positive image of cars by showing a character with an extreme emotional dependence upon them. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* creates a character who realizes himself through his white limousine; Eric Packer's meticulous interior decoration of his car indicates how goods define and replace identity. Like *Car*, *Cosmopolis* exaggerates the ends of consumption and threatens its positive image.

The rise of the automobile as a site of consumption is related to late twentieth century perceptions of America as a culture of consumption; the automobile became its signature material good. Rising gas prices—a result of the previously mentioned gas crisis—especially turn the consumer's attention to more fiscally savvy purchases. Thus, to a degree, car consumption is based on gas consumption, and the car enters a post-luxury phase when consumer interest is more utilitarian. An increase in fuel forces automobile manufacturers to incite consumption through heavier advertising campaigns and a steady increase in the availability of consumer options for their automobiles. Together, advertising and consumer options change American perceptions of the automobile. While cars are more visible in print advertisement, the American public also begins to understand the car's ability to be individualized to suit particular tastes. The

shift in literature is evident when juxtaposing representations of cars at the end of the twentieth century against previous descriptions.

Novels such as Harry Crews' *Car* or John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* offer meticulous descriptions of cars that, in addition to naming specific makes and models, usually further relate extras and optional features. In comparison, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) vaguely describes cars. For example, in one scene, Fitzgerald foregoes exacting diction that would reveal the car's make, model, or year and simply notes that "a new coupe" had wrecked in a ditch (58). Discerning a similar tendency, Matthew J. Bruccoli writes in an edited collection of essays on the novel that "*The Great Gatsby* provides very little in the way of sociological or anthropological data. Three cars are identified: Gatsby's Rolls-Royce [...], Nick's Dodge, and the Ford in Wilson's garage" ("Introduction" 7). Save a brief description of the Rolls-Royce, no further details are provided. Cars in the twentieth century's final three decades, however, provide plenty of sociological and anthropological information. In these novels, the automobile is treated as an object-commodity, one in which exact features and hardware become essential in narrative descriptions.

To understand the paradigm shift, it is important to grasp advertising's influential role in promoting American consumption. In "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," T. J. Jackson Lears admits advertising's dominant role in promoting a "culture of consumption"—his and fellow editor Richard Wightman Fox's branded tag for the new American consumer society. Lears argues that "religious and psychological changes"

have been overlooked in critiques of consumer culture, and he adds, “To thrive and spread, a consumer culture required more than a national apparatus of marketing and distribution; it also needed a favorable moral climate” (4). Lears argues that the “crucial moral change” in America involved “a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation [...] toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world” (4). Lears uncovers the roots that prefigure the paradigm shift and that explain America’s relationship to cars. Drawing on their research, it is easy to understand how cars transition from sites of sacredness to sites of consumption; culture did likewise. In this new culture, as the editors of *The Culture of Consumption* relate in their introduction, people are no longer “passive” consumers, but are instead “active consumers, preferring some commodities over others” (Fox and Lears X). Moreover, this culture “did not emerge full-blown at mid-century” but developed shortly thereafter (X). *The Culture of Consumption* further indicates the “abundance of televisions and automobiles” as a causal factor in the rise of a consumer-based culture.

By 1970, Americans were annually spending just over eighty-two billion dollars on cars; <sup>1</sup> new auto car purchases alone comprised almost twenty-two billion in sales revenue (*Historical Stats* 3:252). By 1999, the last year for available figures, sales revenues regarding the automobile reached over seven hundred billion dollars. Additionally, by 1970 over eighty-two percent of Americans owned at least one car (4:829). Even more telling is the percentage of families who own more than one car: twenty-eight percent (4:829). And by 1995, over two hundred billion cars were

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<sup>1</sup> This figure includes money spent on used and new automobiles, repairs, accessories, gasoline, road tolls, and insurance policies (*Historical Stats* 4:252)

registered to American owners (4:830). Car consumption dominated American consumer habits.

Crews and Updike write novels that reflect this culture. Their characters own (consume) multiple cars. DeLillo, on the other hand, writes a novel whose main character rides around in a car whose size and shape exudes extravagant consumption. All three novels represent the automobile as a site of consumption, and all three challenge (subvert) the perception of the car's role in American life.

#### **4.2: You Are What You Eat—Consumption as a Wasted Event in Harry Crews' *Car***

Perhaps no other novel in this study so fixes the automobile as a site of consumption than Harry Crews' *Car* (1972).<sup>2</sup> While the apt title gives away the novel's content, it yet leaves the reader unprepared for the story of Herman Mack and his televised spectacle of consuming a 1971 Ford Maverick. The work's outlandish plot challenges the reader to consider reason for Herman Mack's motivation, and the answer ultimately reveals the fixed domination of the automobile in American life and thought. *Car* evidences the great lure the automobile is to the American, and the novel suggests the American's greatest desire is a wish to possess the car fully. As Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long note in their political assessment of Harry Crews, "[I]n *Car*, America is in thrall to the automobile. American culture is permeated by auto-culture; life is indelibly marked by the machine" (32). *Car* dramatizes an individual's relationship to

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<sup>2</sup> As this title is no longer available in a separate publication, I quote from the omnibus version of the novel included in *Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader*. *Car* runs from pages 329-437.

the car and narrates the way that automobiles negate and waste the self. *Car*'s ultimate point is one of deepest irony, for it reveals the end results of the automobile, and it highlights the car as a waste product. Moreover, Herman Mack, a character who defines himself through consumed and wasted cars, ultimately finds himself similarly wasted. His body represents the consumption of and the spending of—the defecation of—the automobile. In this way, Harry Crews' *Car* subverts a positive representation of the automobile.

To show the car as a site of consumption, I first examine possible origins for *Car*'s plot and, in addition to suggesting a cultural connection between history and fiction, I highlight the American desire to demonstrate ownership of consumer goods by resorting to eating them—a process that returns consumption to its primary and simplest condition. I next examine the Auto-Town junkyard; it is a scene representing the ends of automobile consumption—waste. *Car*'s junkyard indicates the plethora of junked cars as well as the speed at which cars are consumed and then wasted. In response, newness becomes a desired quality in the consumption process. I point to the way *Car* teases out this theme through scenes that prize the consumption of new cars over past, antique models. In considering reasons why Herman Mack would eat a 1971 Ford Maverick, I posit the Maverick's newness is a primary cause. Additionally, I demonstrate advertisement's role in facilitating Herman Mack's desire for the Maverick. By eating a brand-new car, Herman Mack will have the distinct honor of being the first to transform the car into waste, and thus fully consume it. The process of eating half-ounce Maverick capsules, however, has dire consequences, for Herman Mack internalizes the experience

and imagines himself a car, a point that leads him to ultimately waste his own life. I conclude this section on Harry Crews' *Car* by arguing that the Cadillac is a secondary object demonstrating a similar theme of waste. Mister's consumption of the Cadillac also concludes in frustration and unhappiness.

While *Car*'s plot initially sounds far-fetched, historical research reveals the storyline is one born from real events. For one, Lonnie L. Willis locates a possible inspiration for Harry Crews' *Car* in a feat documented in the *Guinness Book of World Records*; there Guinness credits M. Lolito with consuming an entire bicycle over the course of fifteen days (qtd. in Willis 9). Furthermore, Willis uncovers a 1966 article in *Saturday Review* which alludes to an Australian's attempt to consume a family-sized car, and while the digestion of the full vehicle remains unconfirmed, the *Saturday Review*, according to Willis, reports that Jean Samson ate no less than "one front fender, one tire, and one carburetor" (9). Although Willis is unable to neatly tie these events to *Car*'s genesis, their existence suggests Crews' novel is a fiction perhaps not as "bizarre as one may think"; perhaps even it is, as Allen Shepherd claims, "surprisingly plausible" (53). Both tales play out the human desire to fully possess the automobile through consumption's simplest act—eating. As with Herman Mack, the eating of a car is a self-defining act for M. Lolito and Jean Samson as well. More importantly, all three events—historical and fictional—highlight the consumptive act is wasteful, for by eating it, they negate the car's use function. Indeed, by its very nature, digestion's primary end is excrement. The process ultimately reveals how the individual expends and wastes the self through such senseless consumption.

The opening junkyard scene establishes the novel's themes of consumption and waste, for Crews describes Auto-Town as "a plain of wrecked and mangled cars" (334). The scene evidences the car as site of consumption while it further presents an image of waste. Unlike similar junkyards in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* where migrants barter for car parts and where the car is suggestively still useful, Crews' yard has no further purpose than the destruction of unwanted cars. The junkyard is a space that codifies the ends of consumption. Consider the picture given when Mister surveys Auto-Town while standing atop a concrete dock:

On three sides his horizon was mountains of wrecked cars. Every possible kind of car in every possible kind of attitude: upside-down, sideways, on end, pitching, yawing, tilted. The ground under his feet was not ground at all but an unknowably thick layer of glass shards, glass of all colors, rose, yellow, clear, tinted blue and pink, and even black. Mixed with the glass were ragged slivers of aluminum, scarred lumps of cast iron, and other pieces of metal worn down fine as sand. (333)

Auto-Town is a waste-land of disposed cars. The scene raises the question: What does all this waste mean? While sociologist V. de Grazia reports that owners derive "psychological satisfactions [...] from their possessions" (4:2683), Jean Baudrillard argues that waste is an especially life-affirming action, for in *The Consumer Society*, he states that, through the act of wasting products, a person especially feels "they are alive" (43). I thus posit *Car* is a novel dramatizing one man's attempt to feel alive by consuming and wasting a brand new 1971 Ford Maverick.

*Car* calls attention to the rapidity of automotive consumption—what the novel casually labels “the car’s evolution” (332). For example, Easy Mack reckons that over twelve million cars are junked in America per year in order to make room for new ones, a point that brings him to off-handedly comment, “More cars than people were made in this country every year and those damn cars had to go *somewhere*” (386). While sitting atop the crusher that he uses “to squash cars into suitcases,” Mister fishes out a “brand-new 1970 Cadillac” and promptly crushes it (331). Given that Herman Mack’s 1971 Maverick is also brand new, the Cadillac is, obviously, no more than a year old, a point Mister immediately recognizes. The fact pointedly contrasts the new Maverick with the “old” Cadillac and further suggests the quick American consumption of cars.

In fact, the novel emphasizes the American’s desire for new products in the consumption process and especially suggests newness is a necessary quality for consumer happiness. Of course, in order to consume something new, old possessions must be discarded, a point that while explaining the mountains of junked automobiles in Auto-Town also amplifies the wastefulness of American consumption. In *Car*, old cars and their past are irrelevant; only the future models matter. For example, Herman Mack’s failed attempt to assemble an historical automobile display titled CAR DISPLAY: YOUR HISTORY ON PARADE showcases a lack of concern for the past. Although Herman argues for the need of parading yesterday’s car models by claiming, “Everything that’s happened in this goddamn country in the last fifty years [...] has happened in, on, around, with, or near a car”—nobody else seems to care (338). Herman’s museum attempts to promote antique cars as a site of consumption, and while his billboard for the event

advertises, “SEE THE CAR IT HAPPENED IN—THE EVENT THAT CHANGED YOUR LIFE” (338), Herman’s attempt fails and is itself wasted. These cars are returned to Auto-Town’s lot, joining others there “rusted, broken, and mutilated with parts missing” (338). Instead, Herman discovers the people’s enthralled willingness to submit themselves to an event that involves the consumption of the newest cars. The close juxtaposition of these two events suggests Herman’s consumption of the Maverick as yet another attempt to define himself through cars. The failed consumption of the Maverick, however, indicates that event is equally wasteful consumption.

Interestingly, Herman Mack’s reason for eating the Maverick are, at best, vague notions, a point recognizing V. de Grazia’s assertion that “there is no general theory for why people consume” (4:2683). Doing their own theorizing, DeBord and Long suggest that Herman’s attempt to eat a car is meant to “demonstrate publicly that human beings and love, not cars and consumption, are the measures of life” (43). On the other hand, Frank W. Shelton in “Harry Crews: Man’s Search for Perfection” suggests that the novel reiterates a common Crews’ theme of “man’s yearning for perfection” only to discover “the inevitable imperfection of the world and life in it” (98). According to Shelton, in *Car* Herman attempts to “perform a communion ritual with his god,” and he tries “to find the spiritual through the material” (107). While Crews’ language choice indicates the event reflects the taking of the Eucharist—for example, alone with the Maverick, Herman tastes the fender “as though about to take upon his tongue a sacrament” (364)—Herman yet judges things differently.

When considering why he would eat a Ford Maverick, Herman first thinks, “At least I’ve got something I *can* do”; next he rationalizes, “I’m going to eat a car because it’s there”; and then finally, he simply concedes that he is going to eat the car because it “is where we are in America” (349). He adds,

I know I’m thirty years old, never had anything, nothing. We been squatting out there on those mountains of rusting cars, and it ain’t coming to nothing. But now, at last, I’ve got something. (349)

Herman’s logic suggests that he intends to find meaning through consumption. His rudimentary reasoning skills, as well as his rather uncritical mentality, are intended to reflect and be symptomatic of the average working-class American who yet finds meaning through consumption—even if they are unable to properly articulate it. In point of fact, Crews himself describes Herman as owning a “dulled and dimmed mind like leaves in a slow wind” (379). The book reinforces this position when it ironically suggests another reason for consuming the car, for its bumper sticker reads: “FORD GIVES YOU BETTER IDEAS” (365). The moment implies consumption will make Herman smarter. While the bumper sticker presses that consumption can be a meaningful act, the novel yet witnesses the wastefulness of the event, for after consumption, Herman Mack soon defecates the Maverick—and is none the wiser for it.

However, one thing is certain: Herman’s primary desire in eating the car and the reason for the public’s keen interest in the event regards the car’s newness. Newness promotes consumption. Indeed, so new is the 1971 Ford Maverick in *Car*’s storyline that

even Easy Mack—a self-declared lover of cars, the founder of Auto-Town, and an aficionado of the automobile—admits that he “had never actually seen it” (334). However, Easy Mack “had read about it in the newspapers,” a point that further emphasizes that the Ford Maverick is a new product and one sold primarily through advertising, the first stage in creating public awareness for new cars. Also as Rick Bockmiller informs in *How Products Are Made*, automobile manufacturers begin designing new car models three to five years in advance, and he adds, “Trying to predict what the public will want to drive in five years is no small feat” (25). Thus to entice buyers, manufacturers necessarily heavily promote their new vehicles, often doing so before one can actually be purchased. For example in 1964, Ford made a bold move by advertising its Mustang on national television. They bought the 9:30 PM slot on the three major networks, and the commercial, reaching some twenty-seven million people, generated twenty-two thousand Mustang orders the next day—the first day of sales (Riggs 163). Obviously, car advertisements facilitate consumption, and Crews’ novel suggests advertisement is a reason for Herman Mack’s desire to consume the Maverick. Specifically, Herman is only aware of the car *through* advertisement. Thus, the Maverick especially exists as an image, one Ford promotes. Advertising disseminates the car image that Herman desires and then consumes. Articulating a similar position, DeBord and Long write that Crews’ novel “presents a view of the consequences of mass marketing” (42).

I wish to pause here and simply observe the Maverick as a site of consumption by noting its cost and more importantly its optional features, which in themselves are meant

for further consumption. The 1971 Ford Maverick is sister to the Ford Mustang, another iconic American car, but the Ford Company is quick to emphasize in 1970 that the Maverick is not competing with the Mustang, but is instead meant to rival their previous Falcon models. While the Maverick and Mustang names connote the wild freedom the unsettled West once exemplified, its option-loaded design anticipates the future of car consumption where extra features become standard selling ploys. In 1971, the accessorized Ford Mustang sold for \$5,075, of which \$1710 were included “options”; these included pedal trim, sewn-in rubber floor mats, simulated wood interior, and knitted vinyl high-back seats (Mueller 82). So extensive were the Mustang’s accessories that automobile tycoon Lee Iacocca called the car a “fat pig” (qtd. in Mueller 82). The Maverick was a bit more affordable at roughly \$2200 for a two-door V-6 (Gunnell 135), or as Herman Mack estimates at about “two thousand dollars at the dealership” (386), but it was yet fully accessorized. Indeed, Crews delineates all the Maverick’s extra features such as color-keyed floor mats, flashing side marker lamps, flipper-type rear quarter windows, and an air heater with 3-speed blower (379). The Ford Company’s 1969 pamphlet titled “Some Questions and Answers on Ford’s Amazing New Maverick” further advocates the car’s roominess, despite its marketing as a new subcompact. Ford notes that it can seat “[f]our adults comfortably,” adding, “In fact, a 250-pound, six-foot-two man wearing a hat can drive [a] Maverick with roomy comfort” while also that same man “can get a comfortable ride in the rear seat” (23). Truly, it is a vehicle indicative of American automotive self-indulgence. Herman Mack’s digestion of this roomy and fully

accessorized car amplifies the novel's theme of wasteful consumption, for Herman Mack is not only eating a car, but he is also consuming all its secondary options.

By consuming a car, Herman Mack takes automobile product consumption to its logical and, albeit, fantastical conclusion. Effectively, he enacts consumption in a figurative, but very literal sense, for eating is the primary consumptive act. Moreover, the large porcelain toilet which Herman sits upon to expel the consumed car doubles the meaning of "waste," for the defecated car is simultaneously a waste product resulting from the body's *and* the object's consumption. Essentially, Herman's act reduces the two-thousand dollar plus vehicle to a car worth, according to Easy Mack's calculations, eleven dollars junked (386). Yet to be discarded by society and yet to make an appearance in the junk heaps of Auto-Town, the Maverick is a prized object of current consumption. Herman Mack will be the first person to transform this new automobile into waste, and he will do it before a live televised audience. He hopes to give himself meaning through this spectacle, but unfortunately, he instead discovers the event is a wasted experience.

One reason Herman cannot fulfill the consumption relates to the Maverick's large size. Yet to help Herman eat the car, the Maverick is divided into tiny half-ounce capsules which "won't digest" and will simply pass through him, taking an estimated ten years to complete the process (351). While this process is in itself vacuous and wasteful, Herman's consumption serves no useful purpose, and he further wastes himself by consuming an object that offers no physical benefit. He literally is a vessel, a corridor, or an empty passage through which the product passes. Also, considering that the average

automobile includes components from some four thousand different suppliers (Bockmiller 25) and considering that Herman Mack consumes the Maverick in pill-size quantities that almost equal that amount,<sup>3</sup> his eating of the Maverick effectively reverses automobile production. As the automobile begins as raw material, Herman Mack returns it to that state through disassembling it and converting it into waste. Thus, instead of manufacturing a useful product, Herman Mack churns out waste. Yet these defecated half-ounce capsules become a product in themselves, for they are cast into miniature Maverick replicas and sold for \$12.50 each (411). Furthermore, Mr. Edge develops a jukebox-sized machine whose “transparent plastic top” allows an audience to view the (re)casting of the Maverick replicas, thus making the *making* of the miniature Mavericks a consumer spectacle in its own right. Ironically, the production of the commodity is itself commodified, and the miniature automobile is its own site of consumption. Yet, neither of these events gives Herman the meaning he hopes to achieve. While Herman does not literally try to *buy at* something through the car, figuratively this is the case, and ultimately, the attempt proves unsuccessful.

Another reason for Herman’s wasted attempt to consume the Maverick is that once internalized the car dominates him. He sees “cars in his blood” that “squealed and careened through long curving veinous highways”; he hears their roar in his ears; his eyes “filled with cars”; and cars “raced and competed in every muscle and fiber” of his body “until finally he was bumper to bumper from head to toe with cars” (381). At another

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<sup>3</sup> I get my figure based on Herman Mack’s consumption of one capsule per day for ten years; thus  $365 \times 10 = 3650$ . *Car*, however, advises that Herman will consume approximately “half a pound a day, seven days a week” (375).

point in the novel, Herman speaks of his wish to shake the car's hold upon him—"I only know that I refuse to have my life measured out in cars"—but he begins "choking on the knowledge of some awful truth that he could not say," but which he yet attempts to articulate: "Goddamn cars are measuring *me!* Don't you see we're on the wrong end?" (364). Herman discovers that the car is indeed defining him. So invasive is the car that he ultimately decides, "He was a car" (381).

Ultimately, the novel concludes with Herman's realization that the car dominates him: "He saw clearly that he was defined by the car, that his very reason for living was bound up in the undigested and undigestable parts of the Maverick that still had to be swallowed" (409). The parting image of Herman and Margo entering Auto-Town in their mock love-suicide confirms the wasting of the self through consumption, for here their love and their lives are both wasted. A mountain of metal waste crushes Herman and his lover when the ending plays out the end of car consumption—waste. Theirs, however, is not the only novel's instance of wasted love, for Joe and Junnel similarly act out their desire in close proximity to cars, especially wrecked cars, an event that would naturally bring together policeman and wrecker driver. So dependent is their consummation upon the car-wreck scene that Joe and Junnel encounter great sexual difficulties when in a hotel room, and the moment recognizes sex is wasted. The absence of a front seat to rest his hat upon unsettles Joe, for he "had always put it in the front seat" and it "wouldn't be the same anywhere else"; Junnel not only misses the front seat where she had "always pressed her knees against it," but she also pines for "the excitement of the wreck" (395-

396). Thus, even the act of sexual consumption is not immune to an automobile's intrusion.

Besides the Herman Mack's Ford Maverick, the Cadillac emerges as another site of consumption in the novel. The Cadillac is a car of extreme luxury.<sup>4</sup> In *Car*, these two models (Ford and Cadillac) become dual images of American consumption, each replete with their connotations of luxury and largeness. Like the Ford Maverick's ready-for-television stage display, the Cadillac's showroom serves as its companion image, for similar to the Maverick, the Cadillac is equipped with needless, but desirable options: four cigarette lighters, power seats, power door locks, adjustable reading lights, and a choice of twenty-one colors (390). The scene confirms that the automobile is an object made desirable (read consumable) by extras that exceed any strict functionality. Placed in the middle of the showroom and sitting atop a revolving platform, the Sedan De Ville's brilliant lighting and prominent placement further suggest it is a seductive object, a point emphasized by two little boys whose gaze is fixed upon it and whose heads "were nodding in quiet affirmation" (389).

Yet as *Car* reveals, Mister's consumption of the Cadillac is wasted and likewise fails to give him meaning. His attempt to buy at fulfillment through the Cadillac is thwarted. While Mister considers the Cadillac "[t]he standard of excellence that everything's measured against" (389), his 1971 Cadillac squeaks, and the persistent noise

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<sup>4</sup> The Cadillac finds its way into popular music, and in song it is normally expressed much like Mister conceives it—as an object of luxury and desire. In the b-side to his "Dancing in the Dark," Bruce Springsteen's "Pink Cadillac" (1984) relates a mutual love for a girl and her Cadillac: "I love you for your pink Cadillac" (8). British rockers, The Clash, also play tribute to the Cadillac in "Brand New Cadillac" (1979): "My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac / Yes she did! / My baby drove up in a brand new Cadillac" (3-5).

wreaks havoc on Mister's state of mind, for he cannot discover the squeak's origins. As he prepares to watch Herman digest the half-ounce Maverick cube, Mister is exhausted from having stayed up the night before "looking for the squeak in the brand-new Cadillac car" (401). It is a noise that, to Mister's ears, "sounds as small and sharp as the sound of a tiny bird which had squeaked somewhere in the bowels of the car" (403). Unable to locate the squeak, Mister finally admits that the Cadillac has "overwhelmed him" and has made him feel "his own mortality in a way that he had never felt it before" (402). The passage recognizes the unfulfillment of consumption. The scene suggests the consumer malaise, what Baudrillard qualifies as an "unquenchable desire" that results in the acquisition of "successive objects" (*Consumer Society* 77). Thus, Mister and his Cadillac serve as doppelganger to Herman and his Maverick when the brothers each consume cars to give their lives meaning.

By writing the automobile as a site of consumption, *Car* satirizes American consumerism and highlights its wasteful ends. The novel suggests consumer objects (here the car) are items that define characters' lives, and Crews further implies a character's inability to escape the car's dominance. Such negative representation subverts a positive image of the automobile. As such, the novel reiterates what Gary L. Long reads as a common theme of Crews' work: his celebration of "the determination of characters engaged in hopeless attempts to take control of their lives" (28). Herman Mack's attempt to consume a Ford Maverick is indeed a wasted endeavor.

### 4.3: The Car is Your Life: Consuming Automobiles in John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*

John Updike and his final two Rabbit novels—*Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)<sup>5</sup>—are a series of writings that witnesses the automobile as a site of consumption. Through cars, Updike's characters (especially Rabbit) judge their self and others. My primary focus in this discussion is on Updike's third novel in the series, *Rabbit Is Rich*. I first point out consumption's predominance in the main character Rabbit Angstrom's lifestyle; his life is a series of consumer acquisitions with the automobile as its primary site. I next examine car advertisements and commercials to demonstrate young Judy's and especially Rabbit's internalization of consumption in their identity construction. I also point to examples in which cars promote consumption through accessories that allow consumers like Rabbit to further personalize and thus judge their realized identities. Lastly, I spend the majority of my analysis examining Rabbit's and his son Nelson's relationship, for they consume cars as a gauge for the state of their relationship. Rabbit qualifies his relationship with Nelson based on Nelson's destruction of (that is, consumption of) cars. Likewise, Nelson consumes cars as a means to test and validate his relationship with Rabbit. Both situations indicate the car is a site of consumption, for, through cars and their consumption and/or destruction, Rabbit and Nelson evaluate their testy father-and-son relationship. Updike's novel thus questions their unhealthy dependence upon the automobile for it is the primary way they

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<sup>5</sup> All my quotations for Updike's novels come from the Everyman's Library edition of his works, titled *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels*. *Rabbit Is Rich* is found on pages 621-1046, and *Rabbit at Rest* is found on pages 1047-1516.

understand themselves and relate to each other. The image of the automobile is subversive as it challenges the idea that cars are good for Americans.

While in *Rabbit Is Rich* consumption is one of the novel's dominant themes, the Toyota dealership where Rabbit works especially casts the automobile into a system of economic consumerism, thereby necessarily making it a site of consumption. Rabbit, and later his son, Nelson, sell cars. Consequently, cars are everywhere in *Rabbit Is Rich*. As Richard R. Bolton writes in "Cars of Our Years: The 'Diminished World' of *Rabbit Is Rich*," "Automobiles are the stuff of Rabbit's daily life" (98). As such, the cars define Rabbit's life, and he judges his well-being based on cars. And while consumption is not necessarily restricted to cars, they are its primary site, for they facilitate the income that allows Rabbit to consume.

For starters, while Rabbit may occasionally be noted taking in a history book, his primary reading is *Consumer Reports*, a magazine whose explicit reason d'être is to advise one on consumer products. As Marshall Boswell states, Rabbit "reads *Consumer Reports* in order to decide what to buy next" (144). Importantly, Rabbit is in a position to buy things, and his drive to continually consume and define himself through consumption reflects the new American "culture of consumption," which according to Ian Gordon, "is a phrase used to describe any society in which the acquisition of material goods is viewed a major defining feature of daily life" (392). In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Rabbit dabbles in the gold and silver market; he tools around in new cars; he has several older cars repaired during the course of the novel; and by the book's conclusion he purchases a brand new home exclusively for him and Janet. He is, as the title suggests, "rich," and as a rich person,

Rabbit consumes. Pointedly, it is through cars that Rabbit and the novels' other characters consume, for the Springer Motors Toyota franchise facilitates the Angstrom's financial income that allows their consumption of other material goods. Moreover, these characters internalize consumption as a way of judging the self, a practice that Rabbit especially exhibits. And what he consumes become markers for his identity.

A primary example of a character's internalization of consumption occurs in *Rabbit at Rest* when Judy demonstrates an understanding of herself through the consumption of advertising jingles. Updike explains that Judy "has moved from nursery rhymes to television commercials" (1176), as if that is the typical progression of childhood development. Thus, in addition to the McDonald's theme ("the good times great taste, of McDonald's") and the ubiquitously recognized Oscar Meyer tune ("I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener"), Judy also recites the Toyota mantra: "Toy-o-ta...Who could ask for anything more?" (1176). While song and performance become primary character traits, Judy's musical development centers around the consumption of product advertisements, especially those marketed by the car industry. Her consumption of the Toyota slogan is especially poignant, for she learns to understand and judge herself through her family's occupation as owner of a Toyota car dealership.

Rabbit demonstrates a similar mentality when he, too, qualifies his state of being based on the consumption of cars and their advertisements. For one, when he is rich and doing well in *Rabbit Is Rich*, Rabbit is surrounded by Toyota banners that advertise: "OH WHAT A FEELING" (769). As more and more Corollas sell, Toyota issues another marketing banner that reads: "THE ERA OF COROLLA: *Toyota = Total Economy*"

(1012). Rabbit identifies himself with the American consumption of Toyotas. A man meant to be emblematic of America, or as Updike relates, a man whose eyes offered “a ticket to the America all around me” (“Introduction” vii)—Rabbit Angstrom defines himself through the American consumption of cars, which in turn precipitates his own consumption. He is, as Victor K. Lasseter observes, an American who “inhabits a world of expensive Japanese economy cars, cocktails, and golf” (430), as if those three naturally go together.

Yet when age and poor health bring Rabbit down in *Rabbit at Rest*, the televised commercials cause Rabbit to question himself. For example, when Rabbit enters the hospital with heart complications, a Subaru commercial plays on his room’s TV, and Updike narrates the commercial as follows:

Now a turquoise Subaru is spinning along one of those spiky Western landscapes that the makers of automobile commercials love. A shimmery model, skinny as a rail, dimpled and square-jawed like a taller Audrey Hepburn from the *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* days, steps out of the car, smiling slyly and wearing a racing driver’s egg-helmet with her gown made up it seems of ropes of shimmering light. (1204)

So taken is Rabbit by the commercial’s appeal that he concedes, “Maybe [...], Toyota is a dull company” (1204). It is not primarily that Toyota is dull, but that, since Rabbit judges himself through Toyota cars and since his life has recently taken a downward turn, he too is perhaps dull. Instead of showing a romantic landscape that idealizes the car, Toyota commercials show “people jumping in the air because they’re saving a nickel” (1204). The financial sense of Toyota commercial appeals to the safe and non-risk taking

buyer, a person who some may qualify as perhaps boring, especially in a market of abundance and extravagance. As Marinell Jones relates about the Toyota Corolla, “From the outset, the Corolla was positioned as a family car for the budget-conscious consumer. Marketing strategies emphasized its ‘value-for-the-money’ and its functionality” (581). In contrast, the image that Subaru promotes appeals to the younger and more active set. According to the agency’s president, Robert Schmidt, young people are Subaru’s “best potential” as a market, for they are “the doers, the goers, [and] the hunters” (qtd. in Schoolman 538). In the above scene, Rabbit imagines that he can be happier by consuming a different kind of car—here the sexy Subaru. No longer does Rabbit believe in Toyota’s OH WHAT A FEELING mantra that he previously internalized to represent his state of being. Things have changed for Rabbit.

The novels also emphasizes the car as a site of consumption by highlighting its appearance, qualities, and various options, for cars are meticulously named and described, such as Ma Springer’s ’74 “navy-blue” Chrysler Newport or Rabbit’s own Toyota Corolla with its “urethane bumper so black and mat and trim” (655, 717). While Updike’s novel focuses upon the car as something that is bought or sold and is thus a site of consumption, the text’s use of such specific details highlight that the car is a *consumable* object and thus a site of additional consumption.

Rabbit also details the increasing difficulty of earning a profit and the ways he must *invent* consumption options and thereby continue to validate himself as a salesman. His business ethic—“Sell less than a car a day in this business not counting Sundays and you’re in trouble” (963)—equates his own state of being with the consumption of

automobiles. To be happy, Rabbit must sell at least a car a day. Yet, as the novel indicates, Toyota makes this difficult, for Toyota insists upon selling all their vehicles at the suggested list price which limits “room for finagling” and which curbs the lot’s possible profit (724). Also fearing a default on payment, manufacturers hold money back from dealers and instead return the cash to them in annual rebates that obviously fail to have the immediate effect of money earned. Rabbit further outlines other industry changes which have, in his opinion, reduced the dealer’s ability to earn profits. He explains, “You got to buy sets of their special tools, for thousands of dollars” so that you can repair what you sell (739). Moreover, manufacturers now include options such as radios on their car packages which cut into an area where dealers once profited: “[B]y manufacturers getting greedy and taking these options away from the dealer [,] the dealers have to think up more gimmicks. Like undercoating. And rustproofing” (739). Rabbit thus demonstrates creative ways in which he generates American consumption of his automobiles; these in turn further validate his own self worth. Again, the car is the site for this consumption.

*Rabbit Is Rich* also specifically describes the Corollas that Springer Motors sells, and Updike’s choice of details emphasizes that car’s accessories increase car consumption. The text elides a purely aesthetic assessment of the car and instead flaunts the ways in which the automobile facilitates consumption through accessories. These options do not reflect the car’s function, but merely inflate its cost to appeal to consumer desire. More options allow the consumer to individualize their purchase and thus qualify their identity through personal preference. Even the dealer is not immune to the

American desire to consume this product, for Rabbit, too, buys into the image of owning a new Corolla when he falls in love with “this smooth machine” (1016). Moreover, the additional options validate Rabbit’s own sense of self worth when he imagines himself in the luxurious new Corollas which feature: “*New 1.8-liter engine ~ New aerodynamic styling ~ Aluminum wheels on SR5 models ~ Removable sunroof/moonroof ~ [...] 33 Est. MPG ~ 43 EPA Estimated Highway MPG*” (864). In addition, they also include a “padded dish, electric tachometer, state-of-the-art four-speaker AM/FM/MPX stereo, [and] quartz-accurate digital clock,” features which lead Rabbit to label this the “ultimate Toyota” (1016). Such imagination highlights the manner in which Rabbit internalizes consumption by judging his self-identity through car consumption. Through cars, Rabbit thinks he buys at luxury and wealth—at being *rich*.

Perhaps, however, the greatest evidence of the car as a site of consumption are scenes in which Rabbit relates to his son through cars, for Rabbit judges his relationship with Nelson based on Nelson’s destruction of them. Through cars, Rabbit internalizes and measures their relationship. Pointing out a similar trend, Bolton writes that cars are not only important to Rabbit’s business, but he uses cars to “measure or interpret [his] gains and losses, material and personal” (78). Bolton further suggests that Rabbit associates cars with “possessions and power” as well as with “memory and reflection” where “remembered cars [...] may be as important in their way as cultural cars” (98). With Bolton’s critique in mind, I find examples in which cars become a barometer for Rabbit’s and Nelson’s tumultuous relationship. Moreover, their conversations, which are normally arguments, revolve around the finance and consumption of cars. Rabbit

especially displays a propensity for making judgments based on the financial tabulation of Nelson's destructive behavior.

For instance, when Nelson crashes Janice's Mustang, Rabbit internalizes the event and critiques Nelson. After learning that Nelson has done five hundred dollars worth of damage to Janice's Mustang, Rabbit equates his concern over the car with Nelson. "How can I go to sleep now?" Rabbit asks Janice as they discuss the car's damage. "My head's pounding. It's like *he* [emphasis mine] has it in a vise" (832). Rabbit fails to differentiate whether he is angry about the car's damage or about Nelson crashing the car; as Rabbit has it, the two are confused. He adds, "He has my head in a vise and he just keeps turning the screw. That he'd do it to *your* car, [...] that's gratitude" (832). Rabbit thus internalizes the car's damage to express his frustration with Nelson, and he significantly makes no distinction about which of the two is more upsetting. They equally anger Rabbit.

Later, Nelson wrecks Rabbit's Corona and the situation reflects the one above when Rabbit similarly internalizes the experience and "consumes" the car damage in an effort to invalidate Nelson. In trying to avoid a woodchuck, Nelson rams the back end into a telephone pole, and when Rabbit surveys the damage, he makes acute observations of the damage. Rabbit observes:

The scrape had begun in the middle of the rear door and deepened over the little gas-cap door; by the time the pole reached the tail signal and the small rectangular sidelight, it had no trouble ripping them right out, and the translucent plastic torn and shed like Christmas wrapping, and inches of pretty color-coded wiring exposed. The urethane bumper [...] was

pulled out from the frame. The dent even carried into the liftback door which would never seat exactly right again. (716-17)

Updike importantly provides exacting details of the damage as a means to relate the deterioration of Rabbit's and his son's relationship. Rabbit further surveys the car's damage:

Nails or rivets in the pole have left parallel longitudinal gashes the length of the impact depression. The chrome-and-rubber stripping has been wrenched loose at an angle, and behind the wheel socket on this side [...] a segment of side strip has vanished entirely, leaving a chorus of tiny holes. Even the many-ribbed hubcap is dented and besmirched. He [Rabbit] feels his own side has taken a wound. (717)

The passage especially demonstrates Rabbit's internalization of the accident, the wound he feels in his side, while the implied inflictor of the wound is, indeed, Nelson.

However, Nelson attempts to assuage the situation by belittle the financial damage Rabbit is sure to incur: "Oh come *on*, Dad. [...] Don't make such a big deal of it. It'll cost the insurance company, not you, to get it fixed, and anyway you can get a new one for almost nothing [sic] don't they give you a terrific discount" (717). The text emphasizes the monetary dynamic of the exchange so that money qualifies Rabbit's perception of the damage. In another appeal to his father, Nelson further adds, "Dad, it's just a *thing*". The statement recognizes the high esteem Rabbit gives cars, while it further questions how Rabbit indeed views his son through his destroyed Corona. On this point, Nelson observes of Rabbit, "[Y]ou're looking like you lost your best friend" (717).

Obviously, the accident deeply affects Rabbit when he internalizes the car's destruction, and it is not until the Corona is repaired—several scenes later—that Rabbit finally approves of his son. Updike writes:

Driving Ma Springer's cushy old Newport up Jackson to where Joseph street intersects, the first thing [Rabbit] sees is his tomato-red Corona parked in front, looking spandy-new and just washed besides. They had got it fixed at last. It was cute of the kid to have had it washed. Loving, even. (760)

Updike's free and indirect focalization indicates Rabbit approval of Nelson when, the car repaired, Rabbit can consume its near-perfect condition, as opposed to its previously crushed exterior. Even more telling, however, is Rabbit's "surge of remorse for all the ill will he has been bearing Nelson" since the accident (760). In consuming the new car, Rabbit's estimation of Nelson improves.

As Nelson continues to wreck cars, Rabbit judges Nelson by translating his destruction of cars into dollar amounts. Dollars are a tangible figure that are easy to digest, understand, and, yes, *consume*. In a fit of anger, Nelson deliberately crashes his Royale into two parked cars, an event that is importantly committed with Rabbit standing in close proximity. One of the parked cars, the Mercury, "lifts up on two wheels," while its "fender collapses," the headlights "explode," and "the lens rim flies free" (774). Significantly, the event then is a story which Rabbit repeats by emphasizing the accident's cost: "Five thousand bucks' worth of metal, *crunch*," he tells his country club friends (775). Further, the Mercury is an especially expensive repair since it "was more

severely damaged” than the other vehicles and since its parts “are harder to get” (804). Interesting, however, is Rabbit’s comment, “I haven’t felt so close to Nelson since he was two” (775), for it suggests the father/son bond is intensifying when Nelson’s behavior is more destructive *and* more expensive. Rabbit reduces Nelson to a toddler, one requiring a father’s full guidance.

While Rabbit’s utterance indicates their relationship is ironically united to cars, it again highlights Rabbit’s consumption of the car’s monetary worth as a means to judge Nelson. Throughout the novel, the trend continues. For another example, Rabbit recalls how Nelson sold his Thunderbird in college, letting it go for *half* the purchase amount, an event that disappoints the car-salesman father. Also, in addition to the above-mentioned scenes involving Janice’s Mustang and Rabbit’s Corona, Nelson also wrecks Ma Springer’s car, resulting in an additional eight hundred dollar repair (961). Moreover, in *Rabbit at Rest* when Rabbit discovers that Nelson has cooked the books in order to support his cocaine habit—the storyline that weaves throughout *Rabbit at Rest*—Rabbit’s parental figure dominates, and Nelson again is the subservient and fiscally-irresponsible son, and Nelson is carted off to a drug rehab center much as a young son is sent away to summer camp. The more destructive Nelson’s behavior, the greater is the amount of “car” money expended. For example, by *Rabbit at Rest*, Nelson no longer destroys parts of cars (fenders, headlights) that can be repaired, but he consumes (in dollar figures) whole vehicles. Mr. Shamida, the Toyota franchise president, estimates Nelson’s fabricated car sales at costing Springer Motors \$145,800 (*Rabbit at Rest* 1404). This

recognizes the continuing escalation of Nelson's destruction of (consumption of) cars.

Again, Rabbit internalize car consumption as a means to judge Nelson.

While Nelson attempts to establish his individuality through automobiles by announcing his preference for snow mobiles, older cars, and Mazdas—things that contrast with his father's new Toyotas—Rabbit continually casts unfavorable judgments on his son, and cars are again the basis for these judgments. When Rabbit goes on vacation and leaves Nelson in charge of Springer Motors, Nelson trades new Toyotas for a few old convertibles that, according to Rabbit, become unwise financial moves; the necessary repair work and the insurance deductibles on these old models leave Springer Motors without “any profit” (910). By displaying a strong predilection for antique car models, Nelson attempts to found an identity that is in conflict with Rabbit's. Nelson considers these older cars worth more money and reasons that “special old convertibles, that nobody makes anymore” have a value that “is going to go up and up”; “it *has* to,” he declares (919). As Nelson continues to express and thus judge himself through these old cars, even telling a girl at a party how much he loves “the old American cars,” commenting on “how great they were” (939), Rabbit, however, sees the idea differently. While Nelson's first implementation involves his display of an old TR-6, more important is Rabbit's observation of the vehicle. To Rabbit, the car is “polished up for sale but unmistakably worn, the windshield dull with multiplied scratches of great mileage, the fender showing that slight ripple where metal has been bruised and healed” (769). Updike's anthropomorphic language insinuates the deeper “bruised” nature of the father-son relationship, and the metaphor relies upon cars and their consumption for its implied

meaning. In trying to straighten Nelson out, Rabbit advises, “I know a lot more about the car business that you ever will at the rate you’re going,” adding that Nelson needs to “stop futzing around with these old Detroit hotrods that lose us a bundle and start focusing on the line we carry” (935). In defiance, Nelson trades in snow-mobiles for Toyotas, an act that obviously inflames Rabbit (943).

In fact, the only new cars he deems worthy of his salesmanship are Mazdas: “That’s what I’d want to have an agency in,” he says. Importantly, the statement highlights how he judges himself by opposing his father and Springer Motors’ Toyotas. As the two similar Japanese brands (Mazda and Toyota) compete for individual shares of the car market, similarly do Nelson and Rabbit negotiate their individuality by preferring one over the other. Cars become their relationship’s leit-motif, and they are a pseudo-fulcrum that the two use in vying for power.

#### **4.4: The World is Your Car: Eric Packer’s Consumption of the White Limousine in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis***

The last novel under discussion in this study—Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*—carries the fictive automobile into the twenty-first century. Published in 2003 and set on an April day in 2000, *Cosmopolis* may be about a great many things. For example, to David Cowart it is a novel about “obsolescence” and “time’s erosion” (213, 214); to Jerry A. Varsava it is about rogue capitalism; and to John Updike *Cosmopolis* is a novel in which “anything can happen” but in which instead “somehow nothing happens” (“One-Way Street” 100). Yet a dominant theme of *Cosmopolis* is indeed consumption, and the

automobile is its primary site. Even teasing out the novel's main action—Eric Packer's quest for a haircut—unveils an act of consumption. Varsava's comments in "The 'Saturated Self': Don DeLillo on the Problem of Rogue Capitalism" also evidence the novel's latent consumptive themes, for to Varsava Packer seeks to replace "antiquated consumer goods" with the latest consumer advances such as "satellite TV, financial-transfer systems, sky cams, voice-recognition technology, and surveillance apparatuses" (86). Replacement thus assumes another theme of the novel when, through consumption, Packer attempts to replace the self. Consumed products such as his limo and its interior decoration become chief markers of Packer's "replaced" identity. *Cosmopolis* thus questions the reason an individual consumes and how that same individual relates to his car through consumptive acts. This position challenges the positive perception of the automobile, and as such, is subversive.

*Cosmopolis* differs in its use of the automobile as a site of consumption, for DeLillo makes full use of the car's interior as a container of consumption. The discussion below necessarily addresses the automobile's exterior and interior, for both spaces further reveal ways in which Packer consumes material goods in order to replace and redefine the self. I also argue that DeLillo writes the limo as an object of stasis and instead suggests that it is a space for consumption. Eric Packer first consumes abstract numbers meant to reflect important financial moves in the marketplace. I next demonstrate that the white stretched limo is a consumer object that confirms Packer's identity with the Wall Street crowd. I then critique the limo's interior as a space that allows Packer to assert a more individualized identity, but in effect the limousine replaces

Packer's self, for he realizes himself through the limo and its extravagantly furnished interior. Lastly, I look at the limousine as a representative image of consumption, especially as indicated by its attack from rioters rebelling against capitalism. Ultimately, the limo and its occupants remain unharmed, and nothing effectively changes. The limo is easily replaced (repaired) while the riot is soon forgotten and replaced by something else. DeLillo's morbid comment is that nothing human matters; instead, the interchangeability of durable goods serve a greater function in American society.

For starters, the limousine image in *Cosmopolis* contradicts an image of automotive transportation, for DeLillo calls strict attention to the limo's *inability* to move. No less than nineteen instances highlight that the limo is a frustrated vehicle of "speed." A few choice passages are: "the car was not moving" (39), "the car moved incrementally westward" (43), "the car moved at an inchward creep" (64), "the car stopped dead" (65), and "the car was hemmed in [...] enveloped by paralysis" (88). Indeed, it takes a full day for the limo to drive a handful of city miles. As a parody of the quest/road narrative, the slow-moving limo and its mission for a haircut certainly ups the ante in terms of narrative satire, but what it more particularly achieves is to call attention to the limo as a space of stasis. Events are no longer subservient to the physical, but to the abstract—the numbers, symbols, and scrolling digital data. Throughout the novel, DeLillo emphasizes consumption is an intangible and abstract act, one related to the quick and unceasing succession of the stock market ticker. One poignant scene which narrates Packer standing beneath the financial market ticker on Wall Street, deftly articulates this point. DeLillo writes,

These were the tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly about a hundred feet above the street. Financial news, stock prices, consumer markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed. (80)

A later passage again stresses the unceasing speed of this information: “Never mind,” DeLillo writes, that speed “makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point” (80). The limo’s importance to this endless stream of data is ironic because (1) the limo is anathema to speed and (2) the limo is relegated to an unmoving space in which to observe and thereby consume the stream of scrolling data. With the addition of the limo’s several plasma monitors, the car is, according to DeLillo, a site of “idolatry [...] where crowds might gather in astonishment” at the scrolling numbers (80). “We are not witnessing the flow of information,” DeLillo writes, “so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable” (80). The unceasing abstract exchange of financial data further teases out a theme of replacement as one number replaces another and then another in this unending flow. DeLillo’s spectacle references Guy Debord’s use of the word in *The Society of Spectacle* in which Debord postulates spectacle is “commodity fetishism” (26). Debord adds, “The world the spectacle holds up to view [...] is at once *here* and *elsewhere*; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience.” That “commodity,” as *Cosmopolis* interprets it, are those speeding streams of data, ones exactly like what Packer consumes while sitting in his

rather unmoving limo. Thus especially for Packer, the limo is a space for the ritualized consumption of this spectacle, and spectacle replaces Packer's "lived experience."

In addition to the car as a site of abstract consumption, the limousine is its own specialized commodity in the novel, its own spectacle. First, *Cosmopolis* indicates cross-purposes for the limo, for in contrast to Packer and his white limo, which typically transports stock brokers, black limos escort "delegates, consuls, and sunglassed attachés" of the political sect (11). An automobile's exterior communicates a designed purpose; these images (their color, model, make, etc.) are signs that project meaning, and these signs dominate the automobile's functional or even its aesthetic value. As example, consider Packer's reason for owning the white limo. *Cosmopolis* explicitly indicates Packer's limo is a carbon copy of other limos. When Packer approaches ten similarly styled limousines lined along the New York sidewalk, they seem "identical at a glance" and are "indistinguishable from one another" (9-10). Packer's chief of finance, Jane Melman, confirms an inability to perceive differences between limousines, saying, "All these limos, my god, that you can't tell one from another" (39). In explaining its manufacturing technique, Packer emphasizes the limousine is a product of mass-production by indicating its uniformed production:

They way they build a stretch is this. They take a vehicle's base unit and cut it in half with a huge throbbing buzz-saw device. Then they add a segment to lengthen the chassis by ten, eleven, twelve feet. Whatever desired dimension. Twenty-two feet if you like. (70)

These minute deviations make limos difficult to differentiate with the naked eye, especially when they are parked end to end along a street row, or are seen individually driving through the city.

However, these similarities are the chief qualities that appeal to Packer, for Packer finds comfort in the limos' indistinguishable features, and he uses this to replace and define his self-identity. In fact, Packer conceives of the limo as more of an aesthetic idea instead of an object—a “platonic replica,” he calls it (10). DeLillo's word choice replica again suggests the limo is a product of mass production; it is an object similarly and thus massively produced. To appropriate theorist Theodor Adorno in *The Culture Industry*, the image of the limousine owns a “pre-digested quality” so that Packer (and others) may easily identify it and understand the limo is a consumer symbol (67). Therefore, instead of being individualized, the limo is standardized—another of Adorno's concepts (65). Again, this standardized image dominates a functional or aesthetic appraisal of the limousine, and Packer indulges in (consumes) the limo primarily for this symbolic value. These identical qualities confer a group identity so that Packer bises his consumption of the limo upon his position in the financial world. It confirms a certain group solidarity, thus replacing individual identity.

Is a site of consumption, the limo dominates the novel. Indeed, the novel's front and back covers, which respectively show front and rear photographs of a white limousine, visually indicate this automobile's importance to *Cosmopolis*. Yet since the majority of the novel occurs within it, the interior space is especially a site of consumption, for Packer individualizes the interior in an effort to, again, replace the self

with commodities that express his identity. DeLillo's detailed descriptions, moreover, highlight the various ways in which the limo is a site of consumption. It is decorated and personalized much like one would dress up a house. The primary meaning it gives is that, in addition to being extravagantly rich, Packer is also cultured.

Foregoing a single long narrative break to describe the limo, DeLillo peppers details throughout the novel, so that once combined, a rather explicit picture of the interior emerges. This image of Packer's lavish and specially-equipped limo reveals a car codified in consumer taste and replaced identity. In addition to the perhaps more conventional champagne well (145), liquor cabinet (118), leather seats (179), sunroof (36), one-way shatterproof windows (15, 92), fog lamps (158), and armored exterior (71)—a few of its more unique highlights include: the innumerable plasma screen displays (35), the microwave (13), the heart monitor (13), the urinal (157), the interior spy-cam (52), the exterior night-vision cameras (171), and the cork-lined doors, meant to reduce city noise (179). Furthermore, the Carrara marble that adorns the floor and that is reportedly quarried from Italian stock used by Michelangelo (22) and the "priceless" late tenth century "inlaid fragment of Kufic script on parchment" from Baghdad (90) indicate the installation of valuable artifacts is an extension of Packer's extravagant consumption. As Packer replaces himself with these commodities, the car is a site of historical as well as cultural consumption.

DeLillo's detailed and ostentatiously-accessorized limousine reflects a trend in late twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction to highlight that the automobile is an object that can be endlessly commodified through additional commodities. Certainly

Updike's and Crews' detailed listing of accessories recognizes this bias in car description, but DeLillo's post-modern text especially inflates the situation. The car itself cannot be improved upon; indeed, very little has intrinsically changed in the last fifty years about an automobile's mechanical design. What have been continuously developed are the morphing accessories providing customized interiors. As David Gartman relates in *Auto Opium: A Social History of Automobile Design*, consumers in the 1960s and 1970s began to "question the individuality of their goods," and everyone tried "to find fulfillment through commodities" which bespoke their individuality (183). Gartman further emphasizes that this trait "became manifest domestically in automotive consumption." While these optional consumer objects offer themselves to buyers as ways to define themselves through personal preference, more importantly, they are replaceable with another. And as one accessory replaces another, each allows their owner to read themselves differently. The process recognizes the shift in consumption in which "the postmodern epoch has [...] engendered an entirely new relationship with material life" (*International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* 4:2683).

Packer's several additions to the white limo also highlight a myriad uses for the car's interior space, thereby writing the car as a site of various modes of consumption. For example, in addition to the car as a space for historical and cultural consumption (mentioned above), the limo is simultaneously a bar, a bathroom, a kitchen, a dining room, a security surveillance center, and a doctor's office. The heart monitor's presence certainly confirms the space is medically oriented, but moreover Packer receives a physical examination from a licensed physician while in the limo. Additionally, the car

itself is a facilitator of consumption. As the car delivers Packer to various locations where he makes choices about further consumption (i.e. buying, eating), the text importantly suggests the limo's window are analogous to store-front glass. In the diamond district where the window opens upon a scene "rocking with commerce," Packer observes the "fine Swiss watches" and other "jewelry on display" much as one would when window-shopping (64). And when on the hunt for food, it is from the car window that Packer makes a choice between an "old small reliable subterranean bistro" and a Japanese joint called Little Tokyo (117). Each act of consumption evidences another layer of self-replacement.

However, perhaps the novel's greatest indictment that the limo is a site of consumption is the episode narrating the limo's attack from rioting protestors, for they attack capitalism whose primary tenet is consumption. The limo is its representative image—its accused catalyst. After breaking into the NASDAQ Center and destroying the control rooms, the video wall, and the logo ticker—these protestors then flood into the street where Packer's limo is their next target. "The car made them pause," DeLillo writes, thus emphasizing the crowd's mental figuring while they critique the car's position within capitalism. A protestor hurls a brick at the limo, another urinates on the vehicle, a few toss "sand-filled soda bottles" at it, several begin "rocking the car," and they conclude by defacing the limo with spray paint (89-93). The limo is under attack. To these rioters, it is a symbol of capitalism writ large.

The moment especially recognizes the concern Alain Tourraine relates in *The Post-Industrial Society* where in place of labor unions as a means of social and political

change, Tourraine argues that a united professional class will become the future's protesting force. Using immediate history for a guide, Tourraine asserts:

The most radical and creative movements appeared in the economically advanced groups, the research agencies, the technicians with skills but no authority, and, of course, in the university community. (18)

Without a figurehead to revolt against, Packer and his limo become the replaced, representative object for their rebellion. In fact, no specific agenda pervades their revolt *except* that they are rebelling against capitalism, the “*specter*” that they protest “*is haunting the world*” (89). The limo thus is the site for their rage against capitalism and its implied consumption.

More importantly, however, the crowd is unable to destroy the limousine. In fact, except for some cosmetic marring, a defect that does little to stop the limo's forward momentum, the limo sustains minimal damage. And as Packer relates, the protest is all but soon forgotten: “You saw the car. We were under attack by anarchists. Just two hours ago they were a major global protest. Now, what, forgotten” (118). His own thought is soon replaced by another: peanuts, a lost suit jacket.

Few novels write an automobile as a primary setting, and fewer still use that setting to implicate the car as a site of consumption run amok. That *Cosmopolis* does so recognizes a perceptive shift in American fiction's treatment of the automobile; not only is the novel frankly inconceivable without the car, but the car has moved from an object of superficial observation to one which, as DeLillo writes it, examples rampant American

consumption. In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's stretched white limousine offers itself as a fully exploited image of consumption, one that can be replaced ad infinitum. Packer is a character whose consumption serves as a marker for his identity. Without the white limousine to confirm his identity as a market trader and without his individualized interior to express his cultured and extravagant tastes, the question remains: Who is Eric Packer?

#### **4.5: Conclusion**

In closing this chapter, I wish to emphasize my argument that the American novel represents automobiles subversively by questioning cars' effect upon consumers. In Harry Crews' *Car*, Herman Mack evidences such a strong desire for the automobile that he resorts to consumption's primary act—eating—in order to possess the vehicle; at Springer Motors, Rabbit in John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* consumes cars and other luxury goods, and he gauges his well-being based upon his self-created relationship to cars; and in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer uses his white limousine as a space for consumption—the stock market data, the surveillance video, the Italian marble, the heart monitor, etc. These novels suggest the car is commodity—is something that can be bought and further commodified. The American novel at century's end details the car's make and model and normally highlight its many optional amenities—things that increase consumer desire and that, again, increase consumption. Thus, the car consumed is a site for additional consumption.

Other novels underscore this paradigm. Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) uses the automobile as a site of consumption when the protagonist, Lester Ballard, observes a couple through the car's windshield. As Ballard "raised himself up" to the car "and chanced one eye at the windowcorner," he sees a "pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade" which "humped in a dream of slaverous lust" (20). The car window functions as an analogue to the store window, a hallmark of American consumption. The car window is a screen that encourages free looking, even if one cannot make a purchase; it filters out reality and replaces it with images—products ready-made for imaginative consumption. In *Child of God*, Ballard enjoys the love of gazing, or to borrow from psychoanalysis, scocophilia. Through masturbation, Ballard completes the consumer act by translating the girl into an object for (self-gratifying) pleasure. McCarthy writes, "Ballard, unbuttoned, spent himself on the fender" (20). McCarthy's use of spent especially calls attention to the act as an exchange, and masturbation assumes significance when considering it is a process in the consumption cycle: consumption of object; translation of commodity into pleasure; and a discarding of the goods after their value is spent. While voyeurism incites Ballard's desire, the completion of the consumer act occurs at his climax.<sup>6</sup>

While dominant in American fiction from the 1970s to the present, the paradigm presents itself in works preceding this time period and in work outside of the American novel. E.E. Cummings' poem "she being Brand" (1926) reveals this motif, as his poem

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<sup>6</sup> The car as a site of sexual consumption is certainly a predominant nuanced application of this paradigm. In my introduction I note several examples of this—Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, and T. C. Boyle's *The Inner Circle*, for example.

anthropomorphically sexualizes the car as consumable object. In the opening stanzas, Cummings personifies the automobile (she) and then uses playful language to insinuate a lusty relationship with the car:

she being Brand  
-new; and you  
know consequently a  
little stiff i was  
careful of her and(having  
thoroughly oiled the universal  
joint tested my gas felt of  
her radiator made sure her springs were O.  
K.)i went right to it [...] (1-9)

Cummings' poem concludes in a suggested climax when the speaker simultaneously stops the car and his sexual experience with it. Cummings writes that the speaker,

brought allofher tremB  
-ling  
to a:dead.  
stand-  
;still) (34-38)

Cummings' poem can be understood in two different manners. On the one hand, the speaker takes his car on a ride and has an intense pseudo-sexual experience with the car; or on the other hand, the speaker intends for the car to serve as a metaphor for a human physical sexual encounter. In the latter case, the speaker objectifies an object (the car)

instead of a person (his sexual partner) to relate the experience. In either scenario, the car is, indeed, a site of consumption.

Another poem uses the automotive store for the poem's setting. While the junkyard is certainly a popular setting in fiction—John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Harry Crews' *Car*—the auto parts store is a site of consumption in Charles Olson's poem "In an Automotive Store." The speaker in Olson's poem describes having to tear away his son from a display of automotive parts. Olson writes that a salesman

was putting up a table  
like at a Fair

of new automobile  
electrical and battery  
items

and my son  
had grabbed hold  
and wouldn't let go (27-34)

The poem expresses a desire to consume the car via car parts. The car parts are the displaced object in this father and son turmoil.

Car parts are an especially significant motif in American song. In popular song and television, however, the dominant perception is reinforced; thus these forms of media offer a contrast to the subversion that the American novel instates. Johnny Cash's "One Piece at a Time" (1973), for example, imagines assembling (and then owning) a car piece by piece. The song narrative inverts that of Crews' *Car* in which Herman Mack

*disassembles* a car, yet, like *Car*, the automobile in Cash's song is a site of consumption.

Cash sings:

The first day I got me a fuel pump  
And the next day I got me an engine and a trunk  
Then I got me a transmission and all of the chrome  
The little things I could get in my big lunchbox  
Like nuts, an' bolts, and all four shocks  
But the big stuff we snuck out my buddy's mobile home. (25-30)

Similar to American fiction, Cash's speaker imagines that the car allows him to buy at something beyond the object. In "One Piece at a Time," the car promises to provide luxury—"I'm gonna ride around in style / I'm gonna drive everybody wild" (16-17)—and since the speaker assembles the car from stolen parts, individuality—"The transmission was a '53 / And the motor turned out to be a '73" (34-35). Bruce Springsteen's "Open All Night" (1982) offers another instance of a song with a particular emphasis upon car parts. Springsteen sings about the car's "carburetor [...] cleaned and checked" and its "new clutch plate and new set of shocks" (1, 4). Even The Beach Boys surf tunes play homage to the car's accessories. "Custom Machine" (1963) details the "metal flake blue" Corvette with "naugahyde bucket seats" and a "stereophonic speaker set with fibrosonic sound" (1, 7, 13).

These examples highlight America's current relationship with cars and bring the work into current times. No doubt another paradigm will develop. The rise of eco-criticism certainly speaks to a possible approach that will embrace the literary automobile. For example, a work like Crews' *Car* and its persistent images of waste

recognizes the toxic backdrop that surrounds automobile consumption. But for now, I am at the end of history. I do not have its advantage from which to critique changes for the automobile in American literature. In my concluding chapter, I synthesize the work demonstrated in the application. I suggest how a novel might contain examples of more than one paradigm, and I argue for a consistency throughout the American novel of representing cars that are central to work and important for defining an owner's socio-economic status.

## CONCLUSION

A goal of this conclusion is to suggest that the paradigms of violence, sacredness, and consumption are not in competition with one another. One way to achieve this is by demonstrating how multiple paradigms may operate in a single work. I use Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) to explicate this. Another way to synthesize my argument is to propose a thread which unites representations of the automobile. To achieve this, I argue for American fiction's consistent representation of cars that are useful for work, and fiction's comment upon cars as indicators of an individual's socio-economic status. Before moving forward, I wish to again note that my chapters' chronological division merely suggests a paradigm's rise and dominance in that period of American fiction, not its exclusiveness to it. Thus, American fiction of the early twentieth century predominantly represents cars as sites of violence; mid-century predominantly represents cars as sites of sacredness; and the closing of the century predominantly represents cars as sites of consumption. In some cases, multiple paradigms are present in a single work, such as in James Agee's *A Death in the Family* where a car wreck precipitates a religious interpretation of the event. As I argue above, sacredness is that work's dominant paradigm. However, some works evidence multiple paradigm's with neither arguably being dominant over another. Nabokov's *Lolita* is such a case.

*Lolita* has instances of all three paradigms. In it, cars are sites of violence, sacredness, and consumption. In *Lolita*, the paradigms of violence and sacredness exist

simultaneously, for Humbert Humbert perceives Charlotte's automotive death as divine intervention. Consumption figures in after Charlotte's death when Humbert has sexual encounters with Lolita in the car; additionally, a latent undertone of sacredness also exists when Humbert deifies Lolita and the car's ability to prolong their relationship.

Previous to the car accident, Humbert speculates on how to be closer to Lolita. While murder is a possibility, Humbert concludes this is an unlikely solution, thinking, "No man can bring about the perfect murder; chance, however, can do it" (84). Chance comes to Humbert in the automobile crash that kills Charlotte. At first glance, the accident seems rather ordinary. Humbert rushes out of the house to see a "big black glossy Packard" that "had climbed Miss Opposite's sloping lawn at an angle from the sidewalk [...], and stood there, shining in the sun, its doors open like wings, its front wheels deep in evergreen shrubbery" (97). However, the car's driver, described as a "death-like wax figure," is not the accident's fatal victim; Charlotte is. After being "knocked down and dragged several feet by the Beale car," Charlotte's "mangled remains" solicit an unusual response from Humbert, for, instead of grieving, he plots on how to extend his relationship to Lolita (98-101). Because Humbert perceives the car as divine intervention, sacredness is suggested.

While in the above scene, the car is a site of violence, Nabokov makes this paradigm a plot device,<sup>1</sup> for the car wreck enables Humbert's affair with the young

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<sup>1</sup> In *Lolita*'s predecessor, the Russian novel *The Enchanter* (1939/1940)—a work Nabokov calls "a prototype of my present novel, a short novel some thirty pages long" ("On a Book" 311)—Nabokov instead, has the wife die of natural causes, and the affair with the prepubescent girl begins thereafter. Interestingly, however, an automotive accident occurs, suggesting Nabokov's fascination with the motif. In *The Enchanter*, the novel's frustrated narrator—a person who, like Humbert, is psychologically obsessive—commits suicide by running in front of an automobile. The narrator, who wishes "to get rid of

Lolita. Once bereft of his wife, Humbert uses the car as a site in which to have Lolita.

Humbert first kisses Lolita in the car:

Hardly had the car come to a standstill than Lolita positively flowed into my arms. Not daring, not daring let myself go—not even daring let myself realize that *this* (sweet wetness and trembling fire) was the beginning of the ineffable life which, ably assisted by fate, I had finally willed into being—not daring really kiss her, I touched her hot, opening lips with the utmost piety, tiny sips, nothing salacious; but she, with an impatient wriggle, pressed her mouth to mine so hard that I felt her big front teeth and shared in the peppermint taste of her saliva. (112-13)

Recognizing the car's role in facilitating the affair—Humbert calls the moment “assisted by fate”—the passage especially represents the car as a site of consumption. Moreover, Humbert now relies upon the car to sustain the affair. “By putting the geography of the United States into motion,” Humbert relates, “I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of ‘going places,’ of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight” (152). While Humbert talks of their journey in terms of consumption—“Voraciously we consumed those long highways” (152)—and while they take in American landmarks such as Lincoln's birthplace (155), Death Valley (157), and Yellowstone Park (158), Humbert's perverted travelogue confuses the consumption of travel with the sexual consumption of Lolita.

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[...] the idiotic world” by “any stratagem,” is struck by a car. Nabokov writes that the car “carried him to stage center, under this growing, grinning, megathundering mass, his partner in a crashing cracovienne, this thundering iron thing, this instantaneous cinema of dismemberment” (76-77). Nabokov's grizzly details are reminiscent of similar scenes in American fiction. In the novel's parting scene, Nabokov's narrator describes his death as follows: “I'm traveling flattened, on my smacked-down face—hey, you're spinning me, don't rip me to pieces—you're shredding me” (77).

Other examples of works containing cars of violence, sacredness, and consumption can be found. Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919), for example, contains a violent car wreck and an extended sacred car drive. I wish to synthesize my work by showing how the American novel is uniformly subversive in representing the automobile. This subversion questions the automobile's integration into work, and, by proxy, its effect upon socio-economic status. Eugene Morgan in Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* manufactures the first American automobiles; Jeeter Lester in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* depends upon a car to haul wood to sell; several secondary characters in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* work in automotive related industries; Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* uses a car to complete his work of spreading religion; Rabbit Angstrom in John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* sells cars; the Mack family in Harry Crews' *Car* trades in junked automobiles; and Eric Packer in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* employs a car as his work's moveable office site. As F. C. Gamst observes, "Work furnishes a person's basis of social power and economic and other welfare," and "[b]ecause monetarily paid work is a central identifier of the self[,] the characteristic used as a person's overall social label and assessment is occupational status" (24:16577).

Below I examine the following novels which incorporate automobiles which are specific to work and to making money: John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, Harry Crews' *Car*, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. I extend this examination to suggest how automobile ownership also indicates socio-economic status with a look to F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I close this study with the especially subversive representation James Agee writes in *A Death in the Family*.

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin is with *Rabbit Is Rich*, for John Updike's novel specifically makes the automobile central to Rabbit's work and to his ability to earn money, for Rabbit sells cars for a living. The novel intensifies the car's importance to work and to earning money, and it especially strengthens the relationship between automobile ownership and socio-economic status. The novel questions the prominence of the automobile in the Angstrom's lives, and it reveals a main character (Rabbit) who is only able to understand the world through cars, and it displays another character (Nelson) who uses cars toward destructive ends.

The car's value to Rabbit and the Angstrom family in *Rabbit Is Rich* largely results from what Updike himself explains as "a lucky casual stroke of mine to give the used-car dealer Fred Springer a Toyota franchise" ("Introduction" xv). The Toyota franchise is central to Rabbit's work, and car sales simultaneously fund *and* confirm Rabbit's upper-middle class lifestyle. I first demonstrate the important value the car is to Rabbit's work by highlighting the necessity for Rabbit *to work*. Although Rabbit's behaviors—his ownership of several cars, his membership to the golf and tennis club, his island vacation, and his investments in the gold and silver markets—might point toward an American leisure lifestyle, his work at Springer motors confirms and restricts Rabbit's white collar socio-economic position. Moreover, Rabbit shows a distorted view of the world by using automobile's to assess his socio-economic position.

While Springer Motors and their “acre of asphalt” is where Rabbit imagines himself “king of the lot” (625), Rabbit, however, does not own the lot outright; he inherits it through marriage and really only owns one-fourth of the dealership. *Rabbit Is Rich* opens by relating this very fact in its second paragraph:

He owns Springer Motors, one of the two Toyota agencies in the Brewer area. Or rather he co-owns a half-interest with his wife Janice, her mother Bessie sitting on the other half inherited when old man Springer died five years back. (623)

In consequence, Bolton, argues for a more reserved assessment of Rabbit’s financial labeling; he does not consider Rabbit “truly rich,” but “merely financially comfortable for the first time” (100). Regardless of how one chooses to classify Rabbit—rich or merely well off—his financial well-being certainly places him in the upper middle class, a position that his work at the automobile dealership confirms. Part of Rabbit’s increased awareness of himself as “rich,” results from the American gas crisis that drives the American’s interest in fuel-efficient vehicles. In 1970, the Toyota Corolla had become America’s second best-selling import while world-wide it was the best-selling car, period—a fact sources attribute specifically to the gas crisis (Jones 581). For Rabbit, this translates into work that is especially profitable. However, the novel questions the manifest gains Rabbit enjoys in a disadvantaged economy. Pointedly, he moves up in the middle-class due to an increase in foreign car sales, and he profits from an economic crisis.

Necessarily then, Rabbit values the car for his work *and for* allowing his upward mobility in the middle class. Initially, Rabbit spent several years as a Linotyper—a middle class position but one without the economic benefits of selling cars—but once he became involved with Janice, old man Springer then “took him on as a salesman” (624), which improved his income and necessarily his social status. Moreover, upon old man Springer’s death Rabbit moves up to Chief Sales Representative which additionally boosts his income. Rabbit’s rise in the working class recognizes the relaxed nature of the middle class boundary. The middle class, as Judith R. Blau relates in “The Contingent Character of the American Middle Class,” does not contain the fixed boundaries often given to the poor or elite socio-economic classes. She writes that in the middle class “the stratification system itself is a continuum and is maintained so by both intragenerational and intergenerational mobility” (212). The car specifically promotes Rabbit’s rise in the middle class. Rabbit’s wealth is directly correlated to the gas crisis and to an automobile-dependent economy.

As Rabbit’s wealth increases, he begins equating cars with being rich. Updike’s novel calls attention to Rabbit’s distorted perception that cars facilitate an image of wealth. When the book opens, Rabbit drives a Toyota Corona, a middle-class American car. In one poignant scene, Rabbit demonstrates his economic rise when, standing before his “1978 Luxury Edition liftback five-door Corona,” he “wonders what his father would think if he could only see him now, rich” (647). Rabbit values the car for providing, at least this image of him as “rich.” Moreover, the Angstroms are a multiple-car family, another indicator of their wealthy American class status. Janice drives a Ford Mustang

and, while he has since sold it, Nelson once owned a Thunderbird. Owning two or three cars certainly places a *value* on the car (or several cars) to indicate one's socio-economic status, but again I argue, moreover, that Rabbit's work in the car industry is especially the value he assigns automobiles. Cars provide his work, his income, and in consequence, his standing in the American upper middle class. *Rabbit Is Rich* makes the Springer Motor Toyota franchise the economic heart of the Angstrom family, and the dealership's income settles them into the upper middle-class. However, Updike's novel questions the effect of Rabbit's relationship with automobiles. As I demonstrate in chapter 4, one effect of automobiles upon Rabbit is that Rabbit grows upset when Nelson damages cars. An extension of that argument is that Rabbit also depends upon cars to maintain an image of their middle-class lifestyle; to Rabbit, a damaged car equals a damaged upper middle class image.

Harry Crews' *Car* also makes cars central to a character's livelihood. Crews' images of cars reveal a host of car-dependent livelihoods, thus indicating an economic reliance upon automobiles. A quick survey of the novel's main characters reveals each beholden, in one way or another, to the car. Herman Mack's father Easy Mack owns and runs Auto-Town, and, until Herman accepts the job of eating cars which pays "three hundred dollars a week" (345), Herman works for his father. Easy's other son, Mister, runs the crusher at Auto-Town. Thus while Easy Mack keeps "the books and trie[s] to see into the future," Mister oversees "the disposal end of the business" (337). In addition, Easy's daughter Junnel earns her living by collecting wrecked cars from accident scenes in her "super-charged" ten-wheel tow truck that she calls Big Mama (353). All these

positions confirm their work in the automobile service industry, a job which necessarily depends specifically upon the automobile for their living. Moreover, this work figures their position in the working class economy. The car again is important to work and to providing one's socio-economic status.

The novel questions the value given the car, for despite being surrounded by cars, the Mack family is hard-pressed to own one outright. Mister, for example, is only able to afford his prized Cadillac when he gains money from managing Herman Mack's televised consumption of the Ford Maverick. While cars provide an income, that same income, as Crews writes it, limits the Mack's financial mobility. Crews includes Homer Edge to counter the impoverished image of the Macks, and thus *Car* provides polarized automobile-related narratives which simultaneously highlight the disadvantages and the advantages of the automobile. By providing a few statistics, I intend to locate the Mack family in the American lower working class population and Homer Edge in the upper middle class and thereby show their socio-economic division. Again, the automotive industry provides work and defines socio-economic status. The car is thus valued on both fronts. While it disadvantages some like the Macks, others find advantages with the car. The novel's ultimate point, however, questions the impact of the automobile upon work and culture by emphasizing the automobile's dominance in the workplace. Such an image is subversive.

In 1971, the novel's setting, a person working in the automobile service industry<sup>2</sup> earned an average income of \$6847 (*Historical Statistics* 4:715). This figure locates *all*

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<sup>2</sup> The automotive parts industry is a field that, in addition to the service parts division such as the Mack family's Auto-Town, also includes car repair persons as well as gas attendants

these automotive-related industries in the lower working class American population. In comparison, the average household income for that same year was \$10, 370 (2:652). Moreover, such an income settles Easy, Herman, Mister, and Junnel Mack into the lower fifth percent of incomes distributed that year (2:653), thus effectively restricting their position in the lower working class. For one, they are above that year's poverty threshold of \$2098 (2:665), but they are indeed far below the over twenty percent of Americans in the income's top five percent who earned, at minimum, \$24,138 (2:652). Thus they are the lower working class. In point of fact, Easy is only able to afford the Cadillac once he earns an additional income by helping to manage Herman, a point *Car* makes:

It was true. Easy had always talked of owning a brand-new Sedan De Ville, the most popular of Cadillac cars. But they had never really been able to afford one before. Even owning the largest junkyard in the state, there was always the taxes, and the turnover, and the overhead, and the ever-decreasing value of wrecked cars. (389-91)

While they are surrounded by automobiles at Auto-Town, the Macks' limited means denies outright ownership of a new car. Even Easy Mack drives a car that is over thirty years old: "The truck was a 1937 and it had grown as [Easy] had grown" (342).

In contrast, Homer Edge, who runs "the hotel and entertainment business" (344), remains the only character showing a tangential work relationship to the automobile, for while the car is not central to his business, he makes it so. Further, he profits from the enterprise. Mr. Edge charges a \$1.50 ballroom admission fee to the twice-daily show of Herman's consumption of the Ford Maverick, thus reaping a three-dollar-a-day profit

from persons attending both consumption and defecation ceremonies. Also, a Japanese station pays Mr. Edge \$8,233 to televise the event (377); it is a figure which at once passes the average income for any of the Macks. Lastly, Mr. Edge earns more money by selling tiny replicas of the Ford Maverick for \$12.50 a pop. Obviously, the admission fees, the TV spots, and the toy replicas generate other avenues of revenue and of work for Mr. Edge, all of which depend upon the automobile. Such earnings lead Mister to claim to Mr. Edge, “You’re going to get rich, you cheerful bastard” (370). Mr. Edge’s socio-economic status is further implied by his employment of the Mack family—Herman to eat the car and Mister to help with “promotion, gimmicks, and operational procedures” (411). Clearly, Homer Edge is above the Mack family on the socio-economic pyramid, but more importantly, he depends upon the Maverick to boost his income.

*Car* thus importantly positions characters that individually represent separate facets of automotive economies: Easy Mack and Herman Mack take in junked cars; Mister destroys them; Junnel tows cars away; and Homer Edge incorporates cars into his business in order to generate extra revenue. Combined, their livelihoods indicate the dominant presence of the car in American life and work, or as DeBord and Long succinctly put it, *Car* exhibits the automobile’s penetration “into all aspects of human life” (42). Further, these automobile-related industries reveal the character’s economic status. Work with cars restricts and defines their incomes to the working class, or it increases their economic status. Crews’ novel especially questions the car’s value by writing characters with an extreme dependence upon the automobile. It subverts the car’s role in American by showing a family struggling to earn a living from cars.

In Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer does not sell or trade in automobiles as do the Angstroms and the Macks, but Packer similarly values his automobile as important to work. From the limousine, Packer sells and trades world currencies, a point that highlights the borderless business of financial trading. Additionally, Packer more importantly values the limousine for its ability to convey his status in the white-collar work force. The limousine is a visible marker that separates Packer from the blue-collar working class. Ultimately, DeLillo's novel questions the value of the car since the limousine's exact purpose is obscured and since Packer relies upon it to separate him from the blue-collar world.

While the limousine may seem a strange place for work, the limo as a portable office is perhaps the car's greatest purpose in *Cosmopolis*. In the limo, Packer's work routine fails to differ from the normal office duties of holding meetings and trading market commodities. Moreover, in a telling exchange, Packer's business associate asks, "Any special reason we're in the car instead of the office?" to which Packer replies, "How do you know we're in the car instead of the office?" (14-15). The statement pointedly calls into question the car's exact purpose in a changing work world. In his limousine, Packer trades stock, a type of work dependent upon computer technology. In his influential 1971 work *The Post-Industrial Society*, Alain Tourraine suggests the term technocrat to emphasize technology's dominance in the workplace, and as *Cosmopolis* relates, technology indeed dominates the novel. In an article published in *Harper's*, DeLillo stresses the invaluable importance of technology to American work:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce. ("In the Ruins of the Future" 37)

The limousine thus is a site for technology, but as such, *Cosmopolis* questions the car's role, for, as I demonstrate chapter 4, DeLillo's novel especially negates the car's mobility. By placing Packer in a limousine that fails to move forward at any great speed, DeLillo removes the automobile from its designed function and subverts its image of being important for transportation. Instead, the limousine is a displaced office space.

Additionally, Packer represents perhaps the fastest growing trend in white collar work—the financial marketplace. As Saskia Sassen asserts in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*:

Since the early 1980s there has been a pronounced and rapid transformation in the volume of the financial industry, in its organization, and in the supply of and demand for financial products and services. (64)

Interestingly, the number of commercial banks has not shown a significant increase between 1900 (12,427 banks) and 1980 (14,729 banks), yet their monetary capital tells a different story: \$9 billion in capital assets in 1900 to over \$1.5 trillion by 1980 (*Historical Statistics* 3:651-652). An important consequence of this surge in the financial industry is the increasing gap between the white and blue collar industries, a point that

Packer's limo ownership conveys. While the white limousine confirms his identity with the white-collar fiduciary crowd, it more especially relates his elite wealthy status.

Despite the exact limo's model remaining unnamed throughout the novel, the cover limousine photos display the brand logo which the Oldsmobile division of General Motors manufactures. Oldsmobile has always been an indicator of American wealth and privilege, for in addition to being America's oldest car manufacturer and the world's largest automobile maker, Oldsmobile specifically markets "expensive, high-quality cars," the limousine necessarily being one of its pricier models (Dougal 371). According to the online distributor JWD Limo Sales—"the largest wholesale limousine dealer in the world"—a new limo such as Packer's sells for approximately sixty thousand dollars. Comparatively then, Packer's limo costs nearly thirty times more than Herman Mack's two thousand dollar Maverick or twelve times as much as the Angstrom's roughly five thousand dollar Toyota or Ford Mustang.<sup>3</sup> Indeed a wide gap exists between the blue- and white-collar class, thus leading Sassen to comment: "When we compare the leading growth sectors of the post-World War II period with today's, we can see pronounced differences in their occupational and income distributions"; he adds, "Today's leading sector's," which of course include Packer's financial industry, "generate a higher share of high-income jobs" which result in an increased "growth in inequality" (244). The limousine's luxury far surpasses even the luxury of Easy Mack's Cadillac or Rabbit's Toyota Corolla. *Cosmopolis* especially questions the car's usefulness; it is a superfluous office space and a barrier between Packer and the lower-classed society. Pointedly, the

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<sup>3</sup> The Toyota Corolla sold for between \$1800-\$4000 in the 1970s (Jones 581) while the Ford Mustang retailed for around \$5000 in 1971 (Mueller 82).

limousine isolates and separates Packer from the average American. It says to the public, *I am rich.*

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, cars similarly isolate individuals. The Joads' dilapidated Hudson defines their destitution and their poor socio-economic standing. Indeed, the financially-endowed and technologically current culture that drives Zephyrs and big red trucks figuratively and literally run over the migrant population. Thus in *The Grapes of Wrath*, automobiles suggest a social hierarchy. The Joads, however, do not assume the bottom tier of this social pyramid, for Steinbeck further uses the automobile to display the Joads' dominance of the animal kingdom, a point that effectively positions them between the natural world and the rich big business owners. One scene, for instance, witnesses Al attempting to run down a cat (404), while another shows Tom's glee at killing a rattlesnake with the car (455). While the text typically implies that the Joads are underfoot of the machines (and their owners), the narrative also demonstrates that the Joads are superior to the animal kingdom.

Additionally, Steinbeck's novel highlights a variety of automobile-related enterprises that oppose the Joads and their inability to find work. An image emerges that those who work *in* the automotive sector are employed, while those outside it (such as the Joads) are not. Steinbeck's peripheral characters evidence the manifest gains the automobile brought to American economy, but the novel questions the good of these gains, for Steinbeck uses the Joads to display a sympathetic contrast to those with a financial advantage. The novel offers glimpses of the incipient economies of the gas station, the restaurant, the motel/hotel, and the car parts industry—all of which were

valued for their promise of work and of economic gain. Settings which occur at roadside gas pumps, highway diners, roadway camps, and especially the several scenes involving junkyards indicate the economic promise the automobile brought some in America, but ultimately, the dominance of the Joad narrative questions the automobile technology's value to American culture.

One of the Joads' first stops on their way to California is near a small hamlet called Paden where they pull off the road to refuel and quench their thirst, and while the small shack Steinbeck describes is no mean, thriving economic oasis, it yet anticipates the roadside gas pump and convenience store's growth. Steinbeck writes, "Near Paden there was a shack beside the road and two gas pumps in front of it; and beside a fence, a water faucet and a hose" (341). When they park, the attendant's first question calls attention to the gas pump as a business venture; he asks: "You aim to buy anything? Gasoline or stuff?" (342). At this early point in the novel, the Joads indeed have a few coins, and, while they save some money by drinking water free from the hose, they spend six dollars on fuel (344). The moment recognizes the additional cost of automobile ownership.

Also, the proliferation of automobiles and an increase in American travel created a host of problems, such as the need for better roads and better traffic pattern designs to alleviate roadway congestion. The gasoline tax was the solution. At its inception, the gasoline tax was meant to fund future road develop as well as the repaving of current roads. John B. Rae explains in *The Road and the Car in American Life* how the dramatic increase in car traffic necessitated "an extensive program of highway construction and

improvement at all levels” (60). Yet, the great problem of such an undertaking was funding. “The remedy,” as Rae relates, “was provided by the automobile itself” (62). He continues, “The breakthrough was the adoption of gasoline taxes,” which were first instated by Oregon in 1919 and then quickly adopted by other states. By 1935, gasoline taxes levied against the automobile raised a revenue of almost a billion dollars (Rae 63). Indeed, the value of the car in funding its own thoroughfares through gasoline taxes cannot be underestimated. In 1931, for example, the average car owner such as the Joads could expect to unwittingly pay close to fourteen dollars in gasoline taxes per year (Rae 67). Gas pump scenes thus imply the economic consequences of automobile ownership. Once owned, the car is still expensive to maintain.

The highway diner is another economic value which the novel assigns the automobile. The diner extends the gas pump’s function by serving full meals in addition to offering gas. The diner, however, is also valued for the entertainment qualities it provides, which, of course, are an additional form of revenue. Steinbeck describes the hamburger joints along Route 66 at length and includes its various other commodities:

Along 66 the hamburger stands—Al & Susy’s Place—Carl’s Lunch—Joe & Minnie—Will’s Eats. Board-and-bat shacks. Two gasoline pumps in front, a screen door, a long bar, stools, and a foot rail. Near the door three slot machines [...]. And beside them, the nickel phonograph with records piled up like pies [...]. At one end of the counter a covered case; candy cough drops, caffeine sulphate called Sleepless, No-Doze; candy, cigarettes, razor blades, aspirin, Bromo-Seltzer, Alka-Seltzer. [...]. Beer taps behind the counter, and in the back coffee urns [...]. And pies in wire cages and oranges in pyramids of four. And little piles of Post Toasties, corn flakes, stacked up in designs. (372)

The diner is a mecca of household goods and the ancestor for the modern day travel plaza. In addition to their importance for an owner's livelihood, the diner is also valued for being a veritable consumer oasis along an otherwise desolate strip of road. "The roadside restaurant business," Rae explains, "was also booming in response to the accelerating volume of highway travel" (104). But as scenes in *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrate, the highway diners do not favor the destitute like the Joads; moreover, they remind the poor of what they cannot afford.

Another incipient industry which *The Grapes of Wrath* recognizes is that of the roadside camp, a setting that serves as ancestor to the motel/hotel. While the novel narrates several examples of the roadway camp, one should suffice to illuminate my point. In this passage, the Joads pull into the migrant camp, but are confused to be greeted by a proprietor who intends for them to pay. The proprietor firmly tells the family, "If you wanna pull in here an' camp it'll cost you four bits. Get a place to camp an' water an' wood. An' nobody won't bother you"; disturbed, Tom challenges, "What the hell [...]. We can sleep in the ditch right beside the road, an' it won't cost nothin'" (408). On the contrary the county, as the proprietor informs Tom, has outlawed free roadside camping; if caught doing so, the local law will charge them with vagrancy. The exchange not only shows the economic value the roadside camps provide owners, but it also highlights the increasing problem the automobile gave the American public when the dramatic increase in travel negated the possibility of sleeping along the roadside for free. States and counties refused to tolerate this practice, which for many years was acceptable and, indeed, was the norm. To contextualize the rapid increase in automotive travel

between the 1920s and 1950s, Rae notes that while the population merely doubled during this period, the number of highway miles traveled “multiplied ninefold” (90). People traveling long distances necessarily needed places to rest; thus, the pay to sleep enterprise was born. Initially these were the roadside tent camps such as the Joads encounter, or they were homes renting individual rooms, but by the 1950s, the motel had taken root and “developed into a really big business” (104). Importantly, the car initiated an industry that effectively ended the traveler’s ability to sleep for free. Through Tom’s response, Steinbeck questions the value of car; the proliferation of automobiles ends what was previously a commonplace practice.

Perhaps the greatest economic value that *The Grapes of Wrath* portrays is the rise in the automotive parts industry. Several scenes in the novel find the Joads bargaining with junkyard owners and vying for deals on various car parts. These scenes highlight the migrant’s financial disadvantage, and they highlight the abuse shown the penniless migrant. Consider chapter 7 where the used car lot is a space where waste ironically is a commodity and where the migrant is yet again exploited—here by the used car salesman. The scene describes relays an image of automobiles that are discarded and unwanted automobiles. These automobiles are yester-years’ technology; they are “[p]iles of rusty ruins against the fence, rows of wrecks in back, grease-black, blocks lying on the ground and a pig weed growing up through the cylinders” (275). Yet, the used car lot is yet the migrant’s shopping space, the migrant must survive off of discarded technology or waste.

Moreover, the junkyard owners take advantage of the migrants by trying to sell them their oldest cars. The unnamed narrator advises that one should “work ‘em down to

that '26 Buick," and while they are deciding he will "get the slow leak pumped up on that '25 Dodge," which will be then presumably sold to the migrant buyer (274). If the setting is indeed in the middle of the Great Depression, then the models in the used car lot are at least a decade old. The scene specifically aligns the migrants with old automobiles and demonstrates their inability to pay for current technology. Further, the scene highlights the salesman's exploitation of the disadvantaged, thus questioning the car's value in society. While by the mid-1960s, well over fifty thousand establishments specializing in car parts are in operation (Rae 103), scenes in the novel cast the junkyard in a negative light. Steinbeck's narrative positions automobile-related industries in opposition to the migrants and their poverty. Ultimately, *The Grapes of Wrath* questions the economic value of the car to those outside of its related industries.

Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* also draws a relationship between automobiles and economics, for the novel simultaneously chronicles Eugene Morgan's prosperity and Aunt Fanny's destitution. By introducing polarized dramas that relate to the automobile, Tarkington sutures the two divided narratives involving the automobile: those that profit from it, and those that do not. Thus, *The Magnificent Ambersons* raises questions about the exact value of the automobile to culture. The novel opens with the speculative hopes of Eugene Morgan, a man whose financial footing is below that of the well-to-do Ambersons, but at its close, *The Magnificent Ambersons* highlights Eugene's prosperity for significant financial gains accompany his manufacturing of automobiles. In contrast, the sub-narrative of Aunt Fanny relates the financial disadvantages brought about by the automobile. While her market speculations

in the automobile industry indicate that the automobile is a new industry of financial rewards, Aunt Fanny's investment in the automobile industry fails terribly and sends her into abject poverty. While her actions indicate a perception that the automobile offers financial promise and prosperity, the outcome undermines this notion.

Interestingly, Aunt Fanny's support of the automotive industry comes late in the novel, for she initially sides with George, an opponent to the horseless carriage. In a scene where she and Isabel discuss the sudden proliferation of automobiles around town, Aunt Fanny expresses her opinion that they are a fleeting invention with a small future, stating "I've begun to agree with George about their being more a fad than anything else, and I think it must be the height of the fad just now" (136). She goes on,

Besides, people won't permit the automobile to be used. Really, I think they'll make laws against them. You see how they spoil the bicycling and the driving; people just seem to hate them! They'll never stand it—never in the world! (136)

Of course, Aunt Fanny changes her mind about automobiles, especially when the elder Amberson advises that the electric headlight is a good investment. When Aunt Fanny whimsically muses that there "seem to be so many ways of making money nowadays" and that each day she "hear[s] of a new fortune some person has got hold of, one way or another," Amberson proceeds to recount what he knows of this new invention—the electric automobile headlight. He claims that the new headlight is "better than anything yet," and that, as he got it from his financially-sound adviser, "every car in American can't *help* but have 'em" (206). Piquing her attention, Aunt Fanny exclaims, "People *are*

making such enormous fortunes out of everything to do with motor cars.” The passage explicitly recognizes that the automobile is a site of economic activity and prosperity. Yet against the advice of the elder Amberson, George, and even Eugene Morgan who does not consider the electric headlight a sure thing—Aunt Fanny ties up her savings in the electric headlight company’s stock (206-07). The moment indicates the financial value the automobile brought to the investment class, while it also shows the various businesses that owned tangential relationships to the automobile. Aunt Fanny seeks to even further advance her economic standing.

However, Aunt Fanny’s company fails and her stock plummets. A computational error was made in figuring the speed a car needed to travel for the light to work properly. “They state the speed must be more than thirty miles an hour”; “At thirty-five, objects in the path of light begin to become visible; at forty they are revealed distinctly, and at fifty and above we have a real headlight” (222). Unfortunately for Aunt Fanny, most of these early automobiles could not achieve such speeds, and if they could, poor road conditions inhibited such fast driving. The company folds and Aunt Fanny is left penniless.

While this sub-plot reinforces Tarkington’s inverse riches-to-rags narrative, it more importantly suggests the economic value which early twentieth century America assigned the automobile and its related industries, and it questions that value. The automobile became a site for financial speculation and was valued primarily for its promise of pecuniary reward, but rewards were not necessarily guaranteed. Thus, while many embraced the financial gains which could be earned with the automobile’s rise in popularity, some like Aunt Fanny lost great fortunes on automobile market speculation.

The Ambersons find their lives in destitution, an event that has a direct correlation to the automobile.

I wish to now turn attention to a novel that makes an explicit comment about the automobile's role as a marker for social status. While Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* does not necessarily use his vehicle for work, his car is valuable and indicates his ability to *not have to* work. Unlike the other novels under review here that suggest characters who prize the car as a means for earning more money, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* instead evidences a case where the character specifically uses the car to display *money earned*. Fitzgerald provides an image of an ostentatious luxury car in order to call attention to Gatsby's hollowness. A simultaneous aim of the novel to question the social value given to automobiles, for, according to Fitzgerald, Gatsby gives his auto *too* much value. He requires the automobile to instantly provide him with the façade of being rich, yet he does not have the rich's graces nor their fine manners.

The flashy and ostentatious Rolls-Royce is Gatsby's attempt to emulate the Tom Buchanan's wealth. Through such emulation, Gatsby hopes to impress and win-back Daisy Buchanan. As Thorstein Veblen relates in his study *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, "The possession of wealth confers honor" (21), and it is this honor which Gatsby seeks in his efforts to win Daisy; he uses the car to promote this honor-conferring image. For one, Gatsby owns not one, but two cars. While perhaps more common today, owning two cars was rather uncommon in 1925.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Gatsby's ownership of two cars immediately displays his wealth. Yet, his Rolls-Royce especially symbolizes Gatsby's

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<sup>4</sup> Even in 1949—the earliest year of available data—only three percent of Americans owned more than one car (*Historical Statistics* 4:829).

rise into the wealthy leisure class. For starters, the novel consistently associates Gatsby with his Rolls-Royce.

Even before meeting Gatsby, the reader meets Gatsby's Rolls-Royce; it is initially described as "an omnibus bearing parties to and from the city" (43). *The Great Gatsby* certainly presses this elegant vehicle as an image of Gatsby's affluence and extravagant wealth. So impressive is the Rolls-Royce that even the normally level-headed narrator is caught "looking with admiration at [Gatsby's] car":

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 hat boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns. (68)

The car is oversized and almost *too* rich. As Scott Donaldson relates in "Possessions in *The Great Gatsby*," "Gatsby consistently errs in the direction of ostentation" (188).

Donaldson describes his Rolls-Royce as "a monstrously long cream-colored car," and he further explains how Gatsby's attempt to emulate wealth fails:

His [Gatsby's] clothes, his car, his house, his parties—all brand him as newly rich, unschooled in the social graces and sense of superiority ingrained not only in Tom Buchanan but also in Nick Carraway. (188)

Indeed, Gatsby's strong identification with the Rolls-Royce is the very thing that leads the novel's characters to suspect Gatsby for Myrtle's death. Moreover, the car easily leads Wilson to Gatsby. Thus, the car's value to Gatsby as a means to emulate wealth is

simultaneously the flaw which undoes him and his dream of winning Daisy Buchanan's love. By putting his wealth on display, Gatsby seeks to penetrate the upward social echelon, yet ultimately his attempt is denied. The novel thus questions the unnatural value which Gatsby assigns his automobile, as, through his luxury car, Gatsby tries to buy into the wealthy class.

James Agee's *A Death in the Family* confronts the effects of car ownership upon the urban and rural landscape; it also makes a subtle comment about the car's affect upon the American psyche. Agee's narration of urban sprawl especially questions the automobile's impact upon society. Agee's representation of the automobile is especially subversive, for it forefronts the negative effects of automobile proliferation. As Jay exits the city and enters into "that kind of flea-bitten semi-rurality which always peculiarly depressed him," Agee describes the settlement of "mean little homes" as being "set too close together for any satisfying rural privacy or use" and yet being "too shapelessly apart to have adherence as any kind of community" (36). The progress that this passage observes is the car's reorganization of urban and rural space. In 1933, the Hoover commission labeled this reorganized borderland metropolitanism and explained that:

the motor vehicle extended the horizon of the community and introduced a territorial division of labor among local institutions and neighboring cities which is unique in the history of settlement. (qtd. in Interrante 91)

The progress the automobile engenders is a collapse in the geographical boundary between rural and urban. What Agee's *A Death in the Family* questions is the exact

usefulness of this liminal, metropolitanism space. According to Agee, this space fails to allow enough land for grazing and normal farm cultivation, and it also discourages the community support often deemed an asset of the urban environment. In addition to reorganizing settlement space, the automobile's metropolitan boom also reorganizes economic activity (Interrante 93). Agee captures this point when he narrates the rural husband and wife going to the Knoxville market to sell their goods (38-39). Indeed, the car often separated customers and consumers in ways previously unimaginable.

Perhaps, however, Jay's brother, Ralph, is the most concerned image of the uncertain effects of the progress which the automobile precipitated. Ralph embodies the fast-paced lifestyle which would soon come to be a representative image of American society—one related to cars and speed. Ralph stands out as a character of hurried and frantic qualities. He is “in a virtual panic” when Jay arrives at their father's home and begins running errands in an extremely brisk manner (48). Moreover, Ralph relies upon his car to complete these tasks, thus speaking to the value the automobile holds for him. While he buys a Chalmers car “because it was a better class of auto” and “more expensive than his brother's,” in the Chalmers, Ralph sped “across the street to his office, unlocked his desk, and took two choking swallows of whisky in the dark”; he then “rammed the bottle in his pocket and hurried down the stairs to start his car” again (49). Agee's language underscores a theme of speed; thus choking, rammed, and hurried emphasize Ralph's rush. Ralph's quick actions call attention to the side effects which the car and its progress precipitated. Agee's prose questions the merits of this progress.

An ironic moment in *A Death in the Family* best captures Agee's questioning stance regarding the automobile, for the novel especially notes the car's iconic image as a representative technology of progress. Agee creates a character who defends the automobile on these specific grounds, and this despite a family fatality. While Mary's sister comments that she always thought Jay drove "rather recklessly," and while she admits that she "was *most uneasy* when [Jay and Mary] decided to purchase [the car]," her husband, Joel, immediately defends the car: "Progress," he says, "We mustn't—stand—in the way—of Progress" (115-116).

American fiction subverts the car's image of progress. These novels importantly recognize many gratuitous applications and economic values American society gives the automobile. While these relate to the automobile's mobility, many of them express that relation only tangentially. Instead, the novels I have discussed in this study communicate a view that the car is a technology with questionable consequences. While American literature incorporates a dominant perception of the automobile as good for culture, it subverts this perceptions by highlighting the negative effects of America's love of cars. Understanding America requires understanding the car. The American novel's subversive images of cars help offer a commentary on that car lifestyle.

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