

# The Road Chronotope And the Experience of Displacement

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intersection of narrative space-time and human displacement through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, using John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) as its primary text. The analysis posits that Steinbeck transforms the quintessentially American road—specifically U.S. Highway 66—from a simple geographical setting into a complex chronotope that structures the experience of forced migration. By drawing on Bakhtin's theory, this article argues that the road in *The Grapes of Wrath* functions not merely as a path for westward movement, but as a space where time is “thickened” and history is made tangible, fundamentally shaping the Joad family's identity and their experience of dispossession. The analysis explores how the road chronotope becomes a crucible for community formation and ethical awakening, ultimately redefining the experience of displacement as a painful yet transformative suspension between a lost past and an uncertain future. It concludes that the chronotope of the road in *The Grapes of Wrath* serves as a critical narrative device for articulating the spatial and temporal disorientation inherent in the American refugee experience.

**Keywords:** Displacement, adventure time, American dream, identity, temporality, sequence of movement, encounter.

**Introduction:** In his foundational work, literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the concept of the chronotope (literally “time-space”) to describe the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships as they are artistically expressed in literature. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is “the primary means for materializing time in space... providing the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events” [5]. It is where “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” [5]. Among the various chronotopes Bakhtin identifies, the road holds a special significance. He notes that on the road, “the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity,” serving as both “a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement” [5].

This theoretical framework provides a powerful lens through which to analyze John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel, which chronicles the Joad family's arduous journey from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to the promise—and often the broken reality—of California, is fundamentally a narrative of displacement structured by the road. While many critics have explored the novel's socio-political commentary, its representation of refugees, and its place in American letters [10], [9], this article focuses specifically on how the road operates as a chronotope to shape and define the experience of displacement. It argues that the Joads' journey along Route 66 is not simply a backdrop for their story but an active force that transforms their relationship to time, space, and each other.

## METHOD

In the Oklahoma chapters of the novel, the Joads exist in a world of static, though threatened, time—a time

tied to the land and the cyclical rhythms of farming. Their identity is rooted in a specific place. However, the moment they are “thrown off” their land [8] and onto the road, their relationship with time and space is fundamentally altered. They enter a new chronotope. The road becomes a space of “adventure time,” which Bakhtin describes as ahistorical and governed by chance [5]. The family’s progress is dictated not by their own will alone, but by the mechanical reliability of their overloaded Hudson, by the availability of work at each stop, and by the hostile encounters they face.

This new temporality is one of anxious suspension. The past is symbolized by the burning of their mementos—a literal destruction of their personal history before embarking [8]. The future is an ever-receding mirage, always just beyond the next mountain range. The present becomes an endless, grueling sequence of movement. As one critic notes, the family’s watchword becomes “across”: they must keep marching across [8]. The road thus materializes the experience of dispossession, turning a socio-economic condition into a palpable, physical reality. The highway is no longer a symbol of American freedom and new beginnings, as it is in traditional frontier mythology [1], but rather a conduit for a forced exodus, a “wall they must drive through” [8]. The road chronotope in *The Grapes of Wrath* thus gives artistic form to the “precarity” and dispossession of the migrant’s life [3].

Central to Bakhtin’s concept of the road chronotope is the idea of the “encounter.” Because the road is a place where people of diverse social stations and backgrounds intersect by chance, it becomes a site where normally separate social worlds collide [5]. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this chronotopic function is essential to the novel’s vision of collective identity. Thrown together by shared circumstances, the Joads and other dispossessed families along Route 66 form what scholar Kimberly Wright describes as “a community of people who might otherwise not have interacted” [9].

The road enables encounters that are critical to the family’s survival and moral development. From the used car salesman who offers a fair price (a rare moment of solidarity) to the kindness of fellow migrants at roadside camps, these encounters shape the narrative. The Weedpatch camp, a temporary respite from the road, represents a brief stabilization of

time-space, but it is the road itself that facilitates the crucial encounters with the Wilsons, whose breakdown forces the Joads to help and be helped, forging a temporary family unit. These interactions, repeated and cumulative [5], slowly transform Tom Joad’s individualistic perspective into the communal ethos he articulates at the novel’s end. As one analysis of the film adaptation notes, the road is animated by the Joads’ “do-or-die movements across it” [8], movements that are constantly punctuated by encounters that redefine their understanding of humanity. The road chronotope thus becomes the crucible in which a fragmented group of individual families is forged into a broader, more conscious community of the displaced.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bakhtin emphasizes that chronotopes are not just literary devices but are also “historically, culturally and politically constituted” [5]. Steinbeck’s choice of Route 66—the “Mother Road”—is therefore not accidental. He consciously places his narrative within a real geographical space that was already laden with the historical weight of westward expansion, the mythology of the frontier, and the promise of California [1], [2]. In doing so, he “thickens” this space with the specific time of the Dust Bowl exodus.

As the Joads travel along this artery, the road becomes charged with the collective history of migration. It is not just their individual story, but the story of thousands of “Okies” fleeing the Dust Bowl and the exploitative farm-tenancy system [10]. Scholar Beatrice Melodia Festa argues that Steinbeck’s novel was instrumental in shaping the “archetypal myth of the highway,” influencing not just literature but also the subsequent cinematic genre of the road movie [2]. However, Steinbeck also subtly critiques this myth. The road that was built for progress and commerce now carries the starving and the desperate, exposing the racial and economic fault lines of the American dream. Recent scholarship points out that Steinbeck’s narrative, while powerful, even omits the presence of all-Black towns along Route 66, thus rendering invisible other histories of displacement and resilience [4]. This omission itself highlights how the chronotope of the road is a selective, politically charged representation of space and time.

“Highway 66 “is the main migrant road. 66 the long concrete path across the country waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to the Bakersfield – over the red lands and grey land twisting up in to the mountains crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert and across the desert to the mountains again into the rich California valleys.” (7)

In this excerpt, Steinbeck establishes the novel's structure using the road chronotope. Highway 66 is more than just a location; it serves as a narrative engine. It combines space (geography) and time (history) into a single, unavoidable path. It creates a liminal purgatory in which migrants are deprived of their former identities. It exemplifies the dichotomy of the American Dream. Finally, it dehumanizes the individual, changing the Joads from landowners into traffic units traveling a "long concrete path" to an unknown end.

For the Joads, the road accumulates meaning with every mile. The landmarks—the Painted Desert, the treacherous Mojave Desert—are not mere scenery but are imbued with the temporality of their suffering and hope. The Mojave Desert, for instance, becomes a symbol of the ultimate trial, a space of death that must be crossed to reach the promise of life, costing Grandma Joad her life in the process [3], [8]. Route 66, in Steinbeck's hands, thus becomes a space where the abstract time of national history and the personal time of a family's trauma are fused into a single, powerful artistic image. John Steinbeck uses spatial details like the scene of the road, the scene of the journey, the scene of the desert, the scene of the earth. All these details are connected to each other with the road chronotope as all events in the novel occurs in the open road [6].

## CONCLUSION

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck masterfully employs the chronotope of the road to articulate the complex experience of displacement. More than a simple setting, the road functions as a dynamic space where time becomes visible and history presses in on the present. It transforms the Joads' identity, wrenching them from the static, place-bound time of their Oklahoma home and thrusting them into the precarious, chance-driven time of the journey. Through

the chronotope of the encounter, the road becomes the unlikely site for forging a new, communal consciousness among the dispossessed. Finally, by anchoring his narrative on Route 66, Steinbeck fuses the specific historical moment of the Dust Bowl migration with the deep-seated American mythology of the westward road, creating a powerful and enduring symbol of both national aspiration and human suffering. The road chronotope, therefore, is not merely a formal device but the very medium through which Steinbeck explores the spatial and temporal disorientation of displacement, ultimately revealing how, for the refugee, the journey itself becomes a new, painful, and transformative home.

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